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The teacher-librarian as school principal: A natural progression

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THE TEACHER-LIBRARIAN AS SCHOOL PRINCIPAL: A NATURAL PROGRESSION

A few years ago a colleague outlined for me why it must be so confining to be a teacher-librarian rather than a "real" librarian in a large library system. Most compelling was the supposedly inhibiting factor of having to leave librarianship altogether in order to get ahead, to secure a promotion. The comment has stuck with me even though it has become more and more absurd.

Teacher-librarians are no different from others in education or librarianship who accept challenges of greater responsibility: they take the special skills they have, apply them in a different context and add to their repertoire through professional development and personal experience. Children's librarians do this when they become branch heads and directors; community college librarians are becoming vice-presidents and presidents with increasing regularity; special librarians in large corporations head information centers integrating several departments. And, of course, classroom teachers face that same prospect when applying for school administration.

It is surprising then that more teacher-librarians do not make the move from the resource center to the front office. For the classroom teacher the context and focus are significantly different, but for the teacher-librarian many of the duties are comparable to life as an effective teacher-librarian. The school

administrator carries-responsibilities in at least five major areas: educational leadership, including both the administrative and instructional functions; school organization and liaison; school climate; a focus on instruction; and staff development. In many cases these are mirror images of the role of the teacher-librarian, especially for vice-principals.

Consider first a few of the administrative tasks of the teacher-librarian. The teacher-librarian manages diverse programs, staff and services in order to contribute to the stated goals of the school. The teacher-librarian selects, supervises and plans for the effective use of staff, including recruiting and motivating adult and student volunteers. The teacher-librarian plans for the use of space, equipment and facilities and is one of the few teachers in the school to have experience in planning and managing a flexible budget. Like teacher-librarians, administrators ensure an annual inventory of materials and equipment, regularly prepare oral and written reports, encourage a school-wide environment conducive to learning, and involve staff in the evaluation of program effectiveness. Few classroom teachers have the opportunity to undertake such a wide range of tasks but these are part of the role of each teacher-librarian.

The teacher-librarian is expected to establish rapport with school staff, students and community just as the administrator is. Teacher-librarians work toward collaborative work environments where they can be more successful and this is a priority for effective administrators, too. Both invite and accept suggestions from staff and establish short and long range goals with others.

Schools are more effective where teachers are involved in the selection of materials and the establishment of policy and procedures. Nothing new here for teacher-librarians. Teacher-librarians also have considerable experience in the acquisition, organization and circulation of learning resources.

The teacher-librarian is ideally suited to assess needs and interests and provide resources which satisfy those professional or instructional needs. And what teacher-librarian/principal couldn't share the joy of reading and promote appreciation of whole language and literature-based programs, two current curriculum priorities?

The principal may not design and produce instructional materials like the teacher-librarian but the ability to plan, design and produce resources like newsletters and to advise teachers on the appropriate use of resources is an important function. Like the teacher-librarian, the principal also acts as liaison between the school and other agencies, answers or obtains answers to teacher questions, provides guidance, develops a working relationship with other schools and school board departments, and participates in coordinated projects with the district.

The teacher-librarian also promotes the program, communicates effectively, can develop informational and public relations campaigns and can encourage school-wide themes. These are important components of the administrator's repertoire, too.

The experience in cooperative program planning and teaching is invaluable for any instructional leader. Having participated as a teaching partner, having knowledge of resources and appropriate

teaching/learning strategies, having worked with staff through the trauma of developing a school-based continuum of information skills and processes, having a commitment to work with teachers from the planning to evaluation phases of implementation, all the while providing consistent leadership and support -- these teacher-librarian experiences provide a philosophical framework and foundation for leading staff to work together to improve curriculum and instruction for students. These skills are difficult to develop, however, from the perspective of a single classroom position and well nigh impossible after becoming an administrator without at least a prior disposition.

Successful teacher-librarians are remarkable at fostering a strong team approach. They lead formal and informal in-service programs for teachers, share techniques and strategies on a regular basis and involve staff in developing guidelines. Teacher-librarians also serve on local and district committees, keep abreast of change, take advantage of continuing education opportunities and apply research findings -- again, key factors for the successful principal as an instructional leader. Teacher-librarians also maintain memberships in professional associations and know the importance of networking.

And what teacher-librarian hasn't planned strategies for securing support for the program? And what teacher wouldn't see this as a key role of the principal, as spokesperson for the school?

Of course, principals, like teacher-librarians, also suffer from the rubric "other duties as assigned" and "other duties left when there is no one else to delegate to", but that is the nature of reality in the public schools!

School administration is an ideal extension of the role and responsibilities of the teacher-librarian. Rather than feeling that you've left teacher-librarianship, your area of specialty, you will feel more and more ideally suited to a different leadership role, one with potentially even more impact (yes, even more than the teacher-librarian!) on the quality of experiences that teachers and students have in school.

Stop and consider it:

have you submitted your application?

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Ken Haycock

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By Ken Haycock

Ken Haycock has been a teacher-librarian and a school principal, among many roles he has played in public education. Dr. Haycock is currently director of program services with the Vanconuer (British Columbia) School Board.

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