

SCHOOL LIBRARIANS CREATING SPACE FOR **CONNECTION** AND **COLLABORATION**





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The role of the school librarian (SL) is multilayered and complex. SLs work as curriculum experts to connect teachers with each other and with the necessary resources to do their work well. SLs support schools in unifying curricula among classes and between grade levels and subjects, encourage cross-curricular views of content, and share knowledge of available resources (Purcell 2010).

SLs often assume the role of technology leaders in their buildings and/or districts (AASL 2018; Johnston 2012). They collaborate with teachers in their buildings to plan in-class instruction using technology to engage student learning and center competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration in ways that move past simple substitution to transformational uses of technology that empower student voice (Everhart, Mardis, and Johnston 2011).

Given all that SLs do in service to their colleagues and their students, they hold a unique position in school spaces as teacher leaders. SLs “lead from the center”—a term that has been used to describe the centrality of SLs in school spaces (Dees et al. 2010).

Our Research

When schools closed in March 2020 for the COVID-19 pandemic, we were interested in exploring the work SLs were doing to support their communities. SLs had the knowledge and skills to support school stakeholders in navigating hybrid and online teaching and learning spaces—a skill set with increased relevance and value during the pivot to online learning. So, we wanted to understand how SLs were pivoting their role in the school community to “lead from the center.”

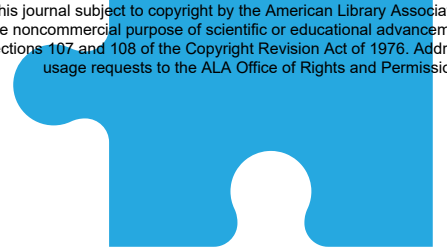
Our state had recently adopted and implemented a professional learning community (PLC) model to support student learning. In this model, educators work together in teams to engage in inquiry and action research. Done with fidelity, the PLC model mirrors the community of practice (CoP) framework (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015). CoP describes a formal or informal support network of professionals who share a common goal, concern, or interest. Based on this foundation, members engage in activities and discussions to support each other.

CoPs create spaces for professionals to solve problems, seek information, share experiences, pool assets and resources, and build members’

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capacities. In these spaces, leadership happens when the knowledge and skills of any one member of the community can contribute to the growth of others in the team. In this way, members of the CoP lead through sharing and facilitation to support other members.

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Food for Thought, Springboards for Discussion, Inspirations for Action

The table below includes more details about what study participants thought and did during and after the school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Issues	Quotes / Examples from Participants
<p>SLs articulated a shared need to support K–12 students and teachers during the pivot to online learning. All SLs in the study expressed a desire to be involved in solving the problems presented during this time.</p>	<p>“Most people don’t fully understand what librarians bring to the table. It would be nice to be at the table. After they push stuff out, I can show them better ways to have done it. But they didn’t ask.”</p> <p>“I could contribute technology skills and information. I’m not being utilized to help teachers with online sources and resources for online lessons.”</p> <p>“I’m a librarian...I can do it all. Seriously though, if they would include me on the leadership team, I could cut out a lot of extra time and work spent trying to reinvent the wheel.”</p> <p>“I tried to let [my] principal know that I could do more than just check out books, but she and the other teachers just did not know how to use my knowledge ... I really hope they will start to want to use tech more after this pandemic.”</p> <p>“I want to know more about how to ‘sell’ to teachers the value of the librarian.”</p> <p>“Librarians need to be more politically savvy to advocate to legislators. When the budget takes a hit, they need to think about schools, accessibility, and provide for every student, not just students with internet and devices.”</p> <p>“Districts need to start thinking about internet access and device access – equity is important to think about now!”</p> <p>“Our teachers need support training on accessibility features (special education, ELL).”</p> <p>“I think the word ‘intentional’ is key. We need to be explicit and intentional in helping [students] navigate this kind of self-guided learning.”</p> <p>“The kids are fine with technology. Fine. The complication is the teacher [and we can help them].”</p> <p>“Administrators have so much to think about, decide, juggle while keeping core subjects at forefront, they forget about the library.”</p> <p>“How do I help kids not feel overwhelmed so they don’t shut down?”</p> <p>“I want to know how to keep kids engaged and help with their soft skills like persistence, reflection, and time management.”</p>

Issues	Quotes / Examples from Participants
<p>SLs created ways to insert themselves into local structures to support students and faculty.</p>	<p>SLs offered and led informal, as-needed teacher professional development, offering technology professional development and support to teachers and students.</p> <p>SLs created informal, as-needed PLCs for teachers (and for their own professional groups), and supported students and faculty through innovative technology applications (e.g., Bitmoji forums, Facebook live posts).</p> <p>SLs reported showing classroom teachers how to use technology more meaningfully and powerfully. Examples included creating a Facebook group for a math class, supporting a special education class on Zoom, offering Google training for grade-level teams, and co-creating content (e.g., a Google Jamboard, a Bitmoji forum with digital phonics-based sound cards, and YouTube screencasts).</p> <p>“I offered Google training for one grade-level team.”</p> <p>“I helped our math teacher create a Facebook group.”</p> <p>“I joined a Zoom call to help [special education] teachers think about how to engage their students.”</p> <p>“We librarians superimposed ourselves in the [school PLC] structures to share resources, lessons, etc.”</p> <p>One SL posted resources for her students on her own webpage and did screencast book talks while also providing free online books.</p> <p>One SL noted that she connected students to online libraries.</p>
<p>SLs identified themselves as practitioners with specialized knowledge and skills that were useful in supporting teachers, students, and families in online learning (e.g., curriculum, technology, resources, pedagogy). They contributed their knowledge, skills, and resources to build one another’s capacities.</p>	<p>SLs noted their extensive knowledge of technology platforms and applications that could have been useful to support online learning during the pandemic (e.g., screencasting, video demonstrations, social media, Bitmoji, Flipgrid (now “Flip”), Zoom, Google Classroom, Padlet, Kahoot!).</p> <p>SLs noted their abilities to plan project- and problem-based learning curricula</p> <p>“My biggest skill set is in project-based learning and cross-curricular content. I would have loved to see more of that in the AMI [Alternate Methods of Instruction] packets.”</p> <p>SLs noted their knowledge of Open Educational Resources (OERs) and online resources that schools could have utilized during this time.</p> <p>“I have knowledge of apps, sites, resources. For example, history could be using AR Traveler. I know particularly resources that can integrate into Google Classroom.”</p> <p>SLs emphasized their knowledge of curriculum and noted strengths in understanding horizontal alignment of curriculum and in supporting teachers (pre-pandemic) to make cross-curricular connections.</p> <p>“I have the ability to connect teachers across curriculum because of knowledge of what teacher A and teacher B are doing.”</p> <p>SLs noted their own pedagogical knowledge and spoke about their abilities to support students, families, and teachers.</p> <p>“I know my students’ personalities, interests and abilities.... I am well versed to supply engaging and innovative information.”</p> <p>“I know how to provide choice and give options for students’ voice.”</p> <p>SLs noted expertise in technology integration and pedagogy.</p> <p>“We need to have kids and teachers practice teaching online [before the skill becomes essential]. Have kids in the library and have the teacher online teach from classroom space. To allow kids to be in those spaces and have those discussions with them.”</p> <p>“I know how to provide choice and give options for students’ voice.”</p>



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We created a qualitative study to center the voices of SLs in the field and explore how they were involved in the move to online teaching and learning (Wake, Hu, and Shaw 2022). We engaged sixteen local (to us) SLs in Zoom-based focus group events in June 2020. All sixteen SLs served at the building level within fourteen districts in our state. Our goal was to listen to the SLs reflect on their early pandemic experiences. As such, the research questions for this study were:

- How were school librarians (SLs) included in district and school planning and implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What knowledge and skills did school librarians (SLs) have that would support the planning and implementation of online learning?
- What concerns did school librarians (SLs) have for students and teachers during the planning and implementation of online

learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Our Zoom sessions followed a structured protocol, ensuring consistency. Participant responses and discussions were transcribed and analyzed so that we might better understand how SLs were involved in school initiatives in response to the pandemic.

Findings

Our team was aware of the barriers that may inhibit SLs' ability to lead in school spaces, including administrators' and other educators' lack of awareness of the role of SLs (Hartzell 2002), archaic and incorrect stereotypes and misconceptions of the role of SLs (Purcell 2010), and a lack of collective vision for school technology integration (McLeod 2015).

Indeed, the SLs in our study confirmed structural barriers that initially limited their involvement in the early days of the pandemic. However, SLs in our study provided rich testimony describing their efforts to circumvent these barriers to connect and collaborate with colleagues. They described engaging in innovative moves independent of formal school structures to support students and families. They based

their responses to the challenges of the moment on their knowledge and skills with technology. SLs in our study described working within local structures by:

- leading informal teacher professional development sessions,
- forming ad hoc professional learning communities, and
- creating and sharing materials with teachers, students, and families.

SLs in the study spoke at length on the knowledge and skills they felt they possessed that were useful in support of online student learning, including:

- knowledge of curriculum (vertical alignment, horizontal alignment, cross-curricular connections, problem- and project-based),
- knowledge of technology,
- knowledge of available online resources, and
- knowledge of effective pedagogy for online teaching and learning.

Our SLs also acknowledged gaps in their knowledge and skills. They voiced a desire to continue learning how to support students in online learning, specifically in self-regulation, motivation, and engagement.

Finally, the SLs noted specific concerns for faculty and students. These concerns focused on equity and historically marginalized populations (e.g., students in poverty, rural students, English Language Learners, and special education students). SLs described limitations in providing online learning environments that are

student-centered and culturally responsive, affirming their role in creating learning environments that center equity and focus on the achievement of all students (AASL 2018).

Implications for Practice

Mapping the study findings to the CoP framework provided evidence that the SLs in this study were actively leading during the pandemic event to serve teachers, students, and families.

- SLs articulated a shared need to support K–12 students and teachers during the pivot to online learning. All SLs in the study expressed a desire to be involved in solving the problems presented during this time.
- SLs created ways to insert themselves into local structures to support students and faculty.
- SLs identified themselves as practitioners with specialized knowledge and skills that were useful in supporting teachers, students, and families in online learning (e.g., curriculum, technology, resources, pedagogy). They contributed their knowledge, skills, and resources to build one another's capacities.

Recommendations for the field include explicit inclusion of SLs in continued work to support teachers and students in online teaching and learning contexts. SLs in this study were minimally involved through the formal leadership structures in their spaces (e.g., managing websites, posting information on social media). One SL in the study noted she was “an untapped resource.”

Conversely, SLs in our study saw their role during the pandemic as teacher-leader. They detailed specific knowledge and skills they possessed to support online learning, including insights into the curriculum, depth of knowledge in best practices for technology integration, and extensive knowledge of open educational resources.

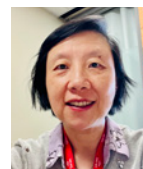
Conclusion

The findings of this study inform districts and schools of the potential of SLs in supporting teachers and students in online teaching and learning. These findings indicate that schools/districts can and should be more inclusive of SLs in planning for technology use in teaching and learning, formally positioning them as leaders in this work.

Despite a lack of formal involvement, all SLs in the study used their position, knowledge, and skills to insert themselves into informal school structures when they saw opportunities. Their work included offering and leading informal, as-needed teacher PD under their own auspices; offering technology PD and support to teachers and students; creating informal, as-needed

PLCs for teachers and for their own professional groups; and supporting students and faculty through innovative technology applications.

The SLs in this study wanted to lend their expertise, skills, effort, and time to support the teachers and learners they served. They acted as advocates for their profession and offered support to students and teachers. In doing so, these SLs led from the center (Dees et al. 2010) and saw their efforts to support colleagues and students as a natural extension of the work they do daily.



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