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Understanding Successful Collaboration between Secondary-Level

Media Specialists and Classroom Teachers

Collaboration between media specialists and classroom teachers proves important at all grade levels for a variety of reasons. It is particularly imperative at the secondary level, as co-teaching opportunities are the main conduit between students and the media specialist, unlike in the primary grades where the media specialist teaches every student regularly. For School Library Media students interested in secondary-level librarianship, it is important to investigate the reasons for and composition of such collaboration, as well as how it is achieved and what positive effects it can produce.

Referencing the Lance studies, Peter Milbury asserts that, "The most important consequence [of collaboration] is that it helps increase student achievement, and it also helps assure that the library is an integral component of the school's curriculum" (30). Regardless of the studies which reinforce it, the idea that more teachers working together toward helping a group of students will positively impact the group more than a teacher working alone is simply rational. When media specialists (LMSs from herein) collaborate with classroom teachers (teachers from herein), they access the opportunity to teach media skills that are applicable across the curriculum. Teaching media skills is not only required by administrators and curriculum coordinators but also is essential for students' development as critical consumers of media. As it stands, one study found that "conventional wisdom among twelve to eighteen-year-olds, 80 percent of who are online, is that the free internet is their reference library" (Levin and Sousin as cited in Williams, Grimble, and Irwin

26). This alarming finding reflects one aspect of the need for media skills to be taught regularly; however, as "Media Skills" does not exist as a course in the high school curriculum, the teaching of these important concepts cannot be accomplished without regular collaboration. When the LMS collaborates with teachers, she can ensure that information is efficiently accessed, properly scrutinized, and ethically used.

While teachers are masters of their content areas, they often have room for professional growth when it comes to teaching media and research skills. Anecdotally, Ann Riedling relates the story of an LMS who was approached by a sixth grade teacher who "just want[ed his] student to use the Internet and cut and paste what they [found]" (54). While this egregious example does not fairly represent the state of all teachers when it comes to research, a study conducted through the University of Indiana found that "54 to 83 percent" (Williams, Grimble, and Irwin 56) of interviewed teachers were unfamiliar with electronic databases, and, even though "they did acknowledge that electronic databases provided more reliable and focus information" (26) than the Internet, "about 69 percent of teachers [interviewed] say they never tell students not to use the Internet as their only source" (27). The researchers in this study found significant differences among the departments regarding the use of and familiarity with databases as well as instructions given to students regarding the Internet as a resource. Offering strong collaboration between the LMSs and the teachers of this department as a possible cause, the researchers found the English department was highly likely to direct students to databases before the Internet (Williams, Grimble, and Irwin 27-28). Both that study (28) and an article by Sharon Coatney suggest that teachers use and value collaboration as a means of professional development (48). Coatney quotes one teacher as saying "[I] always learn so much about the new online resources just from listening to your lessons with my students" (48). Coatney makes the analogy of a fishbowl in describing the relationship between the LMS's teaching role and the school community, noting that everyone in the school sees

the LMS teaching, which provides the opportunity for modeling (48). Collaboration plays an important role in teaching media skills to not only students but also teachers who then, in turn, reinforce the skills and knowledge for the students.

The importance of collaboration lies not only in the achievement of the students and growth of teachers but also in the growth of the LMS and in promotion of the media center. Milbury outlines ten reasons for collaboration, not the least significant of which are the reinforcement of the LMS's role as an educator, the LMS's opportunity to practice forming professional partnerships, and the opportunity to explore, expand, organize, and promote the collection and center (30-31). LMSs continually battle deeply-engrained stereotypes about the clerical or "bookkeeping" nature of their job. Collaboration can serve only to breakdown these stereotypes and elevate the LMS's status as a teaching colleague among educators. In addition, frequent collaboration allows the LMS to refine the social skills necessary for healthy professional relationships as well as "higher-order information literacy skills" (Milbury 31) and familiarity with the specific center's resources. The more the LMS collaborates, the more she will explore her own collection, fortifying and providing better access to it along the way.

As the LMS performs many duties and fulfills many roles each day, a clear definition of collaboration is necessary in order to understand how it can be achieved effectively and what the positive outcomes will be. Montiel-Overall defines it in this way:

> "Through a shared vision and shared objectives, student learning opportunities are created that integrate subject content and information literacy by co-planning, co-implementing, and co-evaluating students' progress throughout the instructional process in order to improve student learning in all areas of the curriculum" (Montiel-Overall n.p.).

This definition, while theoretically succinct, can be complimented by an understanding of the differences among collaboration, coordination, and cooperation as well as the social and affective requirements of successful collaboration. Co-planning is of primary importance for collaboration, and practicing media specialists repeatedly stress the importance of face-to-face time for this. E-

mail and other distance communication can supplement but cannot replace the spontaneous

dialogue and interactive brainstorming that occurs through in-person meeting (Jeffrey, McKenna,

and Roepcke). Co-planning allows time for the teachers to learn more about the concepts and

materials contributed by one another and fosters, "'the sort of trust that makes open disagreement

possible'" (Dipardo as cited in Montiel-Overall n.p.). Trust, professional intimacy, and respect are

built through the planning stages of collaboration when all members of the planning team come

together with a clear understanding of their potential contributions and roles as well as those of their

partner(s) (Brown 15). Toward facilitation of such understanding, the partners must come together

with a unique purpose that "could not be accomplished by either partner alone" (Haycock

"Research about" 48). This unique purpose is a vital part of what distinguishes collaboration from

"other joint efforts such as coordination and cooperation" (Monteil-Overall n.p.). These forms of

working together are also part of the LMS's job but are less intensive. While they may evolve into

collaboration, coordination generally involves "regulating interaction of participants or events for

their common benefit" (Fine as cited in Montiel-Overall n.p.), while cooperation does not

necessitate equal partnership, deep commitment, or co-planning (Montiel-Overall n.p.).

Coordination places importance on efficiency rather than student outcomes and also requires

relatively little commitment; Cooperative efforts may be divided into parts which then coalesce, but

collaboration requires continuous team effort. Once shared planning leads to "mutual

interdependence" (Small, n.p.), it can be carried through the other parts of a collaborative effort—

instructing, managing, and evaluating. When quality working relationships are formed around

clearly-defined and mutually agreed upon goals, collaboration rewards all participants, generating the

motivation necessary to resolve environmental limitations.

     Environmental constraints on collaboration revolve around two main deficits: lack of

administrative support and lack of time.   Clearly, the former deficit often influences the latter;

however, this is not always the case. The LMS must not only be willing to tactfully advocate for flexibility in scheduling and encouragement of collaboration in the media center but she must also prepare to sacrifice time before, during, and after school to co-plan collaborative lessons (Buzzeo "Collaborating to Meet" 29). During the day, the LMS should consider rotating her own planning periods in order to make herself available to all teachers at different times during the year. When encouraging an administrator to facilitate collaboration, the LMS must demonstrate the value of such endeavors, which can be done by, "sharing weekly schedules, preparing monthly reports, and inviting observation" (Buzzeo "Collaborating to Meet" 29). Action research—reflection upon data gathered in the school, through circulation records and other means—can go a long way in convincing administrators to support the media program.

Once administrators are convinced, the LMS must focus on presenting herself as an educational leader and valuable colleague among classroom teachers. The respect necessary for true collaboration can only be generated through activities such as frequent participation in non-library professional development (Small n.p.), formation of a media advisory committee, planning and presentation of staff workshops (Riedling 54), and contribution to curriculum-mapping or department meetings (Buzzeo "Using Communication" 28). While establishing herself as a leader in the eyes of the school community, the LMS needs to advertise her skills and availability. Ruth Small notes that "awareness of the roles and expertise of the library media specialist is also cited as an important factor in creating collaborative partnerships" (n.p.). Media specialists are much fewer in number in schools than classroom teachers, and as a result, there are not as many people around the building who know exactly what the LMS does. She must, therefore, advertise her services through written communication as well as "open-house[s] and instructional tours" (Williams, Grimble, and Irwin 29). These information sessions should include food, as it is an established motivating factor for attendance at non-compulsory meetings and will enhance the welcoming environment. During

this time, the media specialist must also build trust one teacher at a time. Terri Jeffrey suggests,

"great successes can be found in making a suggestion about the best resource, or inserting

technology, or offering a viewpoint of what you believe would work best in a situation" (n.p.).

Cooperation of this kind can spark the interest of a teacher toward collaborative efforts.   In

building collaborative relationships, clear guidelines must be established, supported by policies, in

order to ensure a true partnership. If expectations are not established early in the process, failed

collaborations can result. Binki McKenna recalls one such debacle:

> "An example of bad collaboration happened a few years back. An English teacher
> approached me and wanted to bring her students to the Media Center to learn about literary
> criticism.   I asked what else she wanted them to get from this media visit, and she said that
> the students should learn how to compare and contrast different points of view about a
> literary piece. When her students came to the Media Center, I showed them what resources
> were available using one of the students' assigned authors, and how to use them. I had
> developed a compare/contrast Venn diagram so the students could record the information
> that they found. As I worked with her students, the English teacher brought in her scrap
> booking stuff, sat and ate a snack, and worked on her scrapbook the entire period! Not
> once did she interact with her students. I learned my lesson!" (n.p.)

The lesson she learned was to provide clear expectations early on and to avoid collaboration that is

too rushed and does not allow time for "good planning from idea through completion of the

project" (McKenna n.p.). With proper administrative support, adequate planning time, and strong

relationships as a foundation, collaborative teaching can produce exceptional outcomes.

"And oddly enough, we begin to realize that those lesson plans are not just about teaching

children or young adults but are also about teaching learners of all ages" (Coatney 48). When LMSs

collaborate with teachers, they are teaching teachers, being taught by teachers, learning from

students, and teaching students. The transactional relationship that develops out of the process

results in true integration, not only of information literacy skills but also of the LMS into the

instructional team. Even the students stop seeing her as that "library teacher" and begin to accept

her as an integral part of their education (Schomberg, McCabe, and Fink 10). Meanwhile, the

teacher gains an understanding of the resources available and skills learned through the media center

as the LMS increases her knowledge of content area curriculum. At its worst, what may pass for collaboration can be a one-sided endeavor, masquerading as an important learning experience for students but existent as a break for a teacher or as an over-bearing attempt by the LMS to teach media skills. At its best, collaboration is community.

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