Understanding the school library sector

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1. Introduction

Since their emergence within the scholarly academies of ancient Greece and Rome (Thompson, 2019) school libraries have played an important role in shaping *who* gets informed, by *whom* , and *how* . From the prominently-placed religious texts in the one-room Colonial classroom (ALA, 2011) to the canonical literature selections stocking 20 [th] century libraries, the " library faith" of the powerful (Weigand, 1999, p. 4) has been perpetuated within the school library sector (Weigand, 2007). For centuries the school librarian was a manager not an *instructor* , and in the words of Weigand (2007), one who most frequently persisted in taking a " user in the life of the library rather than a library in the life of the user perspective" (62-63). One might argue that only in recent years have school libraries evolved to become more student-centered " learning commons" (Harlan, 2018, p. 71), spaces in which a learner's ideas, prior knowledge, and interests are utilized by expert *teacher* librarians as the platforms for collaborative, critical, and creative inquiry. In addition to highlighting this historical evolution, the following report will address the information managed in school libraries, the users of school libraries, and the ever-evolving roles and essential characteristics, skills, and attributes of effective teacher librarians.

2. Discussion

2. 1 How school libraries have developed through the years and their current environment

The genesis of American school libraries can be traced back to the emergence of information collections by renowned thinkers and " gatekeepers" such as Aristotle (Thompson, 2019) and Reverend William Bentley (Pawley, 2018), who used their information collections for educating select individuals. The information literacy " gatekeeping" role shifted from individual ownership to institutional ownership with the emergence of academic libraries in South Carolina and Boston (Pawley, 2018), and later in the 1900s shifted again with school libraries working in tandem with public libraries (Weigand, 2007).

As Michie and Holton (2005) explain, only after the First World War — in an effort to bolster nationwide education in response to Sputnik's launch — did the federal government fund school libraries as their own entities. It wasn't, however, until the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) that school libraries were *fully* legitimized (Michie & Holton, 2005) via funding " for the acquisition of school library resources, textbooks, and other instructional materials" (3). In addition to paying for much needed resources, ESEA Title II funds were allocated to the revision of library standards and to the addition of a greater number of school libraries nationwide (Michie & Holton, 2005). The ESEA of 1965 and later, the 1996 Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA), which recognized public and school libraries as vehicles for providing diverse populations with greater access and opportunities, were the federal acts which had the largest fiduciary impacts on school libraries (Michie & Holt, 2005).

While the passage of the ESEA (1965) and the LSTA (1996) placed school libraries on the map *financially* , it was the rise of information's accessibility

via the Internet, the subsequent creation of the standards for " 21st century learners" by the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), the passage of the Common Core State Standards, and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that set school libraries on their current *philosophical* path (ALA, 2018; Harlan, 2018). Respectively, these pivotal events and publications did three things: First, the rise of the Internet reshaped our definitions of *information* in the 21 st century. Information was no longer a static " thing" that could be didactically conveyed, memorized, and spit back out by learners. Second, the standards of the AASL and the Common Core refined our understanding of *literate* college and career ready students, recognizing *literate* students as those able to " contribute positively to [their] learning community and to society" via their interactions with print, digital, and electronic information and others (Harlan, 2018, p. 73). Third, ESSA legitimized the role of the school library in helping to educate young people and gave definition to what an exemplary school library program should look like (ALA, 2018).

Although perhaps not yet fully realized in today's school libraries (Weigand, 2007), the promise of AASL's standards and ESSA's calls for school library effectiveness set an important precedent that school libraries no longer be mere *repositories* in which librarians play the part of materials managers. They set the stage for a more interactive space in which trained specialists (teacher librarians) collaborate with content-area specialists, educational leaders, and community members in the creation of " dynamic learning environments" that can " bridge the gap between access and opportunity for all K-12 learners" (AASL, 2016, p. 1).

2. 2Information and knowledge managed by school libraries

If today's school libraries hope to " bridge the gap between access and opportunity" (AASL, 2016, p. 1), they *must* provide learners a variety of relevant print, digital, and technological information resources in a multitude of different forms that supplement *and* complement a school's core curriculum (Harlan, 2018). Maps, newspapers, literature, non-fiction, journal articles, periodicals, audio resources and key reference materials like encyclopedias and dictionaries are but a few of the resources frequently found in school libraries (Harlan, 2018; Thompson, 2019). Harlan (2018) explains further that school libraries must provide learners with access to " complex, real-world texts," including " primary source documents, news reports, research papers, journal articles, [and] policy briefs" (74) as a means of bolstering students' cross-curricular content knowledge.

Because school libraries work in service to students, it is essential that the library's resources be suitable for students at a variety of ages and developmental levels and provide students with a wider view of the world than they might otherwise have access to. To this end, state standards for library collections, such as the *Standards for South Carolina School Library Resource Collections* (South Carolina Department of Education, 2012) provide school librarians with the guidelines for evaluating their collections. In addition to setting parameters per the number of books per pupil a school library should maintain, these standards provide information on what percentage of a library should be devoted to fiction and non-fiction resources, the levels of text complexity at which different books should be maintained, and how school librarians can assess their collection's alignment

to the core instruction of the school (SCDOE, 2012). Additionally, the standards provide school librarians with qualitative indicators of a school library's resources, encouraging reflection on the collection's diversity of authorship and subject matter, its currency, its age and developmental appropriateness, and its potential relevance to students (SCDOE, 2012).

With the increased availability of information, our definitions of information and information literacy changed dramatically. According to Hirsch (2018), this historical " transformation" has resulted in libraries becoming " technological hub[s]" for their " communities – meaning they integrate technologies, design creative spaces and instructional tools, and create new opportunities for learning and exploration" (3). School libraries, too, have become such " technological hubs" in their quest to assist learners in becoming critical consumers of online information. It follows that access to " high-quality, openly licensed digital and print resources, technology tools, and broadband" Internet (AASL, 2016, p. 1) is a necessity in today's school library. So, too, is access to diverse Internet-based technologies that can assist learners in becoming more digitally literate, understanding how different digital tools can be utilized and for which tasks they are best suited (AMA, 2018; Harlan, 2018). Last, in order to better facilitate creative and critical innovation and inquiry, an increasing number of schools are utilizing " media and digital makerspaces, project-oriented tools, such as cameras, editing hardware and software, and robotics and electronic equipment" (Harlan, 2018, p. 79).

2. 3 Potential users of school library resources and services

The bulk of a school's library users are the K-12 students it seeks to serve. Data from the most recent National Longitudinal Survey of School Libraries (ALA, 2012) reveal just over half (58%) of school library respondents (N = 4, 385) live in metropolitan areas with the remainder of respondents serving more rural schools. 42% of respondents serve elementary school aged students (K-5); 19% serve adolescents in Jr. High/Middle Schools; 26% serve high school aged students, and 26% serve a combination of ages (ALA, 2012, p. 3). However, given the shift in focus from libraries as repositories to libraries as " learning commons" (Harlan, 2018, p. 71), students are but one of the many populations served by public school libraries.

Increasingly, school librarians are spending time collaborating with teachers, school leaders, and other school-based and community stakeholders (Harlan, 2018). For example, recent longitudinal data (ALA, 2012) reveal that in 2012, school librarians spent 15 hours a week on average " delivering instruction" directly with students, but allocated another 2. 5 hours per week " meeting with teachers to plan instructional units" (5-6). Additionally, when utilized as a " learning commons," school librarians can provide the spaces for such ventures as robotics, makerspaces, and video production, opening up opportunities for the public school librarian to " model lifelong learning and mentor community members in informational skills" (Harlan, 2018, p. 79). Given Trieu's (2012) findings that a school librarian's leadership capacity is most strongly predicted by his or her " presence in the school community," using school libraries as platforms for stakeholder development is incredibly important (24). In fact, separate research (Everheart, 2013) identified a school librarian's leadership capacity, his or her ability to " connect the

library program with others, particularly decision makers and stakeholders"

(18) to be the *most* prominent shared characteristic between school libraries

recognized as exemplary.

2. 4 Information professionals and their roles within the school library sector

The shifts in the school library from hegemonic *repository* to co-constructed

" learning commons" (Harlan, 2018, p. 79; Hirsch, 2018) and the definitions

of information from *established* to dynamic have resulted in related

pedagogical changes, altering the role school librarians are expected to play.

This evolution is especially evident when one looks at the ways in which the

role has been defined over time. In 1958, school librarians were little more

than institutional bookmarks, those who spent " more than half of their

workload devoted to service" in a K-12 library (Michie & Holton, 2005, p. 11).

Between 1985 and 1991, working in a school's library not only required "

professional training and skills" and the abilities to " handle books and other

materials," it also entailed " planning and guiding the use of the library and

media services by students, teachers, and others" (11) The American

Association of School Librarian's 2016 definition of a school librarian stands

in stark contrast to these. She or he is one who " serves as an instructional

leader, program administrator, teacher, collaborative partner, and

information specialist" (AASL, 2016).

As Harlan (2018) conveys, today's school librarians are expected to " teach

and model information literacy" (72), serve as literacy and instructional

experts, " develop digital literacies" (73), collaborate with teachers as "

curriculum generalists" (74) to provide professional development and

integrate information literacy opportunities across content areas, *and* manage human and material resources – including budgets, and policies related to district-filters and " acceptable-use policies" (75). In fact, there's little, it seems, that teacher librarians don't do, which is certainly reflected by the knowledge, skills, and attributes necessary to working effectively within this sector.

2. 5Knowledge, skills and attributes relevant to information professionals working in the school library sector

Assuming the role of a *facilitative* teacher of digital and information technology, a literacy expert, a schoolwide instructional leader, a manager of highly dynamic resources, *and* a collaborator (*both within the school and without*) is no small fete. It is unsurprising, then, that the list of skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary for these roles is daunting.

When examining the sector of public school libraries, arguably the most important characteristic listed by the ALA (n. d.) as a skills' requirement is the " desire to meet and serve the library's user community." Although important, a librarian's skills and knowledge within the field of information and digital literacy – one's ability to " think analytically to develop new or revised systems, procedures, and work flow," what one knows of " the philosophy and techniques of library service," and one's " ability to prepare comprehensive reports and present ideas clearly and concisely in written and oral form" (ALA, n. d.) – are insufficient *alone* to meet the needs of a *school's* library users. The linchpin skill for the school librarian is his or her understanding of learners and the act of learning – namely how a student's

prior knowledge, background, interests, readiness, and learning profiles can be utilized to create and co-create meaningful opportunities for critical and creative meaning making. This entails a school librarian's ability to accurately assess a student's needs and his or her ability to provide guidance on addressing those needs. It also entails a librarian's having demonstrated knowledge of a variety of instructional models suitable for information study (Harlan 2018).

Equally important are a school librarians skills as a collaborative partner. In her work researching exemplary school library programs and school librarian leadership, Trieu (2012) noted that " teacher-librarians can no longer simply sit behind their desks and circulate books. They must increase their presence outside of the library, build positive and cohesive relationships with administrators and teachers, and share their knowledge of technological integration of curriculum and literacy" (27). Whether through collaboration with outside partners in the co-creation of a makerspace project or planning research opportunities with an 8th grade class, school librarians must be equipped to work with others as skilled partners. This entails that they be willing, capable, and passionate life-long learners of literacy.

3. Conclusion

School libraries are spaces of immense potential for the collaborative critical and creative co-construction of information that have only recently gained the relative independence necessary to live up to their full potential in service to *all* learners. School librarianship, as a profession, has evolved similarly over time and within the past ten years school librarians have been

empowered to act as teacher leaders rather than mere managers of information literacy. To borrow a phrase from teacher education, a school's librarian is no longer the " *sage of the page;* she or he is the entrusted *guide on the side* " (King, 1993).

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