

2012

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Original Publication Citation

Kimmel, S. (2012). Seeing the clouds: Teacher librarian as broker in collaborative planning with teachers. *School Libraries Worldwide*, 18(1), 87-96.

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Seeing the Clouds: Teacher Librarian as Broker in Collaborative Planning with Teachers

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Teachers engaged in sustained collaboration with a teacher librarian were interviewed about the meaning of that collaboration. The findings suggest that the teachers recognized important contributions of the librarian to instructional planning and classroom instruction including knowledge, legwork, and support. In particular, they understood her role as a broker both to resources and to ideas for using those resources in instruction. While these resources were essential, they were not sufficient; they required a knowledgeable peer who also understood their application to the curriculum and what students were expected to learn. They required a librarian.

Introduction

“If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper” (Hahn, 1987, p. 44).

In many ways the work of the teacher librarian is to find the clouds in the pieces of paper. We are the poets who uncover connections between words on paper: the content standards and 21st Century literacy standards. We connect those words on paper to real students and to real-world problems, and make them visible in our libraries, classrooms, and schools. We broker the imaginative world of planning with the real world of student learning. Ours is the creative work of poets and the very concrete work of brokers to build connections with resources, across curricula, and throughout the school community. As one teacher succinctly put it: *“You help us to connect with other things so we can help the kids see those connections”* (Brittany, second grade teacher).

A significant body of research and literature in teacher librarian ship has focused on collaboration (e.g. Bush, 2003; Buzzeo, 2002; Doll, 2005; Montiel-Overall; 2005, 2008) and the roles of the teacher librarian as instructional partner (Church, 2008, 2010; Harada & Yoshina, 2010; Kelsey, 2006) and leader (Lankford, 2006; Smith, 2011). The role of the teacher librarian as information specialist or resource provider seems to be neglected as a more traditional role. Yet the forms of information resources and their delivery have become increasingly fluid, extensive and complex. The role of information specialist was a solid second in the shifting roles identified in a poll conducted by the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) for *Empowering Learners* as important today and in the future (AASL, 2009, p. 16). The *Standards for the 21st Century Learner* clearly stated that “Learners use skills,

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resources and tools" (AASL, 2007, p.). Now more than ever, our patrons need poets who can broker those connections between information needs and information resources and tools. They need librarians.

In this paper, I share the results of interviews with teachers engaged in sustained collaboration with a teacher librarian about the meaning of that collaboration. The findings suggest that the teachers valued planning with a librarian specifically and recognized important differences in the contributions the librarian brought to instructional planning. In particular, they understood her role as the person who had knowledge and access to resources. The findings of these interviews imply the need to broker across the roles we have identified of teacher, instructional partner, program administrator, leader, and information specialist (AASL, 2009).

The interviews that are the subject of this paper were part of a year-long ethnographic study of collaborative planning between a teacher librarian and a team of teachers (Kimmel, 2010, 2011). That study sought to understand the role of the teacher librarian as a broker for professional learning in the collaborative planning with teachers. The focus of that research was teacher learning with a major assumption that the learning of teachers would impact student learning. As Brittany implies, the librarian helps to make learning connections for students through her work with teachers. As a part of that study of eight monthly-planning meetings between a team of three second-grade teachers and a teacher librarian, each teacher was interviewed at two different times about the meaning of collaborative planning with the teacher librarian.

Theoretical Framework

Collaboration and Professional Learning

Ours is a profession obsessed with collaboration. As Callison (1999) noted about *Information Power*, the word "collaboration" appeared over sixty times "so it must be important," and indeed it remains central to the newer *Empowering Learners* (AASL, 2009) and is the first bullet following the mission statement (p. 8). *School Library Media Activities Monthly* ("Resources," 2008) identified over thirty resources about collaboration in an update for teacher librarians. Numerous articles (Todd, 2008; Haycock, 2007; Williamson, Archibald, & McGregor, 2010) and books (Bush, 2003; Buzzeo, 2002; Doll, 2005) have been written about collaboration. These authors frequently cite student learning and student achievement as the desired outcome of collaboration: "Collaboration is the single professional behavior of teacher-librarians that most affects student achievement" (Haycock, 2007, p. 32).

Elsewhere authors have discussed the role of the teacher librarian in staff development (Hayes, 2001) and as a change agent engaged in school reform (Hughes-Hassell & Harada, 2007), yet few have addressed collaborative planning with teachers as a site for professional development. Yukawa, Harada, and Suthers (2007) described one year-long study of teachers and teacher librarians engaged as a community of practice where participants learned with and from each other and the mentors in an "inquiry partnership." Various authors in the education field have addressed the importance of teachers learning from each other in professional learning communities (Dufour, 1998; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Snow-Geron, 2005) and in other settings. Tyack and Cuban (1995) suggested, "Better schooling will result in the future—as it has in the past and does now—chiefly from the steady, reflective efforts of the practitioners who work in schools" (p. 135). While the accountability movement has clearly heightened the rush for teacher librarians to directly demonstrate their impact on student learning, we should also attend to the professional learning that occurs in collaboration. One avenue to student learning is through teacher learning.

Socio-Cultural Theory

Given our professional interest in collaboration and our common belief that learning has a social context (AASL, 2007), teacher librarians have an affinity with socio-cultural theories of learning that focus particularly on collaboration as a vehicle for that learning. "It is through participant's collaborating to find creative solutions that effective new skills and

understandings are developed" (Wells & Claxton, 2002, p. 3). Wenger's (1998) Community of Practice theory is particularly applicable to collaboration. Yukawa, Harada, and Suthers (2007) drew on this work in their study of inquiry partnerships, and it is a major theoretical framework for this article.

Wenger's (1998) treatment of boundaries and boundary work seems particularly relevant to studies of teacher librarians planning with teachers. The hybrid role of teacher librarian is one that operates on the boundary between the practice of teaching and the practice of librarianship. When a librarian joins a team of teachers to plan instruction she is in a position to carry ideas and resources from the practice of librarianship into the practice of those teachers. Teachers take away resources and ideas from planning with the teacher librarian and use them in their classrooms with students where, we could argue, they affect student learning and achievement. While we often focus on student learning that is a result of direct teaching by the teacher librarian or in the library, we might also find our influence in the student learning that occurs in classrooms through the resources, both tangible and intangible, that we provide to teachers.

Brokering and Boundary Objects

Wenger (1998) calls the work of someone who operates on the boundary in this way and is able to interject ideas from one area of practice into another "brokering." Van Deusen's (1996) case study in which she found the teacher librarian provided leadership as an "insider/outsider" suggests a similar role. In interviews with teachers and the principal, Van Deusen revealed that the librarian was an important member of a team who brought focus and coherence to their work, asked challenging, sometimes naïve, questions that caused teachers to reflect on their practice and she was perceived as adding value through her knowledge of quality resources for instruction. Because she did not serve in a supervisory capacity, she was considered a safe source for dialogue and requests for assistance. Van Deusen's (1996) insider/outsider and Wenger's (1998) broker resemble the "internal networker" leadership identified by Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, Roth and Smith (1999) as the "seed carriers" of an organization as they help to spread new ideas and practices. The results of the interviews for this study illuminate the role of the teacher librarian as a broker who leverages an inside-outside position to introduce different resources and ideas to teacher planning.

An interesting aspect of Wenger's (1998) theory about boundaries is not just about brokers but about what he terms "boundary objects" which are objects, tangible or intangible, that can be used to "coordinate the perspectives of various constituencies for some purpose" (p. 106) and connect us to various practices that we may not belong to. In this sense, a library book about how clouds are formed serves to connect the reader to the work and the understanding that scientists have established about clouds. The book may serve as boundary object, in this general sense, but it has the potential to forge other connections if it is brought to teacher planning by the teacher librarian. Then the book is an object that allows the participants to coordinate its content with the content of curriculum and their instruction. In the act of selecting the book, bringing it to the table and calling attention to the book as a vehicle for instruction, the teacher librarian has brokered a connection. Now the work of teachers and the teacher librarian has an object that will allow them to coordinate their perspectives about student learning. Wells and Claxton (2002) point out that the success of a group engaged in collaboration is not just about skills and knowledge or even the ability to collaborate, but "it is also distributed across the artifacts that are to hand" (p. 3-4). So, in addition to a neglect of the professional learning that occurs in collaboration, I would argue that we have failed to attend to the role of resources provided by the teacher librarian in collaboration and professional learning. Literally and figuratively, there are clouds in those pieces of paper bound between boards as well as other resources that librarians use to broker connections with teachers, curriculum and students.

Method

Setting and Context of this Study

The setting for this study was an elementary school in a mid-sized city in the southern United States serving students whose ages ranged from four through twelve-years-old. Students in the school were predominately African-American and came from a neighborhood impacted by poverty. Interviews of three second-grade teachers in this school were conducted as part of a larger ethnographic study that employed a discourse analysis to examine a year of planning between a teacher librarian and this team of teachers (Kimmel, 2010, 2011). Most students in these second-grade classrooms were seven years old. The elementary school had a flexibly scheduled library, meaning that teachers and the teacher librarian collaboratively determined when and how lessons would be scheduled in the library. Lessons in the library were designed to integrate classroom content with information literacy. Students did not come to the library as a group at any pre-determined weekly time but individually were permitted to visit the library daily to exchange library books. These planning meetings were held monthly in the school library.

Participants

Participants interviewed in this study were the three teachers who made up the second grade team in the school. Each had her own self-contained classroom, but they shared students for their literacy block. The teacher librarian in this study was also the primary researcher in the study and thus held an inside-outside role of “participant-observer” (Spradley, 1980) in the ethnographic study.

The three teachers represented different levels of teaching experience. Dianna had been a teacher for sixteen years and always taught in second-grade. Areyanna had also taught for sixteen years but this was her first year teaching second grade. She was teaching the same group of students she had taught the previous year in first grade, a practice known as “looping.” Brittany was a first-year teacher who had recently graduated from a local university. As part of her pre-service preparation, she had completed two years of field experience at the school. She was new to the grade level and the team but had experience at the school. Pseudonyms are used for the three teachers.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 2009) were conducted as part of a larger ethnographic study in which eight planning meetings across the school year were recorded, transcribed and analyzed (Kimmel, 2010, 2011). Each participating teacher was interviewed separately about midway through the school year, and a focus group interview of the three teachers was planned for the end of the school year after other data had been collected.

Due to numerous end-of-the-year conflicts, it was not possible to find a common time for all three. Areyanna and Brittany were interviewed together, and Dianna was interviewed separately following other data collection. A total of five interviews were conducted: three individual interviews mid-year, a joint interview of Areyanna and Brittany after the end of the school year, and a final interview with Dianna. Interview questions focused on the meaning of planning and, in particular, the meaning of planning with the librarian. Interviews were transcribed; transcriptions were inputted into NVivo Software and were analyzed for patterns in responses to the questions across the five interviews. The interviews all served to elicit responses from teachers to direct questions about meanings of planning and meanings of planning with the teacher librarian. The findings reported below come from these interviews.

Findings

Knowledge, Legwork, and Support

Using a “heuristic elicitation method” (Eisenhardt, Shrum, Harding, & Cuthbert, 1988) for the interviews, teachers were asked to simply list “all the ingredients that the teacher librarian brings to planning.” The list was then read back to them and they were asked “of all of these, which would you say is most important” and then they were asked to elaborate

on that choice. Their individual responses were knowledge, legwork, and support. In Brittany’s case:

Okay, when I say knowledge, I mean that when we come in and we have this objective we need to teach immediately, you are already prepared. You have things pulled, you already know exactly what we need to do, and you are throwing out these ideas. I am coming in, this is my first time teaching this, and so you are definitely giving me new things and opening my eyes to a lot of different ideas that we can do with the kids. Yeah, that’s what I meant by knowledge. Knowledge would basically sum up all those things.

As Dianna said:

One that I definitely appreciate is the first one on the list: resources, because that’s legwork. And ideas as well because instead of just having our three heads here, we have a fourth brain here as well to help.

Areyanna shared their viewpoints:

I think the support goes along with the lessons, and then just having you there because you don’t just sit back, you get involved with what we’re doing. And if we’re planning science or social studies – like now, we’re doing maps. We didn’t know about the Google maps thing and it’s kind of like, ‘Hey have you thought about this’ with the suggestions of integrating computers and all that stuff into what we’re doing.

Support, legwork, and knowledge became the initial categories for organizing responses from across all interviews. Combing through the five interviews for further examples of each of these categories, it became clear that legwork was a kind of support—it was providing time-saving labor for teachers. Table 1 shows a summary of the kinds of knowledge and support that teachers mentioned in the interviews.

Table 1: Kinds of Knowledge and Kinds of Support Identified by Teachers

| Knowledge | Support |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Resources that are in the library including books. ▪ Technology. ▪ Learning objectives ▪ Pedagogy ▪ Other grade levels ▪ Better choices ▪ “What needs to happen with an objective” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To create units ▪ To see what students need to know next ▪ Involved and present in planning ▪ Pulling materials ahead of time for planning ▪ Brainstorming ▪ “Pull it all together” ▪ Having an open mind ▪ Helping to realize objectives ▪ Offering not mandating ▪ Delivering materials to classrooms |

Kinds of Knowledge

When teachers were asked about the meaning of planning with the teacher librarian, a meaning of the librarian as the person “with the stuff” predominated but was always modified to include “ideas” as well as resources. Planning with the teacher librarian was about coming together with the resources that the teacher librarian had prepared ahead of time. As Brittany said “units that you have already laid out.” The teacher librarian pulled resources from the library that included books, professional reading, and technology. The

teacher librarian's knowledge of resources was key. The teacher librarian also had knowledge of field trips related to curriculum and outside resources such as traveling trunks from the local history museum.

Each teacher talked about the teacher librarian's knowledge of the state curriculum or *Standard Course of Study*. It was also important that the teacher librarian knew the curriculum and knew what other grade levels were doing both in terms of making connections between different grade levels working on similar objectives such as those related to weather or in terms of helping teachers to look ahead to the next grade so, as Brittany said, *"they'll already have this knowledge when they get to third grade."* The teacher librarian was considered to have an insider's knowledge of what was in the library as well as an understanding of the teacher's curriculum and was considered, in Dianna's words a *"fourth brain."*

Kinds of Support

In terms of support, one striking feature that teachers valued in planning with the teacher librarian was the sense that resources and ideas were not forced on them. As Brittany says, *"Then we take that and figure out if it will work in our class, or not."* Areyanna makes the strongest statement, *"You don't necessarily push it on us. Suggestions, suggestions."* Planning with the teacher librarian was valued because it made work easier and the teacher librarian who prepared ahead of time to bring resources, curriculum and ideas to the table provided important "legwork" in teacher planning. At a time when they felt so much else was mandated, they appreciated having these resources and ideas as suggestions rather than forced upon them.

Knowledge Combined with Practices

Teachers valued what the teacher librarian knew about resources, curriculum and teaching but also what she did with that knowledge through identifying and pulling resources ahead of time, meeting to plan with teachers in the library, and sharing ideas for how to use the resources in classrooms. This combination of knowledge and practice provided the kinds of support valued by teachers as they planned classroom instruction. Teachers never talked about the teacher librarian without some reference to materials, resources or "stuff," but that was always connected with ideas and support. Brittany sums up the role of the teacher librarian in teacher learning:

I feel like definitely you are a key part of our planning because you are able to get those resources for us but also you always come with ideas as well. And helping us realize our objective - what needs to happen when we are teaching this objective and maybe some things that we can do and you can do with the kids, or we can do in the classroom with kids. So you are very helpful with giving ideas and getting our resources together.

In this manner, teachers did talk about the lessons that occurred in the library but always connected back to what they were doing in their classrooms. The resources and the practices of the teacher librarian combined to offer the kinds of support that teachers needed to think about *"what needs to happen when we are teaching this objective."* In other words, they offered "just in time" professional development for teachers.

Discussion

Library Resources as Boundary Objects

Wenger (1998) talks about brokers as operating at boundaries, but he also talks about "boundary objects" that "coordinate the perspectives of various constituencies for some purpose" (p. 106). These artifacts he points out are designed for "participation rather than just use" (p. 108). In this study, the teachers talked about how the teacher librarian came to planning prepared with resources and ideas. *"You are already prepared. You have these things pulled. You already know exactly what we need to do"* (Brittany).

When the librarian has identified resources ahead of time and brought them to the table for planning, they become an accessible and integral part of planning. Their presence offered resources designed for participation. Knowledge of resources is clearly recognized as part of the role of the teacher librarian as information specialist. L. L. Wolcott (1994) suggested that teacher librarians leverage this recognition in planning with teachers. McCracken (2001) found that teacher librarians perceived this role as most important and felt it was the one they were best able to implement. Mardis (2011) has suggested that we return to this fundamental and historical role as we move into the future.

Boundary Crossings

Wenger (1998) talks extensively about boundaries as sources of learning for an organization. We are all familiar with the suggestion that classrooms and libraries are like silos with the potential for isolation, yet Wenger would say the boundaries that exist between these practices also hold the potential for deep learning within an organization. An interesting aspect of boundaries or concepts of inside and outside is that they depend on your perspective. From the teachers' point of view, they were the outsiders who came into the library for planning. They spoke about the value of "coming to you" and "having you there" when they planned. And they also recognized that the library and the resources in the library were the area of competence for the librarian. As Areyanna said, "Because you don't know what's there as well as the media specialist does."

Teachers spoke again and again about the teacher librarian as the person with the "stuff," but they also always modified this to include "and ideas." In collaborative planning, teachers recognized the value of the resources that the librarian had pulled ahead of time or during planning but also of "having you there." It was important that these resources traveled with the teacher librarian into planning. "Given enough legitimacy, visitors with a carefully composed paraphernalia of artifacts can provide a substantial connection indeed" (Wenger, 1998, p. 112). In answer to one question about what the librarian brought to planning, Areyanna says "Books, you bring us ideas on how maybe that book would be effective. How to use it with a particular objective." She is clearly referencing the work of the librarian as about more than the provider of resources but as making connections through those resources to effective teaching practice.

Collaborative Planning as a Design for Learning

Teachers in these interviews describe collaborative planning with the teacher librarian as a design for learning that includes both the resources of the library and the participation or involvement of the teacher librarian in planning how to use those resources in the classroom. It was important that resources were at hand during planning but it was not sufficient--resources were accompanied by a knowledgeable peer who also understood the curriculum and what students were expected to learn "what we need to know to help our students" (Brittany). Alternative models such as simply pulling resources for teachers or attending collaborative planning and pulling resources later would not have had the same impact and value.

A key finding of this study is that teachers want a librarian to plan with. Teachers recognize the value of the lessons provided in the library but they also see the influence of the teacher librarian in planning lessons for their own classrooms. The teacher librarian needs to have the legitimacy of understanding curriculum and classroom teaching and a knowledge of resources, but more importantly she needs to be "involved with the curriculum" and an active member of planning who brings resources accompanied by ideas. There are clouds in the paper that are not evident unless the teacher librarian is there to broker those connections.

Wenger (1998) recognizes the fragility of persons in an organization who operate at boundaries:

Because their usefulness can easily be overlooked--they may not contribute centrally to any specific practice--they are often the first casualties in processes of reorganization. Multimembership is a particularly interesting form of

organizational participation because it incorporates boundaries into an identity, and the work of reconciliation involved produces a kind of lived resolution at the boundary. (Wenger, 1998, p. 255)

But Wenger also sees the work at the boundaries in an organization as essential to the deep learning of the organization. Teacher librarian ship has a history of identity crises and the literature is replete with studies about the various roles of the teacher librarian including attempts to rank or rate the importance of each role (AASL, 2009). This fuzziness about our identity may be a strength we should leverage. Perhaps it is time we see the clouds in our professional documents and work to dissolve the distinctions between teacher, information specialist, instructional partner, program administrator, and leader. In this “lived resolution at the boundary” resides our strength and contribution to teaching and learning.

Limitations of this Study and Areas for Future Study

This was a very small and intimate study. The participants have moved on, the setting has changed, and the results in all of their particularities defy replication. Clearly this was a very particular setting and context and teacher responses about the role of the teacher librarian concerned the particular practices of this teacher librarian, and no claims can be made to the generalizability of the study. Yet hopefully, in this story and its small details, others will see themselves, their practices, and their struggles. A clear limitation of this study was the engagement of the researcher as the participating teacher librarian. While subjective, one might argue that this position allowed for a type of “insider” knowledge. Following a qualitative perspective, the intention of this analysis is to provide a “plausible interpretation” (H. F. Wolcott, 1994).

Future research might build upon these constructs of broker and boundary objects and explore their meaning as applied to the work of teacher librarians. Research might also work to follow collaborative planning into the classroom to see the influence of the teacher librarian in classroom instruction, not just in library instruction. Clearly, we should also continue to pay attention to the selection and provision of resources as a part of planning. Finally, while we think about ourselves as providers of staff development (Hayes, 2001), we might expand the ways we understand our influence on the learning of teachers to include the small and everyday connections we make with teachers in our many interactions including collaborative planning. These teachers clearly recognized the knowledge of resources and practices of the librarian as essential to the work they did in classrooms.

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Author Note

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