SCHOOL LIBRARIES AND INCREASED STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT: WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

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ELEMENTARY LIBRARY POWER: THE CURRICULUM DESIGN PROCESS

The purpose of this paper was to develop a library curriculum plan for elementary students that would enhance, support, and deepen student learning of information skills. Within this context, the purpose was to answer the following questions: What are the learning outcomes in information skills for a library program? In what measurable way does a teacher librarian enable students to go beyond the amassing of facts to the investigation of those facts and to develop deep knowledge? (Kenney, 2006). Lastly, how does a library program insure that all students are increasing their information skills and understandings?

The process of curriculum design for elementary school information literacy skills was studied. Studies supporting the connection between a quality school library program and increased student achievement were examined for positive characteristics to be implemented into a library program. Also, state standards in reading, technology, and information skills were analyzed for integration into the design.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Project

Twenty-first century public school libraries in the United States aren't what they used to be. There was a time when the words “school library” brought to mind a sterile, hushed, expansive room, with elevated ceilings, stacks of books and rows of bookshelves (Neuman, 2002). A dresser-shaped cabinet or two sat in the corner, filled with tiny drawers housing thousands of index cards. Ah, the dreaded card catalogue. A little old lady librarian in comfortable orthotic shoes, sat behind the counter near the front door of this book-holding vault of the past. Evoking fear in the minds of her students, she often issued the not so welcome commands of “Shush!” and “Look it up!” while glaring at her visitors over the tops of her horn-rimmed glasses (Barton, 2006). Thank goodness times have changed.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, public school libraries in the U.S. are striving to be active, engaging, open places. Librarians no longer “shush” students, but encourage, support and involve
them in active learning. They empower students to be effective users of ideas, information and technology. They include “virtual as well as physical space” (Neuman, 2002). The focus of the library has shifted from being an information storehouse to being the center access point for information literacy, sought out by students, parents, and staff (Barton, 2006). The card catalogue has been replaced by the OPAC (Online Public Access Catalogue). Encyclopedias and other reference materials, once designated as “library use only,” are now available as online databases. In many areas these reference materials may be used not only by students who walk through the doors of the library, but also by anyone with access to the internet (Scholastic, 2006). Why did libraries and librarians make this shift?

Much of the reason for the change in the public school library program and the atmosphere within the library points to research that was instigated in the early 1990’s by Keith Curry Lance, PhD, current Director of Library Research Service of the Colorado State Library and the University of Denver. In 1993, Lance and others began an unprecedented body of studies that have been modified, replicated and funded in 16 states. Lance’s first report, written with Lynda Wellborn and Christine Hamilton-Pennell was titled, “The Impact of School Library Media Centers on Academic Achievement” (Lance, Wellborn, & Hamilton-Pennell, 1993). In it, the authors set out to measure the value of the school library program. Did school library programs make a difference in student learning, and if so, how much? Subsequent, recent reports point to the characteristics of a strong or quality, library media program (Todd, Kuhlthau, & OELMA, 2004).

Overwhelmingly, these studies show an undeniable, measurable connection between a quality school library program and increased student academic performance (Scholastic, 2006). State-wide studies of school libraries conducted in Delaware and Ohio identified that students in those states believed that their school libraries and the services the libraries provided helped students to become better learners (Todd, Kuhlthau, & OELMA, 2004).

Another reason for the shift in the representation of public school teacher librarians and their programs points to the revised 1998 publication titled Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning (AASL & AECT, 1998). Information Power articulated the mission statement for public school librarians around the United States. “The mission of the library media program is to ensure that the students and staff are effective users of ideas and information” (AASL & AECT, 1998, p. 6). Now, not only were libraries access points for information, but they were recognized as a place of instructional leadership, charged with empowering students and staff as “effective users of ideas and information” (AASL & AECT, 1998, p. 6).

The structure of the “No Child Left Behind Act of 2001” (NCLB) dictates that all teachers, including teacher librarians, show evidence of continuous improvement in student learning. With this educational focus and accountability, teacher librarians must take a critical look at their
library curriculum and programs. According to Lance and others, teacher librarians must now move from studying the positive impact of a quality school library program on increased student learning into a study of the obvious questions: Exactly what does the quality school library program look like? How can teacher librarians positively influence student learning? What skills and understandings must students possess to be effective users of ideas and information?

If students are to succeed in the Information Age, teacher librarians must work in collaboration with teachers and administrators. They must help students move from information retrieving to deep understanding and knowledge-based outcomes defined by curriculum standards (Todd, 2003). It is, therefore, imperative that the teacher librarian play a critical role in curriculum collaboration within his or her building. It is essential that the teacher librarian closely and critically examine his or her own library program and curriculum with the goal of continuous improvement and high academic success for his or her students. The days of the meek, quiet librarian sitting behind a desk and “shushing” are gone (Barton, 2006).

Statement of the Problem

Student achievement in reading and writing was falling short of state standards at Grady Elementary School in East Hills School District. Staff members began meeting to determine what changes could be made to positively affect student achievement. While there was district adopted curriculum in reading, writing, math and science, there was no consistent library curriculum within the East Hills School District and specifically at Grady Elementary School. Because there were no identified goals or learning targets, library lessons at Grady were only sporadically linked to critical standards. The critical standards were linked to activities and not to enduring understandings. When the lessons did contain standards, the teaching was more intentional. However, even with articulated standards, the lessons were directed at the standards and not at enduring, lasting understanding for the students. Lessons didn’t contain identified skills and knowledge that students needed to become effective users of information. While some lessons alluded to informal, embedded assessment, there was very little accountability for students beyond the question, “Do they get it?”

In short, the Grady Elementary School library had no plan in place to ensure consistent, measurable, student learning of information skills. Grade level teachers and the principal lacked an understanding of the teacher librarian’s direct role in student support of state standards because the role and standards for information skills in the library had never been articulated or connected with the grade level standards that the teachers were using. Sadly, the most significant effect of the lack of a quality library curriculum was visible in the students themselves. They were unable to find and process information in their own library, from picture books to non-fiction sources. Students at Grady were not receiving the full potential of guided support in reading and information skills that an effective, collaborative library curriculum plan would allow.
Purpose

The purpose was to develop an elementary library curriculum plan for students at Grady Elementary School that would enhance, support, and deepen student learning of information skills. Within this context, the purpose was to answer the following questions: What are the learning outcomes in information skills for the Grady Elementary School library program? In what measurable way does the teacher librarian enable students at Grady to go beyond the amassing of facts to the investigation of those facts and to develop deep knowledge? (Kenney, 2006). How does the library program at Grady insure all students are increasing their information skills and understandings? What are the critical, enduring understandings related to information skills for elementary students? Lastly, what does library learning for students at Grady Elementary School look like?

Significance

This project is significant in that it will increase the potential for student success in reading and information skills at Grady Elementary School. The students and staff at Grady will know the performance standards for information skills in the library. Students will be able to hit these learning targets because teaching will be more intentional and student accountability is embedded throughout the curriculum. Because this project examines and applies the research on increased student achievement, best practices, and effective school library programs, the goal of strengthening the library program at Grady will be achieved. It is a major step in school-wide collaboration between the library staff and the classroom teachers and district-wide collaboration between the elementary teacher-librarians. Teachers and administrators will no longer view students' library time as just their “teacher preparation” time. Now library time will be viewed as an essential extension of the classroom curriculum and a significant part of the academic life of students.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Background

The primary goal of the school library is to empower students to be effective users of information (AASL & AECT, 1998). Based on the 1998 Information Literacy Standards, teacher librarians help create citizens who are independent, evaluative, and critical thinkers. They encourage students to act “responsibly in regard to information, particularly with respect to the difficult issues...in an age of global interconnectivity” (AASL & AECT, 1998, p. 3). Additionally, school libraries promote higher reading achievement through access to books and free reading. (Krashen, 1995).

The emergence of NCLB in 2002 caused classroom instruction to focus mainly on the areas of reading and math, at the time the two subject areas for which public schools were held accountable (Georges, 2004). The structure of NCLB mandated that classroom instruction be centered on both state and national standards. Reading and mathematics textbook companies were quick to respond, evidenced by the articulated standards that are now included within each written unit of these textbooks. Other academic cur-
ricular areas, like science and language arts, have since followed. Because there is no such library curriculum textbook, at least not in the East Hills School District, teacher librarians have had to rely on their own individual research and limited collaboration in linking and articulating standards to the elementary library curriculum.

A Brief Overview of the History of the Public School Library Program

Public school libraries were first developed in the second half of the nineteenth century. They began when public libraries would place small, rotating collections in schools as a service to teachers. Bookmobiles, or wagons, delivered materials to students and teachers in small rural areas (School Libraries – History, 2006).

During the early to middle part of the nineteenth century, the public school library continued to grow in popularity and support. However, acceptance was slow. In 1937, in an article on library services, Louis R. Wilson writes, “provision for school libraries has not been made mandatory in many instances in the way that school service generally has been...the state provides a considerable part of the funds for the school, whereas the library is largely dependent upon local resources; the state has provided extensively for the training of teachers, whereas it has only a minimum of responsibility for the training of librarians” (Wilson, 1937, p. 527).

By 1953–54, 74 percent of public schools in Washington State had designated library media centers, compared with the national average at the time of 36 percent (Michie & Holton, 2005). However, many administrators still viewed the school library as a supplement to education and not a vital part of it. “Some school administrators and librarians did not see libraries as having a primary instructional role, but rather as having a supportive role for principals and teachers” (Michie & Holton, 2005, p. 3).

It wasn’t until the passing of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) that the school library began to be viewed as an essential component in education. This bill was designed to equalize learning for all students in the nation’s War on Poverty (Spring, 2004). In a speech after signing the bill in Johnson City, Texas, President Lyndon B. Johnson remarked, “By passing this bill, we bridge the gap between helplessness and hope for more than 5 million educationally deprived children. We put into the hands of our youth more than 30 million new books, and into many of our schools their first libraries” (Johnson, 1965).

With the passing of this act, the federal government publicly recognized the critical need for school libraries and linked them to higher student achievement. Congress recognized that there was a correlation between poor school libraries and poor student achievement scores. They recognized the need for standards in library programs and that meeting these standards would help all students reach higher levels of achievement. In requiring set standards, the government was trying to make sure all public education students received equal library services, regardless of the socio-economic status of their district.

Public school libraries could apply for
and receive federal funding to assist with the purchase of library materials under Title II of the ESEA program. To receive the funding, states had to submit a plan for library administration. This plan was to include standards for school library resources including “textbooks and other printed and published instructional materials for the use of children and teachers in public and private elementary and secondary schools” (Michie & Holton, 2005, p. 4). The plan did not, however, address the need for standards in teaching library curriculum.

The Impact of No Child Left Behind on the Public School Library

On January 8th, 2002, President George W. Bush along with the 107th Congress passed Public Law 107-110, short titled No Child Left Behind (107th Congress, 2002, p. 1). No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was the reformation and re-authorization of ESEA, designed once again, “To close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind” (107th Congress, 2002, p. 1). According to President George W. Bush’s executive summary of his Education Reform Plan of 2001, which was to become NCLB, “This education blue print will: Increase Accountability for Student Performance . . . Focus on What Works . . . Reduce Bureaucracy and Increase Flexibility . . . and Empower Parents” (Bush, 2001, p. 2).

On the positive side for public school libraries, this bill provided for more funding for eligible schools for materials, books and technology to improve reading scores. The NCLB overview of Subpart 4, Section 1251, Improving Literacy Through School Libraries states, “The purpose of this subpart is to improve literacy skills and academic achievement of students by providing students with increased access to up-to-date school library materials, a well-equipped, technologically advanced school library media center, and well-trained, professionally certified school library media specialists” (107th Congress, 2002). Through these words, President Bush and the 107th Congress recognized the school library as a necessary partner in improved student learning.

In a U.S. Department of Education newsletter for NCLB, libraries continue to be recognized as “critical to meeting schools’ instructional goals: they promote literacy by encouraging reading” (The Achiever, 2004, p. 3).

While the president and large bodies of research support the positive correlations between quality school library programs staffed with full time certified teacher librarians and increased student achievement, there are those that still think there is little or no connection. On June 23, 2006, The Seattle Times newspaper published an article titled, Federal Way School District May Sacrifice Librarians to Save Budget (Montgomery, 2006). According to the article, Federal Way school district principals recommended cutting 27 teacher librarian positions because “libraries were the area that would least affect student achievement” (Montgomery, 2006). Principals were unwilling to sacrifice reading and math facilitators and viewed those positions more critical to student learning than school librarians.

One negative of NCLB’s Improving Lit-
eracy Through School Libraries is that the program money is only open to "a local educational agency in which 20 percent of the students served by the local educational agency are from families with incomes below the poverty line" (107th Congress, 2001, p. 144). In June of 2006, eligibility for this grant money was based on 2003 government census eligibility figures. Schools with poverty levels below 20 percent are ineligible for the grant money. With a poverty rate of 13.8 percent, East Hills School District is one of these (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Because of NCLB, there has been an overwhelming shift to standards-based teaching and learning. Students are held increasingly more accountable for their demonstrated knowledge of control over Washington state standards, evidenced by a passing score on the WASL. It was imperative that teachers and teacher librarians at Grady use these Washington state standards as their roadmap for instruction.

**PROJECT PROCEDURE**

To develop the information skills curriculum design, it was necessary to analyze several sets of standards. These included the Washington State standards for student learning and the recommended text form and features documents, and the information literacy standards found in *Information Power* (AASL & AECT, 1998). Also examined for inclusion into the project were the Washington State *Technology Foundation Standards for Students*. The standards were inspected for appropriateness to an information literacy skills curriculum to be taught in the library.

Collaboration between the classroom teachers and the teacher librarian followed the identification of grade level standards, to determine which information skills and resources needed to be supported or taught in the library. Next, the design template, following the *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) format, was utilized for curriculum design.

Finally, each skills unit, divided by grade level text forms, was organized to fit the design format. This included creating *big ideas, enduring questions*, and both summative and formative assessment possibilities. The last step involved finding or creating a list of suggested activities to go with each unit that would help increase and/or deepen student understandings of the *big ideas* (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005).

**Development**

The first step in the curriculum design process was to develop a *big idea* (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005) as the umbrella covering the whole information literacy unit. The big question was, "What do students need to know to understand how to use or apply information?" The answer was, "Students need to know how information is organized to be able to find what they are looking for." There was the *big idea*. *All information is organized*. The connections that the students could make on their own with this *enduring understanding* were limitless. Systems of organization, like alphabetical order, weren't just found in dictionaries and encyclopedias but could also be found in the video store in the movie or game section and in the phone book where students might order pizza.

Another enduring understanding that
rose to the surface was that systems of organization are developed to make access to information easier. This was true in a storehouse of information like the library, as well as the students' closets or dressers at home. Critical to this understanding was that students needed to know several systems of organization for quicker, more effective, access to information. The big ideas were found.

Next, the teacher librarian needed to connect with the classroom teachers and the text forms and features to find out just what information literacy skills needed to be taught and which library resources needed to be targeted. After looking at the text forms and features (OSPI, n.d.), it was decided which units would be uncovered in the library, with students discovering the systems of organization, as opposed to the teacher covering the information in class (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005).

Once the information literacy units and skills were decided upon, the teacher librarian needed to figure out how the students could show evidence that they were learning how to effectively use grade level appropriate information. Teacher observation of the effective use of information by students was a key assessment. However, a variety of embedded, formative assessments needed to be included along the way to check for student understanding of the new learning. Critically, the assessments would be an aid for the teacher librarian in strategic planning of instruction. It would give the teacher librarian feedback as to the ongoing proficiency levels of the students so that the librarian could adjust the instruction to better meet student needs.

The next step in the process was to list instructional resources and strategies. This involved looking at the various resources already in place, and collaborating with other teacher librarians in the district to develop activities that would facilitate student learning.

The final step in the process will be ongoing. It involves looking at the results of the student assessments and modifying the unit designs to increase student learning based on the results of the assessments.

**CONCLUSION**

Results and New Learnings

This project, Elementary Library Power: The Curriculum Design Process, fulfills the need for a collaborative, standards based, curriculum design plan in information literacy skills for the library program at Grady Elementary School. Resulting from mandates dictated by NCLB and research on the effect of the library on increased student achievement, it integrates national and state standards in reading, technology, and information skills. The desired results are articulated in terms of goals, student understandings, and key concepts (expressed as essential understandings). Because they are articulated, the teacher librarian and the students will have a clear understanding of the key questions, “What is important here? How do the pieces connect? What should I pay most attention to?” (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005, p. 66).

Prior to the project, assessment of student learning in the library consisted of some graded papers and informal, observational assessment of evidence of understanding. Little was done with the
evidence, beyond the teacher librarian looking at and using the results to guide further instruction. Most of the evidence stayed hidden away in the library.

The biggest epiphanies of the project occurred during the examination of Understanding by Design (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005). The first three of these insights concerned the overriding big ideas, or deep understandings, critical to information literacy at Grady Elementary. Those insights were: (a) information is organized for easier access, (b) there are many systems of organization, and (c) once students understand and can apply the systems of organization, they will have the power of information literacy.

Additionally, this research found there was the strong, articulated connection between Understanding by Design (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005), the text of Information Power (AASL & AECT, 1998), the research on quality school library programs (Scholastic, 2006), and the research on differentiated instruction for special populations (Tomlinson, 2003). At their deepest levels, all are concerned with the effective application and transfer of information from the classroom to real life situations, evidenced by embedded assessment.

While this idea of the effective transfer of new learning from the classroom to real life seems fairly obvious, the big question before this research was, How do teachers get students to make this transfer? It wasn’t happening at Grady. Now, the teacher librarian will use essential questions to guide students into making their own transfers from the library and the classroom, to real life, and beyond!

**Implications**

Prior to the project, the Grady library program lacked consistency in articulating and meeting state standards in any area. While students liked coming to the library and it was a warm, inviting place to be, classroom teachers and the school administrator didn’t really value it as a place of learning. The library program’s reputation was caused by a lack of understanding and collaborative dialogue between the teachers and the teacher librarian.

At the conclusion of this project, Grady Elementary School is beginning to function as a Professional Learning Community. The teacher librarian is part of the instructional leadership team guiding the building in this endeavor. This is due, in part, to the research completed in this project on collaboration and the curriculum design plan, Understanding by Design (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005).

The implications for this project are the hope that student engagement, academic achievement, and test scores will all increase in the coming years. Charged with ensuring “that students and staff are effective users of ideas and information” (AASL & AECT, p. 6), the mission of the school library is at the heart of all learning, be it student, staff or administrative.

The research also suggests the need for a district-wide collaboration effort among the teacher librarians if library programs are to reach their fullest potential as an essential component to student academic success. This is especially true for the elementary school teacher librarians as they regularly connect with and instruct up to 460 students each week. The teacher librarians need to be able to collaborate to
create consistent library goals, assessments,
and activities that will show collective evi-
dence that elementary school libraries and
their instructional interventions, positive-
ly affect student achievement.

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