The School Library Media Center:  
A Vision for Excellence  

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An ideal school library program is one that has students at its center. The school library media center is a place of learning, and, as such, the teacher-librarian is there to foster inquiry and promote student learning (*Empowering Learners*, 2009, p. 19). While providing quality resources (books, databases, library space) is an important part of the teacher-librarian’s role in the school, materials must be connected to true learning. Thus, the ideal school library media program has a teacher-librarian dedicated to equipping students.

The teacher-librarian acts as both an instructor and a partner for teachers. As such, the teacher-librarian works collaboratively with teachers to promote inquiry. Furthermore, collaborative work promotes the blending of content and process. 21st Century skills should not be learned in a vacuum and need to be linked to what students are learning. The teacher-librarian also has an important role to play in promoting multiple literacies and in promoting reading. Finally, through an active role in instruction, the teacher-librarian is perfectly situated to assess student achievements and to demonstrate the positive impact of the school library media program (*Empowering Learners*, 2009).

Classroom teachers cannot promote inquiry-based learning and thus true understanding acting alone. They need support from the entire school community (Hughes-Hassell, 2007, p. 51). The teacher-librarian has a vital role to play in creating an environment of understanding. Since the teacher-librarian works across the curriculum, he/she is in a position to lead students through the necessary skills to gain understanding in all content areas. In order to create this environment of inquiry, the teacher-librarian must act as a “coach, caregiver, connector, and catalyst” (Hughes-Hassell, 2007, p. 53).

As coach, teacher-librarians guide other educators to constantly question their practice and examine their methods. As caregiver, the teacher-librarian develops relationships with teachers to provide support and empathy as they explore new modes of teaching. As connector, the teacher-
librarian fosters collaboration with and among teachers. Finally, as catalyst, the teacher-librarian asks the hard questions in order to promote positive and effective change.

Though the teacher-librarian does not directly teach reading, promoting reading and reading skills is vital to creating a school culture of reading and literacy. Furthermore, the teacher-librarian is equipped to give students skills beyond traditional literacy. With the multiplicity of formats in today's world, students need to know so much more than how to read books. They need to know how to "read the Web" (finding, evaluating, using relevant and quality websites), as well as the world around them (Hughes-Hassell, 2007).

In today's technology rich environment, there is a lot of pressure to incorporate technology tools into the classroom. Students need technology skills to succeed in today's world, but does using technology necessarily give them these skills? This is another area of instruction in which the teacher-librarian is well situated and well equipped to intervene. By becoming well versed in Web 2.0 and other educational tools, the teacher-librarian can help teachers determine which technology tool will best serve their needs and provide an effective learning tool (Hughes-Hassell, 2007).

Along with incorporating technology into the classroom comes the idea of information/digital literacy. This also links to the idea of "multiple literacies" (Hughes-Hassell, 2007, p. 95) and encompasses the myriad of skills and attitudes that students need to succeed in today's world. The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) Standards for the 21st Century Learner (2009) address these needs in great detail. In an effective school library program, the teacher-librarian will know how to connect the AASL standards to state standards, thus linking the skills of multiple literacies to content.

One extremely important aspect of a vision for an instructional school library media program is that of assessment and evidence-based practice. It is good for teacher-librarians to have a broad vision of helping students learn and of giving them access to books and information, but a
teacher-librarian's worth should be measurable in their impact on students. Teachers have to demonstrate that they are making a difference in student learning, thus teacher-librarians should make it part of their program to assess their own work and their own impact (Harada, 2010).

All of the above aspects of an instructional school library program depend on collaboration among teachers and the teacher-librarian. Collaboration is needed to truly promote understanding in both content and process. Students need to understand their own learning and search process, and they can learn this best within the context of what they are learning in class (Montiel-Overall, 2006). Likewise, students will best understand content when they have the skills to process the information they’re given and to create new knowledge from what they’ve learned.

Having a school-wide research model is an effective way for student and teachers to have a consistent research process that continues from year to year. In this situation, the teacher-librarian is perfectly situated to head up a school-wide research model. He/she can work with teachers to incorporate the research model into the classroom, thus creating even more of a link between student work in the classroom and student work in the library.

In a high school setting, The Research Cycle (see Fig. 1) is a wonderful research model that matches up with inquiry-based learning. The Research Cycle was developed by Jamie McKenzie and “requires students to make decisions, create answers, and show independent judgment” (http://virtualinquiry.com/inquiry/researchcycle.htm) as opposed to simply going through the steps of topical research. Another aspect of the Research Cycle is its recursive nature – the cycle requires students to be constantly rethinking and revising their question and their process. The reporting stage, in which the student shares the knowledge they produced, comes only after the cycle has been completed more than once.

The steps of the Research Cycle begin with questioning, in which the student comes up with a question to answer. Questioning is a very important aspect of the Research Cycle, since the student is not assigned a topic to research, but must develop a problem that is interesting to them.
The second stage of the Cycle is planning. In planning, the student is required to plan their information search. Students are encouraged to plan keyword searches and specific questions they want answered as well as to group their findings by key ideas. This helps students deal with the enormous amount of information available to them.

After planning, students gather their information. Because students will have planned their search and determined in advance what information will be useful, gathering should be an efficient process. Though students will have only gathered relevant information, they will still need to sift through what they have to develop new insights into their question. Synthesizing involves creating new knowledge and the bigger picture from the information students have found. At the evaluation stage, students have to determine the quality of the information they found. In many cases, students will have to return to an earlier stage to revise their question or their search strategy. Once students have revised their process and have evaluated their work, they can report their findings in a substantive presentation. (McKenzie, 2000)

The Research Cycle model matches up well with the AASL Standards for the 21st Century Learner, but is especially applicable to Standard 2: “Draw conclusions, make informed decisions, apply knowledge to new situations, and create new knowledge”. It is also a well-thought-out way to represent inquiry-based learning, which starts with a question and moves students forward to creating new knowledge.

For example, an 11th grade social studies class doing a unit on the Civil Rights Movement would greatly benefit from using the Research Cycle as they put together a research project. Without inquiry-based learning and the Research Cycle, a research project may look something like this: the teacher assigns each student or group of students a topic or person to research and present on. The students go straight to Google and type in their topic. They use the first few webpages that come up to gather facts. Their presentation is shallow and boring. Of course, this is somewhat of a worst-case scenario, but is certainly not unheard of.
With the Research Cycle, however, students come up with a question that interests and motivates them, such as “How did popular music play a role in the Civil Rights Movement?” The student then plans her search by coming up with keywords and possible main idea categories. She also determines the best sources for her question (books, the Web, CDs, etc.). During the gathering stage, the student goes back to questioning and planning as needed to develop the most efficient search strategy. During the sifting stage, the student goes through everything she has found about music during the Civil Rights Movement to find new insights on the topic. In the synthesizing phase, she draws her own conclusions in order to contribute something new to her field of study. At this point, she should be ready to evaluate her work – if she determines that her work either does not answer her question or that her question needs some reworking, she can repeat any stage of the cycle. Once she is done, she will have a fascinating and dynamic presentation to share with her class and community.

By giving students the skills to ask good questions, find and evaluate relevant information, and use that information to create new knowledge, the teacher-librarian has a vital role to play in this process. Furthermore, the Research Cycle is an effective way to foster collaboration between teachers and the teacher-librarian, and thus linking content and process.
An ideal school library media program is one in which the teacher-librarian is an instructional leader in the school. By collaborating with classroom teachers in order to focus on student learning and understanding, the teacher-librarian will foster an environment of true learning and a truly effective school library media program. Of course, this vision relies on teacher and administration cooperation, a school open to inquiry, and the time and resources to devote to teaching.
Bibliography


