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Building Relationships: The Foundation of School Librarianship

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When I saw that this issue's focus was going to be on relationships, I honestly chuckled a little bit because the focus of my presidential year has been on building relationships. After the webinars, town halls, blog posts, and national conference on the subject, I knew this was one topic I could write about fairly confidently.

But even more so, building relationships is one of the fundamental skills of school librarians and the foundation of the majority of our work. We are, by nature, people who work with others. Without the people we serve, we have no purpose. And the people we work with go beyond the walls of our libraries, beyond the walls of our schools, and beyond the boundaries of districts.

The last three-plus years have presented unique challenges that we have not had to navigate before. Our school library training did not prepare us for a global pandemic that was closely followed by deliberate acts of misinformation about the people who work in and the resources present in the school library.

We cannot predict what the future holds. I wish I had a crystal ball that would alert us to any difficulties that may lie ahead or a magic wand that I could wave to make those difficulties disappear. Not to make my/our life easier necessarily but so that every learner in every school across the country could benefit from having

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a certified school librarian embedded in their school life from pre-K all the way through graduation.

Since we can't force school leaders to hire certified school librarians and we can't make people fact check information before they believe it, we instead have to do what we do best. We need to build relationships with our learners, with our communities at large, and with each other.

In order to grow and activate advocates and allies and lifelong library users, we need to first build relationships with them. We need to share our story so that they understand what a school library can

offer for their specific needs and interests. Even more so, we need to listen to their stories so we know what to offer them. And, we need all of us to come together so we can create the best environment for all learners to think, create, share, and grow.

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I've developed a thick skin over the years and learned that most of the time, things aren't personal. A student having a bad day is simply having a bad day, and I can use the opportunity to build a positive relationship with them based on my response to their behavior. A classroom teacher who says no to offers of collaboration the first four times is not ready yet, but might take me up on the fifth because they finally have the brain space to contemplate working with someone else. An administrator might dismiss my offers of providing a brief information piece at a staff meeting for a while due to time constraints, but then, one day, they may say yes, which could lead to a standing offer to share information frequently at meetings.

There's a message I see shared often on social media that basically comes down to this—don't judge others...you don't know their story. This is so very true. We may never know what the folks we are serving are going through in their school or personal lives if we don't have those relationships built. But, we can get to know them better so that we can get a sense of who they are and what they need through conversation, connection, and the care we provide.

My advice to myself and to all of you:

- Start small. Building relationships with everyone in your building sounds exhausting and is probably not even possible. But, instead, I can make a plan to seek out people who would be either easy to get to know or someone who might provide an opportunity to grow my connections with others because they are viewed as leaders in the school.
- Be patient. I often repeat the advice of a dear mentor, Dr. Becky Pasco, as a reminder that school librarianship is a marathon, not a sprint. It takes time to develop

relationships with others. It's OK if things take a while to manifest. Continue to lay the groundwork and see what develops over time.

- Celebrate. Don't only focus on what you feel is a lack of relationships. Instead acknowledge positive growth. Each student, classroom teacher, administrator, parent, community member, fellow school librarian, etc. who you connect with is a win.

And, please, make sure you are using your connections in the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) to build relationships with your colleagues near and far. Take advantage of the free town halls and webinars to grow your community. Ask questions and respond to others through ALA (American Library Association) Connect's AASL Member Forum and the AASL Communities of Practice. See how you can use these networks to learn more about any areas you want to gain knowledge in, including building relationships. And, please consider getting involved in a committee or other volunteering opportunity at <https://www.ala.org/aasl/about/getinvolved>.

Your national association is here for you. We want to listen to your story so that we can better serve you. The more you engage and build relationships with folks at the national level, the better equipped we are to respond to the needs and interests you have. Thank you for choosing to be a member of AASL. We hope we will connect with you online or in person in the near future so we can continue to build our relationship with you.

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