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Practitioner Strategies for Effective Advocacy Engagement in the USA

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Practitioner strategies for effective advocacy engagement in the USA

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Abstract:

Increased defunding and destaffing of school libraries in public schools in the United States makes advocating for school library programs increasingly important. Practicing school librarians must develop an understanding of advocacy so they will know how and when to act for their program. Additionally, it is important to identify advocacy strategies so that strong advocacy plans may be developed. This study identifies the activities and practices of advocacy within the library programs of a group of practicing librarians. Findings suggest successful strategies of advocacy follow three themes: building awareness for the school library program, engagement of the librarian in the school culture, and building an indispensable program.

Keywords: Advocacy, School libraries

Practitioner strategies for effective advocacy engagement in the USA

Introduction

The number of school librarians has declined nationally in recent years (Keaton, 2012). In the past 5 years, there has been a downward trend of -4.27% in the staffing of school libraries by certified school librarians in the US (ALA, 2013b). School administrators and district leaders often see the position of school librarian an easier cut to make than other teaching or resource staff when faced with difficult budget decisions (ALA, 2013b). Therefore, it is critical that school librarians know the benefits of advocating for their program in such a way that stakeholders perceive them as a vital component to the school community. This will ensure that the school library program is protected by and for the patrons who use their services (Kenney, 2008; Ewbank, 2012).

The position statement of the American Association of School Libraries (AASL) on the Role of the School Library Program states school libraries are instrumental to the academic success of students (2010). One component to strong library programs is having a highly qualified school librarian who builds influence and support for the position, as well as for the school

library program. Both the American Library Association (ALA) and its school library division, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) have dedicated resources and toolkits for advocacy (AASL, 2006; ALA & AASL, 2003; ALA, 2013a). These resources of the national professional organizations are available to assist school librarians as they implement their own building-level advocacy plans.

While organizational resources are beneficial to the field, there is a lack of consistency in understanding and enacting advocacy by school librarians. Though the term advocacy is widely used, rarely does it carry the same connotation across multiple audiences. In recent studies (Burns, 2014; Ewbank, 2011), practitioners had different perceptions of advocacy. Few identified advocacy as actions beyond their assigned duties in building a quality library program. Due to the undeveloped exploration of the topic, there is little consistency among school librarians of what exactly constitutes advocacy. A cohesive repository of successful strategies, therefore, has not been identified.

Statement of the Problem

AASL, the US national professional organization for school librarians, maintains a tiered definition of advocacy. Definitions of public relations (PR) and marketing co-exist under the definition of advocacy in published AASL documents and websites. This allows for individual interpretation and possible misunderstandings.

AASL defines advocacy as the “on-going process of building partnerships so that others will act for and with you, turning passive support into educated action for the library program” (AASL, 2007). Therefore, program advocacy goes beyond simple program promotion and requires deliberate, consistent relationship-building efforts. School librarians must build influence for their position and their program if they hope to build relationships with stakeholders that influence others to act in support of the library program (Hartzell, 2003). To ensure that others in the school community are aware of the benefits of a strong school library program under the direction of a qualified school librarian, school librarians must have an understanding of advocacy and develop strategies to educate and build partnerships with their stakeholders.

Little research has been conducted examining school library advocacy. There is little to no empirical research examining school librarians’ understanding and behaviours of advocacy. To date, only Ewbank (2011) examined the activities and actions of practitioners associated with school library advocacy. With such a dearth of research, the field focuses on the writings of thought leaders in the profession to begin to identify strategies used to advocate for school library programs.

Review of literature

Despite resource development from state and national organizations, there remains little consistency in the field of what activities constitute advocacy. School librarians, therefore, have varied perceptions on advocacy in their practice. Hartzell (2003) contends that school librarians must build influence for their program and their position through creating relationships with stakeholders. These relationships then have the ability to provide educated support for the library program. A review of the literature was conducted and structured using this framework.

Hartzell (2003) promotes facilitating change for the position of school librarian. People rely on stereotypes and their own experience with school librarians when they do not have other information to draw on (Oberg, 2006; Johns, 2007). The lack of understanding of the school library program by others in the school building, especially decision makers, continues to be an obstacle school librarians face. If stakeholders and policymakers are to support a program, they need to understand the program's function and how it impacts the academic success of students (Haycock, 2003).

Building positive relationships with teachers is an important component in redefining the school library position because teachers will then become advocates willing to speak on behalf of the importance of the library for the success of their students (Hartzell, 2003; Johns, 2007). School librarians must educate their stakeholders about the position, specifically with respect to the role of instructional partner. School librarians must be able to articulate the benefits of a strong school library program and the services of a qualified school librarian (Braxton, 2003; Levitov, 2012; Martin, 2012). Kirkland (2012) warns if the school librarian herself cannot demonstrate the program's worth, it is impossible to expect others to understand, especially administrators and decision and policy makers, thus putting the program at risk.

After establishing the role of school librarians as teachers and instructional partners, in addition to program managers, Plunkett (2010) and Hand (2008) suggest that school librarians stress the importance of their services by showing they are indispensable. Lau (2002) suggests the best way to make school librarians more valued is for them to better articulate how they directly impact student learning.

One way to improve the perception of the position of school librarian in the building is to discuss ways the library can support classroom curricula (Hartzell, 2003; Zmuda, 2006). A key finding in Church's (2008) study was that school librarians must be trained to advocate for their instructional role in the school environment so that others, particularly administrators and collaborating teachers, are aware of the valuable role school librarians play in supporting student achievement. Administration can support this effort by allowing time for the school librarian to attend grade and curriculum meetings and granting time for professional development with other school librarians (Church, 2008).

Finally, Hartzell (2003) suggests that school librarians overcome ambivalence about taking on leadership positions. The school librarian must develop the disposition of educational leader-evidenced not only as a leader within the school, but within the field of education.

School librarians must seek leadership opportunities, even if they are ambivalent about the elevation in power these opportunities will afford them (Hartzell, 2003). As one of the few professionals in the school responsible for each student (Everhart, 2007), school librarians have a responsibility to advocate for greater learning opportunities for everyone in the building. One way to accomplish this is to lead professional development sessions at the school or district level. Other opportunities include positions on school leadership teams, school and district curriculum committees and technology projects (Hartzell, 2003). Successful engagement at the school level will lead to further opportunities to demonstrate leadership and build an influential reputation (Branch & Oberg, 2006).

Research questions

This study explores the actions and strategies of advocacy in practice through the examination of a school librarian's understanding of advocacy in a school library setting. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do practicing school librarians define advocacy?
2. What advocacy activities do practicing school librarians enact?

Methodology

Participants

The twelve participants in the study were school librarians selected via criterion sampling (Patton, 2002). Each participant was a state certified, licensed school librarian working in a public school in Virginia. To obtain a representative sample, participants were selected from various school levels, and each of the seven geographical regions of the state as identified by the state library association.

Table 1. Demographic Summary of Study Participants.

Participant	Age	Degree	Years Teaching	Years in Library	School Level	Geographical Region
Janet	32	Master of Ed. w/ Library Endorsement	10	8	Elementary	James
Marie	64	Library Endorsement	30	10	Middle	James
Anna	54	MLS	22	22	Middle	Potomac
Maggie	50	Master of Ed. w/ Library Endorsement	23	15	Elementary	James
Theresa	54	Master of Ed. w/ Library Endorsement	18	10	High	York
Erin	38	MLS	12	12	High	Shenandoah
Vickie	51	Master of Ed. w/ Incomplete Library Endorsement	20	1 month	Middle/ High	Roanoke
Sarah	53	Master of Ed. w/ Endorsement	29	13	Elementary	Rappahannock
Lisa	53	Master w of Ed. w/ School Library Concentration	18	14	Elementary	Rappahannock
Taylor	62	EDS/Master Library Science	39	23	Elementary	York
Kat	51	Library Endorsement	14	7	Elementary	Clinch
Sue	43	MLS	18	14	Middle	Potomac
Mean years in teaching 21 ($n=12$, $SD = 7.9$)			Mean years in school library 12 ($n= 12$, $SD=5.99$)			

All participants in the study were women. The mean number of years participants have been involved in K-12 education is 21.1 years ($n= 12$, $SD= 7.92$). The mean number of years practicing as school librarians is 12.3 ($n=12$, $SD= 5.99$). Ten possess a graduate degree. Four participants hold a graduate degree in library science; five have certification in school library media. One participant was completing the state endorsement program. Six participants

taught in an elementary setting, three in a middle school, two in a high school, and one in a combined middle/high school.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured, individual interviews were used to capture each participant's unique experiences with advocacy. Each interview was conducted online via video conferencing technology (Skype, Adobe Connect) and recorded for transcription. Each participant was interviewed once to explore her understandings of advocacy and how she engages in advocacy for her school library program.

The researcher transcribed all interviews and provided copies to participants to allow for clarification. Minimal changes were made. The transcripts were coded with the assistance of a research team. The team consensus coded 100% of the transcripts. Horizontalization, as developed by Moustakas (1994), was used as the method of analysis. Through this process, textural descriptions were coded and recorded until patterns were identified. Finally, a narrative that captured the experiences of the participants as a group was constructed.

Findings

The first research question, how the participants define advocacy, was answered contextually through their narrative descriptions of advocacy activities. Advocacy was uniquely defined by each participant and was largely dependent upon the strategies in which each individual engaged to gain support and influence for her program.

Findings offer insight into the advocacy strategies school librarians use in their practice. Three primary types of strategies could be identified from the data. Each participant's experiences with advocacy in her particular setting were described through these strategies.

Building awareness for the school library program and school librarian position

Strategies that were most prevalent encompassed promotion of the school library program in an effort to raise awareness for the program and how it supports the school community. Each of the participants in the study engaged in this type of activity when advocating for her library program. Some strategies specifically targeted the school community while others were more inclusive of stakeholder groups such as parents and community members.

The participants perceived there to be a lack of knowledge of the responsibilities of the school library position and the function of the school library program within the school, and especially the larger community. They perceived their primary advocacy need to be educating parents and staff to understand the function of the school library program. Strategies to educate and promote the services of the school library program were numerous. Participants focused on activities developed to build awareness of library services such as publishing bookmarks, creating brochures, speaking at back-to-school nights and sending out announcements to both students and the school community at large on a regular basis. Additionally, participants met with stakeholders within the school such as administrators, teaching teams, and leadership teams to build awareness for the program. Strategies to educate these stakeholder groups included promotion of library resources and the generation of monthly reports shared with administration about the library program. Participants also

promoted the physical space of the school library. As Anna described, “ We make them feel like the library is the place where they will feel comfortable.”

Increasingly, technology and social media were used as an additional tool for program promotion. Maggie noted, “ I put links to my blog or my website to some of their work. Just to get it out there so that teachers go, and parents go, Oh, wow, look what they did in the library.” Likewise, social media continued to be a way to encourage promotional advocacy strategies to student stakeholders. Janet hoped to build momentum of new social media campaigns such as *twitter chats* and *text a librarian* in her county to engage students, hoping they would spread the word, “Oh, I got all this help from this awesome library.”

Finally, participants expressed that advocacy activities sometimes need to reach beyond a local level. Opportunities to engage in national professional organizations existed. Additionally, letter writing or email campaigns to legislative members, as well as petitions, were strategies that participants have engaged in. Erin noted that often the librarians in her district worked together to craft one message, “One of the other high school librarians is involved in getting the information out to us--if she sends a form or an email I can easily send off to a specific person, I will.”

Engagement of librarian in school culture and community

Each of the participants suggested that school librarians must go beyond building a strong school library program, and must become a visible presence in the school community. There was a need to entwine the activities of the school library program into the culture of the school. This ensured that the school library and the position of the school librarian not be seen as extra, but were seen as a vital, essential part of the school community.

Participants described how they built relationships with school community members, not necessarily to showcase the library, but to show that they support the school and the students. Erin explained how her presence at school events has had a positive effect on building relationships with the school community:

It just allows you to connect with parents and make them value or encourage value for the library, just showing them that you care about their kids and what their kids are doing and how you can help their kids... I think that speaks a lot more to parents than them getting an email that describes in detail, you know, all your wonderful databases kind of thing.

Strategies to incorporate leadership positions for the school librarian were beneficial in showcasing the positive influence of the participants. Participants demonstrated this in a variety of ways by being involved in professional organizations, being active members on school leadership teams, and being involved at a district level in professional development that was interdisciplinary in design. Anna used her experience of the specific request that a librarian work with elementary social studies teachers as they implement a new curriculum as an example. Marie volunteered to work as a Mentor Coordinator in her building, working with new teachers as they are assigned to the school. This allowed her to establish a relationship with new staff and opened opportunities for collaboration early on. Further, participants looked for opportunities to include advocacy strategies that include members of the community beyond the school. In an effort to strengthen community partnerships and

develop her career resources, Vickie worked on writing a grant with the Vocational Advisory Council at her school.

Building a program of indispensability

Participants strived to create a meaningful partnership between themselves, their program and multiple stakeholder groups so they were perceived as essential to student learning in their school community. Relationships with each stakeholder group- teachers, students, parents, and community members had to be built to support learning opportunities. A need was identified to emphasize the instructional role of school librarian in the school setting so that others would advocate for the school library program as a resource for student achievement.

Strategies that have been effective include leading staff library advocacy training sessions and sponsoring events for parents to demonstrate how the school library supports the state Standards of Learning (SOLs). Participants emphasized a need for students and teachers in the building to convey value for the program. It was essential that the school librarian be viewed and valued as a teaching resource. Marie pointed out, “you need to get your library embedded into teachers’ curriculums.” Building familiarity with curricular pacing guides has become a useful strategy for the school librarians. As Lisa pointed out, “It is easy for me to support, introduce, or, um, co-mingle, or whatever, their SOLs, because I’m familiar with what they’re doing. We have the pacing guides. Before I knew what they were going to cover, but I didn’t know when.”

Additionally, participants came up with fresh, innovative technology to share with teachers to incorporate into student assignments. Marie explained, “I am out there looking for new ways to enhance their lessons. Then I go and I try, I will promote it. I send out information whenever I can to update the teachers about, something new I think they will like, something to help them in the classroom.” This was often accomplished by promoting the library’s resources on a regular and continuing basis and incorporating teacher’s lessons into the library calendar.

Discussion

Through each practitioner’s unique experience, the strategies and activities of advocacy for a school library program in the US are examined. Advocacy is uniquely defined based on each participant’s experience and understanding, as well as the activities that fall within the duties of her assignment. However, three thematic strategies are identified among the participants as they enact advocacy within their particular program setting.

Building awareness for the school library program and the position of the school librarian is a primary focus of advocacy initiatives of the participants. Without these strategies, community members may rely on misconceptions of the work of the school librarian and even depend on previous stereotypes (Oberg, 2006). School librarians must remain vocal in educating their stakeholders about the school library program. This will assist others in the school community in having an educated position as they transition from passive supporters to advocacy partners (Johns, 2007).

Engagement of school librarians in the school culture facilitates building relationships with stakeholders. Hartzell’s (2003) framework recommends that school librarians make themselves more visible both in and outside the library if they want to be seen as influential in

the school community. Advocacy strategies must focus on building these influential relationships through the activities in which the librarians engage. If others in the school community see the school librarian vested in the school and student achievement, they will be more inclined to partner with the school librarian in return.

Finally, strategies tied to student support are demonstrated by building a program of indispensability. Multiple thought leaders in the field (Hunter & Applegate, 2009; Kachel, DelGuidice, & Luna, 2012; Kirkland, 2012) articulate that the best advocacy messages are stated in a way that demonstrate a need for the program framed through the lens of its effect on student achievement. Advocacy strategies should therefore demonstrate how the school library program affects student learning in a unique way.

Positive outcomes from these findings include participants describing strategies incorporated as part of a sustained advocacy plan intended to build support for their programs. Haycock (1994) contends a systematic, developed plan for advocacy that can be implemented and carried out for a long period of time is most appropriate for successful advocacy. While participants recognize obstacles to advocacy, such as lack of time and the need to overcome stereotypes for their position, they also identify the need and incorporated advocacy plans into their library program.

Limitations

Though the study assumes that the participants are representative of typical school librarians, the criterion sample is derived from only one state. Virginia's Standards of Quality (Code of Virginia, Standard 2, 2012) maintains minimum staffing in most of the states schools with populations of 299 or greater. Therefore, destaffing is less of a concern for participants in this study than in other areas of the country. A more nationally representative sample would possibly provided a more urgent examination of the topic.

Conclusion

This study engages practicing, state-certified school librarians in a conversation in which they describe their understanding of advocacy. It also offers insight into what advocacy strategies the school librarians are implementing into their practice. There is currently a dearth of empirical research examining school library advocacy actions in K-12 school libraries. Due to the lack of a consistent definition in the school library field, it is difficult for professional organizations to develop definitive strategies when developing advocacy resources. These findings will add to the school library literature as the field attempts to define expectations of advocacy for school librarians and explore effective advocacy strategies at all levels.

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