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**THE LIBRARIAN'S ROLE IN FOSTERING POSITIVE SCHOOL-WIDE READING CULTURE IN GEORGIA SCHOOLS (FULL PAPER)**

**Abstract**
This study examines how librarians in Georgia's K-12 public schools foster positive reading cultures. Using qualitative research, it explores how librarians promote reading engagement by creating inviting library spaces, curating diverse collections, developing programs that encourage reading for pleasure and academic growth, and collaborating with school community members. The research is guided by the Reading Culture framework, adapted from a combination of the cultures framework and the Expectancy-Value Theory of Achievement Motivation. This framework contextualizes how librarians influence reading culture through resources, programming, and relationships. This study's findings contain best practices for encouraging student reading engagement and increased literacy growth.

**Introduction**
Within the past ten years, research focusing on school reading culture fostered by school librarians has consisted primarily of studies conducted outside the United States. These countries include Canada (Cheney & Wander, 2023), Kazakhstan (Agadil & Zhurumbayeva, 2023), Australia (Mason & Merga, 2019; Merga, 2019), Singapore (Loh et al., 2017; Loh et al., 2019), Nigeria (Adejimoh et al., 2021; Obim & Wagwu, 2023; Onwubiko, 2022; Ternenge et al., 2022), Pakistan (Asif & Yang, 2021), and Ghana (Samuel, 2022). However, there is a lack of current empirical studies within the U.S. on the librarian's role in developing reading culture in schools (Daniels & Steres, 2011; Deuschle, 2017; Feirsen, 1997; Fitzpatrick, 2022; Kordeleski, 2017; Makatche & Oberlin, 2011; Tate, 2011). This research aimed to fill that gap by exploring, specifically, the perceptions of award-winning Georgia school librarians on how they foster positive reading cultures.

**Literature Review**
Research shows multiple ways a school librarian can play a role in fostering a reading culture. A school librarian and the library can contribute to a positive school-wide reading culture through the library's (1) physical environment, (2) reading collection, and (3) programming (Adejimoh et al., 2021; Agadil & Zhurumbayeva, 2023; Loh et al., 2017; Mason & Merga, 2019; Onwubiko, 2022; Samuel, 2022; Ternenge et al., 2022). Additionally, for school-wide reading culture to be developed and sustained, the school librarian needs collaboration within the school community and support from the administration (Daniels & Steres, 2011; Loh et al., 2017; Loh et al., 2019; Mason & Merga, 2019; Onwubiko, 2022). The literature also indicates that a school librarian

may encounter and must address barriers that may deter the establishment and growth of a school-wide reading culture (Adjeimoh et al., 2021; Mason & Merga, 2019; Onwubiko, 2022).

**Theoretical Framework**

A combination of the expectancy-value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) and the cultures framework (Stephenson, 2023) formed this study's theoretical framework: the reading culture framework. As seen in Figure 1, the reading culture framework is comprised of three main elements: materiality, activities, and motivators. When applied to this research, materiality is the library's collection (physical and digital) and the library's physical space, from its layout to its furnishings within. Activities represented in the framework are library programming, while motivators are the collaboration between the librarian and the school community members. The cultural vectors found in the middle of the framework represent formal and informal ways in which the culture is transmitted. An example of a formal cultural vector would be the librarian formally teaching educators on how to help students find just-right books that appeal to students. An example of an informal cultural vector would be students observing another student reading and enjoying a book or perhaps two students conversing about a book. The expectancy-value theory also influenced this study's theoretical framework because, for school community members to have buy-in and become active participants in the school's reading culture development and sustainment, the community members need to see value in it. In addition, any real or perceived costs, barriers, or frictions must be abated. Fostering value and removing barriers increases participation and full engagement when community members are participating.
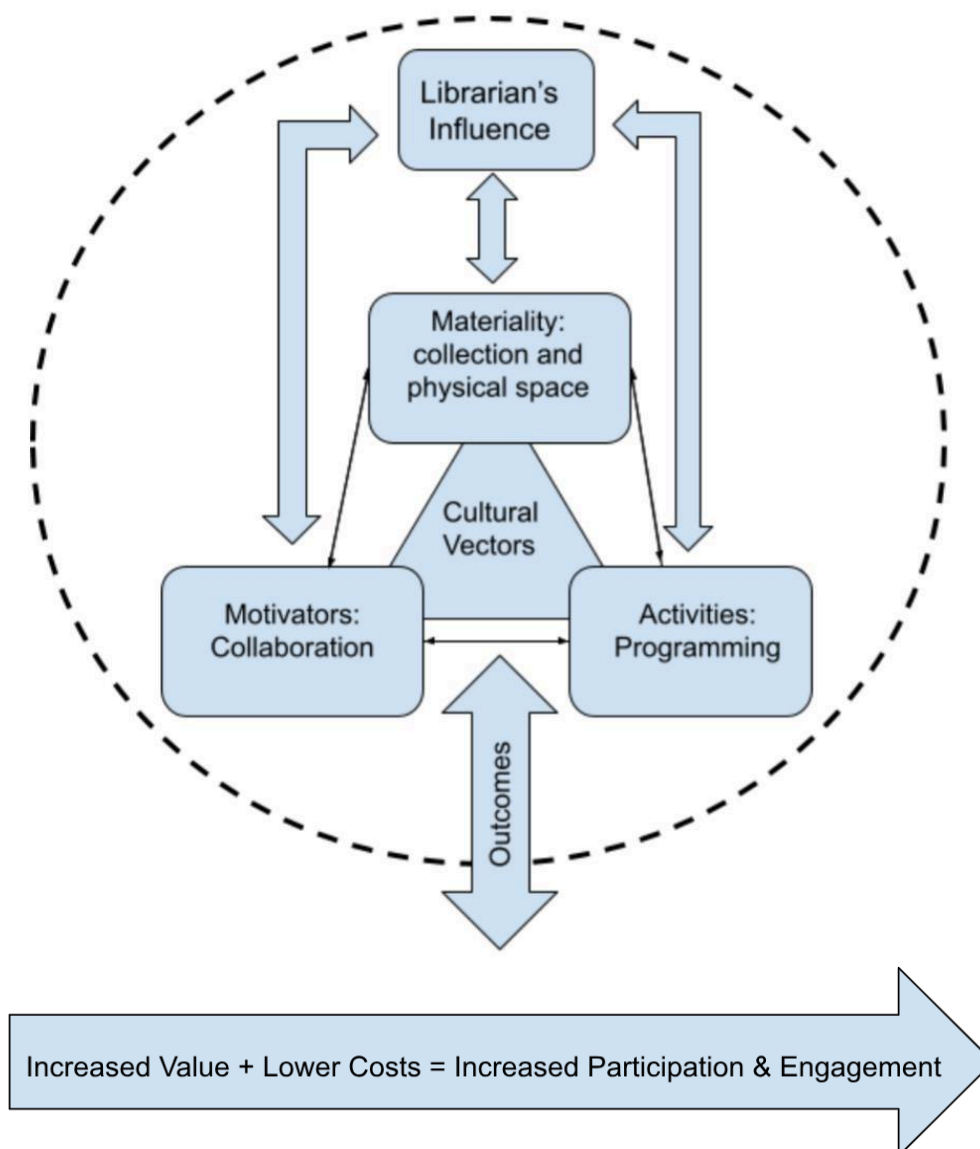
Figure 1. The School Reading Culture Framework, a Proposed Theoretical Framework Created through the Author's Adaption of the Cultures Framework (Stephenson, 2023) and Expectancy-Value Achievement Theory of Motivation (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

**Methodology**

The study's literature review and theoretical framework guided the development of the research questions. The reading culture framework describes a school's reading culture as being composed of different elements, including physical resources, library programming, and collaboration. These elements are reflected in questions one and two. The third question captures the literature review's data on librarians encountering barriers.

- Research Question 1: How do Georgia school librarians perceive that their library's physical space, reading collection, and programming foster positive school-wide reading cultures?
- Research Question 2: How do Georgia school librarians perceive that their collaboration with the school community fosters positive school-wide reading cultures?
- Research Question 3: What do Georgia school librarians perceive to be barriers to school librarians fostering positive school-wide reading cultures?

The design was a qualitative study, which included two phases. Phase one consisted of semi-structured individual interviews, while phase two involved conducting a focus group. The participants of the interviews were a purposive sampling of school librarians who won the regional or state Georgia Library Media Association (GLMA) Librarian Media Specialist of the Year (LMSOTY) award between 2014 and 2024. According to qualitative research experts Merriam and Tisdell (2016), purposive sampling is a good choice because it allows for an in-depth exploration of a specific topic, and interviewing experts on that topic is best. Because the LMSOTY application focuses on multiple aspects of award-winning best practices, individual interviews were conducted to narrow down the sampling to participants who, in particular, are exemplars of reading culture development and sustainment. These exemplary participants moved on to phase two, the focus group. Finally, interviews and focus groups were transcribed, coded, and examined using a thematic analysis approach.

**Findings**

The first theme, "It Takes a Village," focuses on collaboration between the librarian and school community members to foster a school-wide positive reading culture. The participants shared that the librarian cannot solely foster a school-wide reading culture. It must be a team effort. The expertise and experience of the librarian can influence and spearhead the development of a reading culture; however, a school's reading culture will struggle to flourish and be sustained without support beyond the librarian. The interviewees highly recommended that librarians run school-wide reading initiatives and gave successful examples of how they accomplished this. Nonetheless, partnering with specific sub-groups within the school community, including teachers and staff, was still necessary. In particular, collaboration with teachers appeared throughout the data, indicating that the participants believed this type of collaboration was essential in fostering a reading culture. The study's participants also described student involvement as vital to reading culture development and sustainment. Other community members that the school librarians considered involving include the public library, student families, and a professional learning network (whether within the district or via long distance through virtual means like social media). However, ultimately, the study's participants perceived that the support of the administration or district leadership determines how much collaboration is allowable. A leader determines many factors, such as which programming or initiatives are

permitted to be implemented or the development of a school schedule that allows teachers and librarians to collaborate during the school day.

The second theme, "Student-Centered with Student Involvement and Ownership," illustrates the participants' belief that a school's reading culture will thrive when it focuses on students' needs and wants. One of the ways to do this is for librarians to design the library's physical space with students in mind. The physical library space includes signage to help students browse and find reading materials of interest. Librarians should also involve students in decision-making regarding program planning, collection development, book displays, etc. Collection development should be centered on books that are relevant and engaging to students. Library (and school) policies should focus on student choice in reading and encourage pleasure reading. It is additionally impactful for students to converse with other students about books and what they are reading.

The third theme, "Intentional Community Building," emerged as the participants described wanting their library to be a "safe place" where students felt they "belonged" and could be "seen," "valued," and "be themselves." Other words that participants used to depict their libraries included "comfortable" physically and emotionally, "inviting," welcoming," "caring," and built on "trust." Participants also emphasized the importance of building relationships with students. Overall, the data described library communities as having intellectual and emotional safety atmospheres.

The fourth theme, "Positivity Begets Positivity," centers on the concept that positive feelings, attitudes, and associations build up over time to create a strong and positive effect on library patrons. Repeatedly in the interviews, award-winning librarians used the word "fun" when describing how they foster reading culture. Mainly, they focused on making the library fun and reading fun. The words "positive" and "positivity" also frequently occurred in the data, and a particular phrase from an interviewee seemed to capture the phenomenon at play: "Positivity builds." Interviewees believed that it was essential for students to develop positive core memories about reading and the library. They perceived that these positive associations would continue, and maybe even grow, as students moved up grade levels–positively influencing their views of the library and reading as adults. In short, when a student experiences a positive interaction with the librarian, library, or reading, the student is more likely to engage with reading. This positive influence will continue as students persuade their peers to engage also with reading and the library. This theme also resonates with the flywheel model (Figure 2), which involves attracting, engaging, and delighting one's customers or patrons. The ultimate goal of the flywheel model is for a service or product to be successful and its success continues to propel its success. One adaptation for the reading culture was adding the word "inspire" to the third stage, changing it to "delight and inspire." The reason for this is that the participants not

only described their patrons as being delighted with the library, but patrons were also depicted as being inspired to read more and take ownership of their school's reading culture.
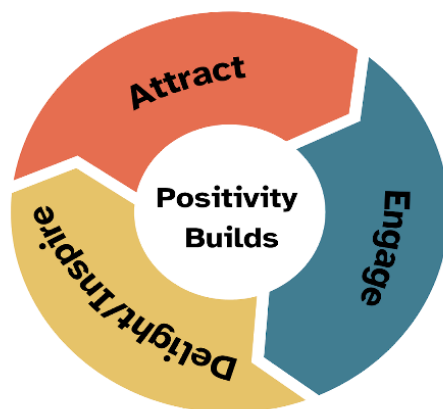


Figure 2. Reading Culture Flywheel Model, Author's Adaption of Flywheel Model (Viazirani & Jaiwant, 2023, p. 66).

The fifth theme, "Overcoming Barriers of Time, Access, and Mindset," developed because the data contained repeated descriptions of specific barriers that needed to be lessened or removed entirely for a reading culture to be fostered. Time was one of the obstacles. For example, participants shared that their students lacked the time to read and visit the library. Furthermore, teachers need time in their schedule that allows for student or class library visits, student pleasure reading in the classroom, and teacher collaboration with librarians. The school librarian needs a flexible schedule and an assistant to have the ability to plan with teachers and not close the library while attending planning meetings with teachers. This leads to the need for access barriers to be removed. Students need to be able to access books at their point of need, and they need access to a space, like the library, to read. Access is especially crucial for students without reading materials at home or a conducive environment at home to read. In short, the participants believed the library should always be accessible and never closed during the school day. Students must also have access to relevant reading materials of their choice, including different reading formats, like graphic novels and audiobooks. Finally, certain negative mindsets need to be changed. One of the mindsets that needed to be changed is that reading should always be paired with a test or other formative assessment, like a reading comprehension activity. The participants believed students should not constantly be tested on their reading; students should be able to engage in pleasure reading. Additionally, the interviewees believed another misconception needs clarification: the mindset that the library is not an engaging place and is not an essential part of the school ecosystem.

**Conclusion**

Overall, this study provided examples of best practices for fostering school-wide positive reading cultures. Data from the participants provided collective insights that offer a roadmap for creating vibrant, inclusive, and student-centered reading cultures that support academic and personal growth. These practices can be adopted by librarians and other school community members, especially teachers who can collaborate with librarians and administrators who can provide essential support for librarians.

Potential future research includes exploring the different school levels to understand better how to foster reading culture within specific grade level ranges, like elementary school, middle school, or high school. Another research avenue is learning about the perceptions of other school community members–students, teachers, administrators, and so on– and how they believe a positive reading culture is developed and sustained.

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