

The School Library Team: Principal, Librarian, and Teacher

Dianne Oberg

Professor Emerita, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

doberg@ualberta.ca

Abstract

The school library is a tool for promoting civil, social, and economic progress, with a focus on sustainable development and community engagement. As a tool for educational reform, it requires collaboration within and beyond the school – it is the shared responsibility of teachers, school leaders, school library professionals, and community members. The work of school library professionals contributes to improvement in student well-being (moral purpose) and improvement in student achievement (educational purpose). Ideally, school library professionals have dual qualifications in education and librarianship because of their core instructional roles: literacy and reading promotion; media and information literacy; inquiry-based learning; technology integration; professional development for teachers; and appreciation of knowledge and culture. Research shows that a school library team – principal, librarian and teachers – is essential for a successful school library program.

Keywords: school library team; preparing partners for Educational Reform

Citation: Oberg D. (2024). The School Library Team: Principal, Librarian, and Teacher. *Pampaedia, Bollettino As.Pe.I*, 197(2), 82-91

Copyright: © 2024 Author(s). | **License:** Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).

Conflicts of interest: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflicts of interest.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7346/aspei-022024-07>



Introduction

International School Library Guidelines

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) defines the school library as a special learning environment: “A school library is a physical and digital learning space within the school, where reading, inquiry, research, thinking, imagination, and creativity are fundamental to the journey from information to knowledge by students and for their personal, social, and cultural growth» (IFLA *School Library Guidelines*, 2015, p. 16). These *Guidelines* recognize a fundamental shift in the instruction provided by school librarians, from simply helping students find information to helping students develop their abilities to interact with and learn from information and to engage with information in critical ways (Green, Chaussereau, 2023).

The work of school librarians contributes to improvement in student well-being (moral purpose) and improvement in student achievement (educational purpose). Ideally, school librarians have dual qualifications in education and librarianship because of their core instructional roles: literacy and reading promotion; media and information literacy; inquiry-based learning; technology integration; professional development for teachers; and appreciation of knowledge and culture (IFLA, 2015, p. 39). Generally, school library professionals should have the same level of education as classroom teachers. Where school library professionals are expected to take a leadership role in the school, they need to have the same level of education and preparation as other school leaders.

The school library can be a tool for promoting civil, social, and economic progress, with a focus on sustainable development and community engagement (Cianfriglia et al., in press). As a tool for educational reform, the school library program requires collaboration – the program is the shared responsibility of teachers, school leaders, school library professionals, and community members. Educational reform can be initiated in many different ways, depending on local context, influenced by legislation, economic development, and educational infrastructure. For example, the United States National Library Power School Program in the 1990s was a nongovernmental program that involved more than 700 schools in 19 communities in a school improvement initiative through the leadership of school library professionals and through partnerships within the school district and the community (Donham et al., 2001; Hopkins, Zweizig, 1999a, 1999b). Library Power’s core components were collection development, facilities refurbishing, flexible scheduling, collaborative planning, and professional development. The Library Power Program Evaluation reports discuss implications for preservice and continuing education of teachers, principals, and library professionals. There are many lessons to be learned from Library Powe.



Preparing the Partners for Educational Reform

Initial pre-service education for teachers

At least three decades of research has shown that teachers' use of the school library in their teaching is influenced by many factors: their experiences of library use in high school and university; their perceptions of their own library knowledge; the encouragement of their principals; and the nature of the curriculum.

Ideally, K-12 classroom teachers should experience the use of the library in teaching during their pre-service education. Information literacy instruction is essential for teacher education students who must not only be information literate themselves, but also be able to teach information literacy in their K-12 classrooms. Over the years, reports in the educational literature have appeared, featuring library-related instruction and programs in teacher education courses, in practice teaching settings, and in university libraries:

- Novice teachers who received library-related experiences and instruction in their teacher education on how to incorporate library learning in their practice were more likely than their experienced colleagues to share books with their students, to provide library instruction, and to collaborate with their school librarian (Oberg, 1993).
- Literacy educators in a large teacher education program teamed with local school library professionals and the university librarians responsible for instructional services. Students were introduced to process-oriented information literacy concepts which they applied to a unit-planning assignment. The students taught the unit they had planned in their practice teaching schools (Aselin, Lee, 2005).
- A Curriculum Materials Center (CMC) which provided preservice teachers with the resources to complete course assignments and to use in their K-12 practice teaching was re-organized to visually and environmentally resemble a school library. The new Teaching Resources Center was designed to transition pre-service CMC users into classroom teachers who use school libraries for personal professional growth and to enrich their teaching (Dickinson et al., 2004).
- Teacher education faculty and school librarians collaborated to provide preservice teachers opportunities to volunteer in after-school clubs. The preservice teachers provided valuable support to the school librarians meanwhile exploring technology integration in these authentic contexts helped preservice teachers understand the multiple roles of school librarians (Shepherd et al., 2015).
- School library educators and teacher educators modelled the collaborative design and implementation of a process-oriented Guided Inquiry unit involving preservice teachers in digital video production (Green, Chassereau, 2023).
- Preservice teachers engaged in collaborative lesson planning, implementing,



and assessing throughout their coursework. The support of the school librarian during their practice teaching and during their first year as classroom teachers was the most influential factor (Moreillon, 2008).

- Teacher education students at a large public Midwestern university must complete four core courses (Education in a Democratic Society, Educational Psychology, Educational Technology, and Introduction to Exceptionalities). University librarians collaborated with education faculty members to design an information literacy program consisting of one module for each of the core courses (Earp, 2009).

Initial pre-service education for school leaders

The programs for the preparation of principals generally neglect any consideration of the school library as a positive force; rarely does their coursework include any mention of school libraries except as a source of problems such as copyright infringement and book censorship (AASL, 2016). School library professionals generally receive only limited training on how to be advocates for the library program, and thus the issue persists of their failure to promote themselves to their administrators and colleagues. Principals and school library professionals would benefit from shared courses and shared course assignments, but such initiatives in higher education are very rare. However, both students and teachers benefit from the work of principals and school library professionals (Alexander et al., 2003; Hopkins, Zweitzig, 1999):

- A study of principal learning found that a high-quality preservice preparation for principals is associated with stronger teacher retention and with student achievement gains in both mathematics and English language arts. Underrepresented students of color benefited the most from their principals' opportunities to learn. High-quality preparation programs included: a quality internship; opportunities for applied learning; learning about leading instruction; learning about shaping a positive school climate; learning about developing people; and learning about meeting the needs of diverse learners (Campoli, Darling-Hammond, 2022).
- A study of school librarians who mentored first to third year teachers explored school librarians' contribution to the resilience of new and beginning teachers: encouraging perseverance; providing nourishment through care and empathy; and offering the library as a resource, especially for student research. Developing teacher resiliency may increase teacher retention, which in turn supports student achievement. By affecting teacher retention, resiliency influences social stability within and outside the school (Soulen, Wine, 2018).



In-service professional development

Research suggests that educators at all levels and in all professional roles should be working together in learning communities during their preservice education as well as during in-service education or professional development (Donham et al., 2001). Unfortunately, library-related pre-service programs are a short-lived rarity, and many new teacher graduates in Canada and the United States arrive in their first classroom without that experience (Asselin, Doiron, 2003; Nero, 1999). Fortunately, these deficiencies in pre-service education for teachers can be mitigated, particularly through informal job-embedded in-service education, that is, collaborative work with their school-based library professional.

Principals' engagement in high-quality in-service learning opportunities is positively related to the stability of the teaching force and the academic achievement of students. The associations between principals' access to professional development are positively related to teacher retention and strongly related to student gains in both English language arts and mathematics. The relationship is at least marginally significant in coursework for learning about shaping a positive school climate and about meeting the needs of diverse learners. These relationships are strongest for historically underserved students of color, suggesting that professional development programs, especially those focused on learning about leading instruction, may help principals develop specific means to support teaching and learning for those furthest from opportunity (Campoli, Darling-Hammond, 2022).

Library-related professional development for principals most often takes the form of informal communication with a school library professional during collaborative work. Formal library-related professional development is a rarity. Here is one innovative approach, developed as part of addressing a shortage of school library professionals: as part of recruiting teachers into school librarianship, a four-module online program was developed to help school principals understand school libraries and academic achievement, information literacy and academic standards, library collections and flexible access, and revitalization and evaluation of school library programs. The program was free to principals whose teachers enrolled in a school library education program (Kachel, 2003).

Role of school leaders in promoting school libraries

School leaders (i.e., principals, headmasters) wield considerable influence in their schools in relation to innovation and change. Without their involvement and support, innovations are likely to founder. School library professionals are very aware of the importance of principal support of their work. In studies of outstan-



ding school library programs in Canada, school leaders and school library professionals identified four aspects of principal support:

- As supervisors working directly with teachers – e.g., the principal informs new teaching staff about the importance of collaborating with the librarian; the principal includes collaboration with the librarian as part of teachers' annual evaluations.
- As models demonstrating personal commitment – e.g., the principal encourages teachers to invest time in planning and teaching with the librarian and spends time with teachers in the library; the principal includes the school library on tours of important visitors.
- As managers enabling the program – e.g., the principal provides funding, supports flexible (responsive) scheduling, and seeks feedback on the quality of library programs and services;
- As mentors providing visibility/importance – e.g., the principal works with the librarian to develop the librarian's personal professional development plan. (LaRocque, Oberg, 1995; Oberg, 2009).

The concept of 'principal support' was also explored in an international study from the perspectives of principals and librarians from seven countries: Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Japan, Scotland, and South Korea (Henri, Hay, Oberg, 2002). In general, across the international study, the beliefs of the principals and librarians about the role of the principal were aligned except where librarians were not also qualified teachers.

Research shows that the most critical factor in a successful school library program is a school library professional educated in both classroom teaching and school librarianship (IFLA, 2015, pp. 25-31). Where school library policies do not mandate the employment of qualified school librarians, development of library-related instructional programs is challenging.

Implications and Lessons Learned

The integrated school library program, though known and advocated for many decades still an innovation in many educational environments, local and national. It can best be understood, not as a unitary innovation, but as a bundle of innovations: cooperative planning, team teaching, precisely defined goals and objectives, individualized teaching, variety in resources, maximum freedom for the learner, teacher as facilitator of independent learning, and different locations for learning. Changing any aspect of an educational system is an enormous challenge, normally taking five to seven years of dedicated work. There has been extensive research into the factors that support change and the factors that undermine



change. At the macro level, enormous inertia, political change at the national or local level, and financial restraints can stall innovation and change. At the micro level, many specifics influence school library programs: the education of teachers, the complex demands on school leaders, the lack of official school library professional roles, the local history of educational change, the culture of the school, changes in curriculum (Oberg, 2009). Looking at the lessons learned during one major initiative, such as Library Power, can assist those who plan even a small change in education, whether that change involve new resources or technologies, new instructional strategies, or new assumptions and theories underlying the innovation.

The principal investigators of the Library Power Program Evaluation identified three categories of lessons learned: community; process; and outcomes, the highlights of which I share here (Hopkins, Zweizig, 1999a, pp. 107-109):

– *Community.*

- *Student learning is a shared interest.* Educators were joined by community partners who helped generate enthusiasm, money investments, and volunteers. Library Power benefited individuals and the community as well.
- *Networking is critical to implementing change.* Library Power brought together community leaders and educators in a shared vision. For many participants, it was the first time they had focused on school libraries as central to instruction. They, not librarians alone, articulated support for libraries.
- *Collaboration between librarians and teachers is important.* Strong connections between teachers and librarians were central to Library Power. Involving teachers in selection of library materials resulted in teachers' increased use of library materials in instruction and in encouraging student library use. Collaboration brought librarians and teachers together for unit planning and instruction.

– *Process.*

- *Planning is important and worth the effort.* Comprehensive planning at the school and community level was required for receiving the Library Power grant. Planning gave opportunities to reflect on past practices and to consider best ways forward.
- *Shared professional development opportunities build a common vision.* Multiple professional development activities provided opportunities for teachers, principals, and librarians to work together. These activities helped develop a learning community focused on maximizing student learning.
- *Incentives make a difference.* Library Power funding was over \$1.5 million per-community over three years but the amount going to each school was not great. However, schools could apply for \$500-\$1000 mini-grants to support collaborative instructional projects, and they could use Library Power funds to hire substitute teachers so that teachers and librarians could



plan together. These small monetary investments in teaching and learning paid off in positive results.

- *In the promotion of student learning, the school library can offer resources, and the school librarian can serve as an internal agent.* Library Power supported the full integration of the school library program into instruction. The leadership of the principal and the librarian were critical for this initiative, but the librarian also needed to represent an on-site agent for learning through the library.
- **Outcomes.**
 - *Working to achieve a common vision is worth it.* The success of Library Power depended on the contributions of many at the school and community level. Through joint planning, shared professional development, and collaborative teaching, they learned about the power of the school library and found that working together to achieve a common vision was worth it.
 - *School librarians can be curriculum partners/leaders in their schools.* Many school librarians had been an untapped source of leadership. Library Power required instructional leadership. It required knowledge of curriculum, of the developmental characteristics of children, and of instructional resources. It required planners and presenters for professional development. In many cases, these requirements could be supplied by the school librarian.
 - *The national guidelines work!* (as expressed in *Information Power*, the U.S. 1998 national school library guidelines.) The requirements of Library Power reflected the library guidelines: a student-centered library program; a fulltime school librarian; an up-to-date collection; space for group and individual activities; flexible access to the library space; and collaborative instructional planning between librarians and teachers.

In my role as a case study researcher in the Library Power Program Evaluation, I focused on lessons learned about teacher transformation (Oberg, 2001, p. 45). Below are five important lessons, adapted to the innovation of an interdisciplinary curriculum:

1. ***Faculty capacity for change.*** A faculty that has experienced successful instructional innovation will be able to do the transformative work required for an instructional innovation such as an interdisciplinary curriculum. A faculty that has experienced a failed innovation will need greater support, time, and encouragement; the faculty will also appreciate an honest acknowledgement and analysis of the errors made in the failed innovation attempt.
2. ***Instructional leadership of the principal.*** A dynamic and forceful principal focused on student learning and curriculum change, and knowledgeable about the school district and community, can build support for the innovation in the school and the community. A principal can use routine administrative pro-



cedures to emphasize teachers' use of the library, to encourage collaboration, and to reinforce student-centered teacher practices.

3. **Shared leadership within the school.** The teamwork of the principal and the librarian can enable an instructional innovation in a powerful way. The leadership of classroom teachers, as well as that of the principal and librarian, is important in implementing an instructional innovation.
4. **Collaboration.** Schools where people share their ideas and where there are structures in place to facilitate teachers working together are more able to implement an instructional innovation. Flexible scheduling of the library provides the opportunity for educators to use the facility in a more integrated way and to work together to develop a deeper understanding of an innovation.
5. **Teacher learning.** Staff development is critical for the implementation of an instructional innovation. Staff development is more powerful if it is embedded in the regular daily instructional practice of the school. Staff members will progress in their learning at individual rates and in personal ways. There is no one-size-fits-all in staff development.

References

- Alexander L. B., Smith R. C., Carey J. O. (2003). Education reform and the school library media specialist: Perceptions of principals. *Knowledge Quest*, 32(2), 10-13.
- American Association of School Librarians (AASL). (2016). *Pre-service toolkit for principals and teachers*. www.ala.org/aasl/toolkits
- Asselin M., Doiron R. (2003). Whither they go: An analysis of the inclusion of school library programs and services in the preparation of pre-service teachers in Canadian universities. *Behavioral & Social Sciences Librarian*, 22(1), 19–32.
- Asselin M., Lee E. (2005). “I wish someone had taught me”: Information literacy in a teacher education course. *Teacher Librarian*, 30(2), 10-17.
- Asselin M., Nasland J. (2000). A case study of partners in educational change: Teacher-librarians and preservice teachers. *Proceedings of the 24th IASL Conference and 4th International Research Forum*. Malmö: Sweden.
- Campoli A. K., Darling-Hammond L. (with Podolsky A., Levin S.). (2022). *Principal learning opportunities and school outcomes: Evidence from California*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/438.376>
- Cianfriglia L., Meroni M., Francavilla F. (in press). Quality school library services in Italy: The principal's role. In L. Marquardt, D. Oberg (Eds.), *School librarians and principals leading together: International perspectives*. Bloomsbury Libraries Unlimited.
- Dickinson G., Cogdel E. A., Gavigan K. (2004). Transitioning from curriculum materials center to school library media center in preservice teacher education. *Education Libraries*, 27(1), 11-15.
- Donham J., Bishop K., Kuhlthau C. C., Oberg D. (2001). *Inquiry-based learning: Lessons from Library Power*. Linworth.



- Earp V. (2009). Integrating information literacy into teacher education: A successful grant project. *Behavioral & Social Sciences Librarian*, 28(4), 166–178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639260903275748>
- Green L. S., Chassereau K. (2023). Modeling Guided Inquiry and school librarian instructional partnerships to pre-service teachers through digital video production. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 62(2), 185-205.
- Henri J., Hay L., Oberg D. (2002). An international study on principal influence and information services in schools: Synergy in themes and methods. *School Libraries Worldwide*, 8(1), 49-70.
- Hopkins D. M., Zweizig D. (1999a). Library Power Evaluation [Theme issue]. *School Libraries Worldwide*, 5(2).
- Hopkins D. M., Zweizig D. (1999b). *The United States National Library Power School Program: Research evaluation and implications for professional development and library education*. Distributed by ERIC Clearinghouse <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED437055>
- IFLA. (2015). *School library guidelines* (2nd. ed.). Written by the IFLA School Libraries Section. Edited by Barbara A. Schultz-Jones and Dianne Oberg, with contributions from the International Association of School Librarianship. IFLA.
- Kachel D. E. (2003). Partners for success: A School Library Advocacy Training Program for Principals. *Knowledge Quest*, 32(2), 17-19.
- LaRocque L., Oberg D. (1995). Building bridges between the library and the principal's office. In *Proceedings of the 19th Annual Conference of the International Association of School Librarianship*. Umea, Sweden.
- Moreillon J. (2008). Two heads are better than one: Influencing preservice classroom teachers' understanding and practice of classroom-library collaboration. *Library Media Research*, 11(1).
- Oberg D. (1993). Use of libraries in teaching by novice and experienced teachers. *School Libraries in Canada*, 13(3), 14-19.
- Oberg D. (2001). Teacher transformation. In J. Donham, K. Bishop, C. C. Kuhlthau, D. Oberg, D., *Inquiry-based learning: Lessons from Library Power* (pp. 31-46). Linworth.
- Oberg D. (2009). Libraries in schools: Essential contexts for studying organizational change and culture. *Library Trends*, 58(1), 9-25.
- Shepherd C. E., Dousay T., Kvenild C., Meredith T. (2015). Fostering technology-rich Service learning between school librarians and teacher education programs. *Knowledge Quest*, 44(2), 44-52.
- Soulen R., Wine L. D. (2018). Building resilience in new and beginning teachers: Contributions of school librarians. *School Libraries Worldwide*, 24(2), 80-91. doi: 10.14265.24.2.006

