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What Do Schools Need?

After eighteen years of professional commitment to library media services for youth, I found myself perplexed by the question, What do schools need? Perplexed because my personal perceptions were so clear—or so I thought. Yet, I could not focus and translate them to the written word. It became necessary to sit and recall years of professional behaviors and experiences in the school and public library. It also became necessary to summon relationships and accomplishments, gained or lost, due to those behaviors.

What I saw showed growth and tremendous change, but not nearly enough. It was frightening because I found that the majority of our problems were due to us; we did not know who we were or what we should be doing. I turned to research and fellow professionals for help. I had to know what was being done in the school library media centers of this country. There was too much fragmentation in my mind and in the evidence to determine what was needed now and tomorrow. What I discerned schools to need from librarianship and what I see them needing in the future was tied to how we perceived ourselves as being and what role we are willing to play.

Visualize this scenario. The school doors open at least thirty minutes before the morning bell. The children begin to enter—slowly, sleepily, but with a destination in mind. The library media center is warm, cozy, and there is a person there frantically trying to get ready for the day. Some books that really need to be processed came in late yesterday. A teacher is waiting for them. There are still four unusable media kits from last week, returned with parts missing. An order needs to go out for replacement of the parts. A class is coming in at first period and the schedule shows that classes will continue until fifth period. Lunchtime work is out of the question—cafeteria duty. There is a faculty meeting this afternoon so no after school catch-up. The curriculum team is meeting, and the busy library media specialist really wants to prepare some bibliographies for the units to be studied next, even though not invited to do so. Two projectors

need to be moved from their security location to classrooms for first period, and they need to be checked before going out.

The faces appear in the door and see the distressed expression of the library media specialist. Some just want to view magazines, some have reports due, and some are looking for a book that a friend returned. If you were one of the students, would you ask the library media specialist for anything? If you were the library media specialist, would you *want* the students to ask?

James Liesner (1984) in "Learning at Risk: School Library Media Programs in an Information World" states a premise school library media specialists should contemplate:

Considerable confusion exists regarding the roles library media specialists do or do not perform and the roles they are capable of performing. Roles cannot be performed and services cannot be used effectively if they are not perceived accurately by potential clients or if there is a lack of acceptance of these roles by either the individuals receiving the benefits of them, or the individuals attempting to perform them. Role conflicts of this sort almost inevitably lead to job dissatisfaction and ineffective performance. (p. 76)

"Capable of performing" is one significant phrase of this excerpt. Most school library media specialists have educational backgrounds. They have been trained as teachers and, therefore, curriculum theory and instructional design are part of the expertise brought to the field of library media. Skills instruction—which by default, lack of acceptance, or ignorance—is often taught in isolation. Library media specialists are not, as a whole, invited or even considered to be a part of the school curriculum team.

This brings up another issue in Liesner's excerpt which is "roles cannot be performed accurately by potential clients or if there is a lack of acceptance of these roles by either the individuals receiving the benefits of them or the individuals attempting to perform them." Although the library media center has been called the "hub" of the school, the actuality of this occurring is not universal.

The role designation of the specialists is not seen as a support position. Olson (1984) in "Unassailable Truth? A Look at the Concept of School Library Media Specialists as Teachers," cites "the problem is that we have been too literal in our interpretation and demonstration attempts at curriculum support....such support should be far more direct. In fact...the library is a *part* of the curriculum" (p. 55). He submits that we must stop thinking about the library as a resource, a service, and start thinking about it as a subject, a course requiring direct instruction to achieve its objectives" (p. 56).

The need is evident for library media specialists to accept themselves and to determine their "place" in the scheme of educating children. Inherent in this acceptance is the need to educate teachers and administrators,

not just of the importance of the school media program, but, more significantly, the role the library media specialist plays in the accomplishment of the total program. Only with this sense of being needed and expected to perform can both the school and the library media specialist attain the desired results.

In order for job satisfaction to be a basic part of the work life of the library media specialist, evidence of self-confident professionalism is necessary, even if forced. This self-confident professionalism is shown when library media specialists come out of the center office performing clerical tasks only and enter the mainstream of the school's instructional program.

Hambleton (1982) offers another response to role designation as seen through an analysis of studies on school library media specialists and programs by various school-based individuals as well as by media specialists themselves.

In the numerous studies carried out in the past twenty years, a number of conclusions are common: that the school librarian's perception of that role differs significantly from that of others in the educational system, that the school library seems to play only a marginal role in the total educational program, and that the low regard for the school librarian militates against a direct involvement in the instructional program of the school. (pp. 18-20)

The impact of the perceived role designation, or lack thereof, of the library media specialist was further cited by Judy Pitts (1984) in "A Creative Survey of Research Concerning Role Expectations of Library Media Specialists." Four of these findings are summarized below:

1. Today's library media specialists preferred the traditional services of acquisition and distribution, as opposed to instructional development, evaluation, and utilization.
2. Professional media specialists could communicate to teachers the instruction role they played much better than part-time or nonprofessional library media specialists.
3. Librarians with more diversified interests exhibited more involvement in the curriculum.
4. Librarians with low self-images spent more of their work time in the media center doing clerical tasks and less work with students (pp. 164-69).

These findings, coupled with the research excerpt of Hambleton, create the frame of mind necessary to eliminate the negative aspects of what we need to be to and for schools and promote planning for the future. Understanding this research may be just the impetus for library media specialists to become more aggressive in their discipline. We must be aggressive in order to promote the field and its necessity, not merely relevance, to the educational arena by showing the achievements and

benefits to young people. "School library media specialists and children's librarians have long had specialized programs to meet special needs; then some degree of specialization in other areas became the rule" (Hannigan, 1984, p. 24). The specialization, more than likely, has been in a content area, or in general elementary education/teaching.

Just as we promote freedom to read, we have promoted putting mechanisms into place to allow personal participation in what children read and view outside the library media center walls. "Technological advancements have redefined the role of the school media specialist in the 1980's from that of a collector of resources and administrator of a facility to that of a teacher and instructional designer" (Hortin, 1985, pp. 20-21).

Reading any of the literature enhances the knowledge that school media specialists, along with being teachers and instructional designers, are setting priorities as participants in the instructional program. We are bringing to the table personal expertise in research skills, teaching methodology, curriculum development, etc. We are integrating the standards of learning and collection development into the overall pattern of classroom instruction, which is as it should be. Consequently, the role of the library media specialist becomes a more integral part of, and reinforces the role of, the classroom teacher.

Liesner states that it is time to accept and develop the information intermediary function that we perform and not worry about whether we are teachers or not. Of course we perform a teaching function, but it should be based on our own discipline and related to the essential intermediary role we are playing and need to expand and improve (Liesner, 1984, p. 85). No longer do we need to carry the self-imposed weight of feeling like second-class teachers or of considering ourselves as "enrichment for the basics rather than as the fodder on which learning can thrive; enrichment, like butter on bread, can be scraped off or done without when times get tough" (Loertscher, 1982, pp. 415-21). Loertscher goes on to say: "If library media specialists can take the best programming ideas they have now and integrate them into the instructional program...they will be demonstrating their worth instead of just talking about it" (p. 421).

This, then, is what we need to be to schools. The library media specialists, moving toward expansion of services to meet the intellectual needs of a more technologically advanced society, demanding higher level skills, and more complex means of integrating those skills into a multifaceted curriculum design is, indeed, what we should be accomplishing.

It is universally understood that "the keeper of the books" is now the "information keeper/retriever/disseminator." "The older concepts of passive culture repositories or centers for the development of an enjoyment and appreciation for reading good books while identifying very important functions, do not appear to be actively responsive to the entire range of

needs identified as crucial for survival and achievement in an extremely complex, information and rapidly changing world” (Liesner, 1984, p. 69). What are school library media specialists doing to secure their effectiveness in the twenty-first century? It is safe to say that if we are professionally astute, we are:

1. soliciting the support of school administrators;
2. sponsoring and presenting in-service programs for the teachers with whom we work;
3. producing much needed instructional materials not available through commercial sources or too expensive to purchase;
4. managing media centers with computer programs designed to provide the much needed time for student and teacher joint efforts;
5. training students to use the electronic formats of information retrieval so that a broader base of research is at their fingertips;
6. accepting responsibility for and asking to be part of contributing to the curriculum design effort of the school program;
7. providing, for preview purposes, newly produced/printed materials in an effort to bring teachers and administrators into the selection process; in this manner they gain a commitment to and a responsibility for the importance of collection development based on the educational philosophy of the program;
8. acknowledging that we may be our own worst enemies in not actively seeking and establishing our role in the total scheme of educating children;
9. sharing with each other goals and dreams for what can be done and what has been done, and, in so doing, learning from, with, and for each other;
10. adamantly stating personnel worth and justifiably taking credit for accomplishments;
11. developing curricula of library skills to be integrated into the subject content areas; thus showing the significant impact of the field on all others, and broadening the scope of educating youth, and;
12. reaching out to other libraries and agencies to supplement needed materials, gain additional support, and make them active participants in the goal and knowledgeability of the role of the library media specialist.

If the twenty-first century is to look bright, library media specialists must become not only accountable, but accomplished in their role and with the impact of it on the education of youth. The confusion over role designation has not kept library media specialists from moving forward. What we should be doing is evidenced by the apparent knowledge and understanding of what we have been doing, the desire to determine what the schools need, and the determination to reach that need, mitigate the negative effects of what has not been done and cause us to move forward.

NOTES

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