

RESEARCH IN PRACTICE



Kathy
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Kathy Colvin is in her 8th year as a Teacher Librarian at Tulare Union High School in California, where she is dedicated to fostering a collaborative learning environment. With a passion for connecting with classroom teachers, Kathy strives to build strong partnerships that support student learning and engagement. Kathy's goal is to become a trusted partner in education, working alongside teachers to integrate library resources into the classroom experience. She is committed to supporting both students and staff and helping the position of Teacher Librarian be seen as a vital part of the school's educational community.



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Melanie Lewis Croft, Ed.D., is the Director of Library Services at Anderson University in South Carolina. She was a recipient of the 2022 AASL Research Grant and currently serves on the Education Committee in ACRL's Education and Behavioral Sciences Section.

Methods for Establishing Successful Collaborative Partnerships

Collaboration in education has long been recognized as a cornerstone of effective teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Among the various professional partnerships in schools, the collaboration between teacher librarians and classroom teachers holds unique potential for enhancing student learning outcomes (Copeland & Jacobs, 2017; D'agata, 2016; Kachel & Lance, 2018; Lonsdale, 2003; Montiel-Overall, 2005; Scholastic, 2016). Teacher librarians are not only information specialists but also instructional partners, playing a critical role in fostering information literacy, supporting curriculum goals, and encouraging lifelong learning (American Association of School Librarians, 2018). However, despite this potential, collaboration between these two professional roles is often underutilized or misunderstood (Crary, 2019; Francis et al., 2010; Johns & Kachel, 2017; Lewis, 2019, 2021; Merga, 2019; Moreillon, 2008; O'Neal, 2004; Wheeler & McKinney, 2015; Witte et al., 2015).

As a former classroom English teacher of 12 years, I experienced firsthand the challenges of meeting diverse student needs, delivering an engaging curriculum, and integrating technology into lessons. These demands often left me searching for additional support, particularly in the areas of resource curation, differentiated instruction, and fostering research skills in my students. While a teacher librarian was employed at my school, I lacked a clear understanding of how to effectively collaborate with them to enhance my teaching practice and student learning.

Once I became a teacher librarian, one of my primary goals was to build strong collaborative relationships with classroom teachers. I wanted to be the person I needed when I was in the classroom. I understood that fostering open communication and teamwork would not only enhance the learning experience for students but also create a supportive and dynamic environment for the entire school community. By working closely with classroom teachers, I could integrate library resources and services into their curriculum, offer targeted support for specific projects, and assist in developing engaging, cross-curricular activities. I wanted to be a resource for teachers, helping them enhance their lessons with literature, technology, and research tools, while also encouraging a collaborative approach to student learning. This teamwork would allow us to share ideas, solve challenges together, and ultimately provide a richer educational experience for students.

The gap in my experience with collaboration led to my interest in researching the dynamics of collaboration between teacher librarians and classroom teachers. I wanted to ascertain how partnerships could be fostered in meaningful ways. I wanted to know what factors contribute to successful collaboration, and what barriers might prevent it. By exploring these questions in my research, I hoped to uncover strategies that empower both teacher librarians and classroom teachers to work together more effectively, ultimately creating a more enriching educational experience for students and supporting teachers in their practice. My goal was to contribute to the development of practical, evidence-based approaches to strengthen these partnerships, ensuring that both educators and students can fully benefit from the expertise of teacher librarians.

For my school library and information technology master's degree program, I was required to conduct an original research study. Under the

advisement of my thesis mentor, Dr. Melanie Lewis Croft, I designed a phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of classroom teachers and teacher librarians who have successfully collaborated within the K-12 learning environment. During the summer of 2021, I interviewed six classroom teachers and the teacher librarians with whom they had collaborated in the past. All participants worked at the secondary level. I designed my questions to elicit the specific actions and techniques that were the essence of creating the collaboration and what participants believed made the partnership successful. The data analysis revealed that the building of relationships between classroom partners and teacher librarians was the cornerstone of successful collaboration (Colvin & Croft, 2024).

Participants in the study shared that the building of relationships is derived via the following methods: building a culture of collaboration, making the collaboration relevant to learning, starting small, and advocating.

- Creating a culture of collaboration is critical to developing strong, meaningful relationships for successful collaboration. When collaboration is prioritized as a shared value, it encourages open communication, mutual respect, and a sense of teamwork. This culture fosters an environment where both educators feel comfortable sharing ideas, resources, and expertise, leading to more effective partnerships.
- Making collaboration relevant is accomplished by the teacher librarian communicating to classroom teachers that they understand the subject matter or skill being taught. Collaboration needs to be a relevant and integrated process to have teachers willing to work together.



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- Starting out small is crucial when cultivating collaboration between teacher librarians and classroom teachers because it allows for manageable, incremental progress that builds trust and understanding over time. By beginning with simple, low-stakes projects or activities, both parties can explore how to best work together without the pressure of overwhelming expectations. This approach helps to identify each teacher's strengths, preferred methods, and areas of interest, fostering a sense of comfort and cooperation. As success is achieved in smaller initiatives, the relationship can naturally expand to more complex collaborations, gradually increasing the impact on student learning. This thoughtful, step-by-step approach ensures sustainable and meaningful partnerships.
- Advocating for collaboration is key to making it a reality. By actively promoting the benefits of collaboration – such as improved resource sharing, innovative teaching strategies, and enriched learning environments – advocacy helps to shift mindsets and prioritize joint efforts (Colvin & Croft, 2024).

Implications for Practice

An unexpected and interesting concept that came to light during my research was a differentiation between two specific types of advocacy – active and passive – as a means to establish collaboration amongst educational partners.

According to participants, active advocacy is the intentional and consistent promotion of the idea of working together. It involves taking concrete actions to ensure that these partnerships are seen as valuable and are supported within the school community. This type of purposeful and intentional advocacy could include initiating discussions with classroom teachers about the benefits of collaboration, proposing specific projects or co-teaching opportunities, highlighting successful examples of collaboration, and demonstrating how your knowledge and expertise as a teacher librarian can assist and support them in impacting student engagement and improving learning outcomes. Additionally, active advocacy can involve reaching out to school administrators to secure time during staff meetings or professional development events to carve out time to show educators databases that may be helpful in

their classroom research projects, share a collaborative endeavor with another colleague that was successful and may pique the interest of others, or provide information regarding how a teacher librarian can help curate support materials for their subject matter objectives and activities.

Active advocacy can ensure that collaboration is not just encouraged but is sought out and fully integrated into the school's culture. Active advocacy involves a level of intentionality and persistence that makes it more likely that collaboration will not only take root but thrive. By actively advocating, teacher librarians can help foster a culture where collaboration is prioritized and integrated into everyday practice, ultimately improving educational outcomes for students.

Passive advocacy involves creating opportunities for collaboration without directly seeking out teachers for personal interactions. This approach highlights the library's capabilities and fosters interest in its resources through indirect methods. For example, by developing an online presence, sharing successful collaboration outcomes through emails or flyers around the school, and familiarizing oneself with subject-matter curricula, the teacher librarian can establish a reputation as a valuable resource. Organizing events and activities within the library not only increases visibility but also provides avenues for teachers to engage with the library in a non-intrusive way. Additionally, promoting school wide reading initiatives, such as contests and rewards, fosters a sense of excitement around the library, allowing for organic connections to form. These passive advocacy methods gradually build relationships with classroom teachers, setting the stage for future collaborations.

Successful collaboration is achieved through the dedicated, consistent, purposeful, and persistent building of relationships with classroom teachers and both active and passive advocacy methods. When teacher librarians take the time to understand teachers' needs, preferences, and classroom objectives, they can offer tailored support that aligns with the curriculum. Similarly, teachers who engage with teacher librarians gain access to a wealth of resources, expertise, and innovative strategies to drive instruction. This mutual respect and understanding fosters an environment where ideas can flow freely, challenges can be addressed together, and students benefit from a more integrated and dynamic learning experience.

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