

“This role pushed me in new directions”: Understanding the Transition from Teacher to Teacher-Librarian

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of five participants as they transition from teacher to teacher-librarian. The study examines reasons for becoming a teacher-librarian, the opportunities, barriers/challenges and successes in the first year as a teacher-librarian, and the previous experiences that informed their practice. Some of these emerging included: exposure to teacher-librarians while teaching, desire for change in their professional life, sharing a love of reading and/or inquiry-based learning, desire for more of a leadership role in a school, collaborating with teachers, building a reading culture, promoting literacy initiatives, trying to have an impact on the whole school, lack of understanding of the role of the teacher-librarian, technology and connectivity challenges, library design and space issues, clerical work, time and priority management and debunking stereotypes about librarians. This study contributes to our understanding of the early experiences of teacher-librarians and brings in the framework of possible and provisional selves as a lens to examine teacher-librarian identity.

Keywords: New Teacher-Librarians, Possible Selves, Identity, Teacher-Librarianship Education

Introduction

Do you remember your first years of teaching? Your transition from student to teacher? The change(s) in your identity? Your opportunities, barriers/challenges, and successes? Would it have helped you to understand how other new teachers experience this transition?

In hopes of helping new teacher-librarians understand the transition from teacher to teacher-librarian, this study presents findings from the first year of a three-year study following five teachers as they transition to the role of teacher-librarian. As instructors in the Teacher-Librarianship by Distance Learning program at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada, we are interested in how current students and recent graduates experience the early years of becoming a teacher-librarian. We also believe that other new teacher-librarians, teacher-librarianship educational programs, and researchers will be interested in this study.

Research Questions

The following questions inform this paper:

1. What factors influenced these new teacher-librarians to take on the role of a teacher-librarian?
2. What were the opportunities, barriers/challenges and successes in the first year as a teacher-librarian?
3. What previous experiences (formal and informal) did new teacher-librarians value as they transitioned into their new roles?

Conceptual Framework

This paper explores the concept of “possible selves” in the transition from teacher to teacher-librarian (Markus & Nurius, 1986.) “Possible selves derive from representations of the self in the past and they include representations of the self in the future” (Markus & Nurius, p. 954). These selves are individual and personal while also being social. This concept is interesting as we look at the crafting of the professional identity of teacher-librarians. Ibarra (1999) introduced the idea of “provisional selves” and suggested that a person transitioning into a new role follows an iterative process of observing role models, experimenting with provisional selves and evaluating provisional selves (p. 787). Ibarra’s research examined a business culture, the transition of people within the organization to a new role within that same organization, in much the same way that teachers transition to the role of a teacher-librarian.

Literature Review

There is very little research about the first few years of becoming a teacher-librarian and nothing looking at teacher-librarians in the Canadian context. To prepare teachers to become teacher-librarians we do have Canadian (*Achieving Information Literacy*) and American (*Standards for Initial Preparation of School Librarians*) Standards, as well as the work of other library organizations around the world. In Canada as a whole, a very small number of teacher-librarians will have an MLIS degree or a Master of Education degree in Teacher-Librarianship. In a recent survey of teacher-librarians in Canada (Branch and de Groot, 2011), only 10 of 178 respondents had an MLIS degree and only 10 more had a Master of Education degree. In western Canada, many more teacher-librarians have a post-graduate diploma. The courses tend to be at the senior undergraduate level. We also have “teachers in the library”; those that are assigned to the school library for a part of the school day but with little or no further education in teacher-librarianship. As a result, in Canada we have a very diverse group of teachers in the role of teacher-librarian. This study is interested in new teacher-librarians who are qualified for the position; those that have completed or will soon complete a Master of Education degree in teacher-librarianship.

There is much research about teacher identity and pre-service preparation to help inform the experiences of new teacher-librarians (for example, Battey & Franke, 2008; Florio-Ruane & Williams, 2008; Horn, Nolan, Ward & Campbell; Olsen, 2008; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2007). Thomas and Beauchamp highlight that the success and well-being in a new profession is dependent on a strong sense of professional identity. Horn et al. tell us that “teaching identities are an ongoing project and this identity construction is a productive place to connect to novice teachers’ own learning goals” (p. 70). Battey and Frank remind us that “we do not develop our identities in isolation” (p. 128) and that “local communities limit the variety of practices that teachers have access to” (p. 129). Florio-Ruane and Williams (2008) encourage us to examine “the stories of our own paths and the stories of the paths taken by others...as a significant part of the development of one’s identity not only as a teacher - but as a member of the larger teaching profession” (p. 8). Enyedy, Goldberg and Welsh (2005) remind us that teachers may struggle with “multiple conflicting beliefs, goals and knowledge” (p. 91). Olsen encourages the inclusion of learning and teaching autobiographies, conversations about contradictions and paying formal attention to personal and emotional effects of identity transitions (p. 38).

Research on the unique professional learning needs of teacher-librarians indicates that “interaction with other school library professionals is not a regular occurrence” (Mardis & Hoffman, 2007, Online focus groups as a motivator for decreasing educator isolation section, para. 2). Providing opportunities for teacher-librarians to reflect and connect resulted in both “a sense of shared circumstances (I am not the only one like this) and the opportunity to learn of successful strategies for school librar[ies] that had immediate relevance (I want to try that out here)” (Mardis & Hoffman, Online focus groups as a motivator for decreasing educator isolation section, para. 2). This study allows new teacher-librarians to reflect on their experiences, make connections between previous formal and information learning and their new role, and think about their new identities.

Methodology

This research project is following five new teacher-librarians for three years. The five teacher-librarians included in this research are working in a variety of school settings, including elementary, junior high school, and high school libraries. They have all been classroom teachers in the past and at the time that this research project began, were all currently enrolled in, or recently graduated from, a graduate level teacher-librarianship education program. This research paper presents the findings from year one of the study. Individual interviews were completed three times in year one (September 2012, January 2013, and June 2013). The interview transcripts were analyzed, by looking for common themes and trends that emerged across questions and throughout the comments (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1998).

Findings

This study follows five new teacher-librarians through the first three years of their transition from classroom teachers to teacher-librarians. This purpose of the study was to document their successes and challenges in their new roles and to better understand their experiences as new teacher-librarians. This paper focuses on their first year and the findings presented below were gathered from three interviews with each of the five participants. This paper reports only on the findings related to three of our initial research questions. This section presents findings using three overarching interview questions to organize the findings and uses representative quotes to support the key ideas and themes from each question.

New Teacher-Librarians

The first research question asked what factors influenced these new teacher-librarians to take on the role of a teacher-librarian. Two participants indicated that instability was one factor in deciding to become a teacher-librarian. “Declining enrollment and yearly layoffs” meant that these two classroom teachers were looking for more stable teaching positions in their district. One participant indicated that it was exposure to the role of the teacher-librarian that excited her. “Two days after being assigned to the library for one block of prep-time for a full-time teacher-librarian, I knew this was the place for me.” For another participant, it was “working in the school with a TL that was a mentor and collaborator” that was the reason for wanting to pursue further education in teacher-librarianship. She stated, “I wanted to do an M.Ed. but I didn’t want to go into administration.”

For several participants, the move to teacher-librarianship was based in a need for change. One participant spoke about “loving to read and wanting to share my love of reading.” Another talked about wanting to do more inquiry-based learning and wanting to share that with others. A third participant was offered a district librarian position and was tempted to take it until she realized that she was committed to “the teaching piece” of the role rather than the administration piece. One participant spoke at length about being in a specialized

position (French immersion teacher) and wanting to be more of a generalist. She wanted a more senior leadership role, desired a change, wanted to renew her skills, wanted to develop another area of expertise, and learn more about technology.

Opportunities, Barriers/Challenges and Successes

During each of the three interviews, the researchers asked new teacher-librarians to describe the opportunities, barriers/challenges, and successes in their school library program. We report the findings from the fifteen interviews together here.

Opportunities

Participants listed many opportunities for their first year as a teacher-librarian. They were excited to be working with teachers and enjoyed collaborating. Comments included opportunities to “mentor new staff” and work with teachers “you know but haven’t worked with.” One participant added, “People are happy to work with me.” One participant saw that building a reading culture in her school was a huge opportunity because of very low circulation statistics. Three teacher-librarians mentioned that the first year as a teacher-librarian provided them with the opportunity to reinstate silent reading initiatives such as DEAR (Drop Everything And Read).

One participant said that her greatest opportunities were a supportive administrative team and “working with an amazing library tech with similar goals and vision.” Two participants talked about inquiry learning/project-based learning opportunities in their schools. Another new teacher-librarian felt that having a flexible schedule allowed her so many opportunities to make a difference in the school library. One participant felt that the first year as a teacher-librarian provided her with “opportunities to continue to expand my educator’s toolbox, expand or add to my own experience, and work with the whole school body.” For her it was a chance “to have an impact.”

Barriers/Challenges

All of the new teacher-librarians articulated barriers and challenges they saw in their new role. One teacher-librarian was filling in for another on leave and so the biggest challenge was the library was not “her space.” She told us that the previous TL was much loved and staff would always say, “Susan always.... Susan would never....” This theme of staff resistance came out as a barrier in several of the interviews. One teacher-librarian suggested to a fellow teacher, “Hey, we could try this....” But the other teacher was quick to reply, “No, I do this on day 67.” “Staff responses haven’t always been positive” shared one new teacher-librarian and another commented that, “It takes time to develop relationships with staff.” Several new teacher-librarians also noted that understanding the role of a teacher-librarian was also a barrier to their work. One teacher-librarian shared that, “Administrators don’t know what the role is.” Another teacher-librarian worried about “being perceived as competent.” A third teacher-librarian felt that she struggled with the “stereotype” of a librarian.

Technology was another theme that came out of the interviews with the teacher-librarians. One teacher-librarian reported that the school and school library have low access to technology. Another was concerned with bandwidth and the blocking of social media sites. A third said that “lack of connectivity” was a big issue in the school library.

A challenge for one teacher-librarian was the physical space. For another teacher-librarian, a challenge was the “logistics of taking over” a new space including passwords and learning about the library management system. Two teacher-librarians felt that budget issues were barriers to the development of a quality school library program. One teacher-librarian

responded that while there is enough money for this year, “I am concerned about the budget going forward.” Several teacher-librarians were concerned about time and “finding time to do everything.” This included the large amount of clerical work when there is insufficient support staff - “I am not a clerk, I am a teacher.” Another teacher-librarian noted that she struggled to “find enough time to do everything.” A third teacher-librarian commented that, “Time management is a challenge trying to determining which projects to take on that will have the most impact.” For one teacher-librarian, the biggest challenge was “keeping up with the momentum of change.”

Successes

The theme of literacy/reading initiatives came out as a success for several of the new teacher-librarians. This included silent reading promotion in the school (DEAR), collection development in the fiction section, and increasing circulation. One teacher librarian told us that her greatest success was being able to “focus on literacy. I love talking about new books and the kids are always surprised when the library has the newest book.” Another new teacher-librarian that she loved “developing her role in the school for readers’ advisory.” After putting a lot of effort into collection development, this teacher-librarian could report that “circulation statistics were way up for fiction and recreational non-fiction.” One teacher-librarian noted that her successes included “leading the school’s professional book club.”

One teacher-librarian felt that a success was that she was “more confident in her abilities to help students with research.” This confidence allowed her to start “recommending information and forwarding information to other staff members.” Another teacher-librarians commented on how she had developed a “good rapport with staff.” A third teacher-librarian worked with 36 of 42 teachers over the year on projects and saw this as a huge success. A fourth new teacher-librarian told us about the woodshop teacher in her school who went to the administration to insist that they needed to keep the teacher-librarian “in the role because she hasn’t missed a beat.” That same teacher-librarian felt that she was “making good connections with LA and SS teachers.” Two of the teacher-librarians felt that one big success for the year was “providing professional development for other teachers.” These successes helped to increase the time in the school library for one new teacher-librarian from “four blocks out of eight to five.”

Several new teacher-librarians shared their excitement in improving the school library space. One completed “weeding to allow for some renovations to occur.” Another created a section for board games and “built a board game collection for students and teachers.” A third felt that “creating a welcoming space where students want to be” was her greatest success. Other successes for the new teacher-librarians included their work in building their libraries virtual spaces. One was excited about “initiating the process of getting access to databases for students.” Two more were pleased with their work building their library websites.

Previous Experiences

The third question in the research study sought to determine what previous experiences (formal and informal) the new teacher-librarians valued as they transitioned into their new roles? All of the new teacher-librarians spoke about the importance of the learning in their graduate programs. Two spoke specifically about the “Web 2.0 course” and one stated that the course was “paradigm shifting.” The importance of understanding educational research was felt to be important for one teacher-librarian. This was seen as crucial for “knowing how to assess results of standardized tests.” One teacher-librarian felt that being in the Teacher-Librarianship by Distance Learning program “had given her a wealth of knowledge and information and had made the transition smoother.” One teacher-librarian noted that discussions with colleagues in graduate courses had been very important.

One new teacher-librarian spoke at length about her previous teaching experiences. She explained that having 20 years of classroom teacher experience was essential for her new role. She described that her teaching in “French immersion was resource-based.” Therefore she was “very comfortable with teaching with resources.” She elaborated that in French immersion “you are the program and this is the same as a teacher-librarian.” Her experience of “speaking another language made her better able to make connections with other people.”

New teacher-librarians spoke of the importance of the knowledge of literature, having an English teacher background, and being readers. One new teacher-librarian felt knowing the curriculum was very important in this new role. Another spoke about her knowledge of inquiry and said that “inquiry-based learning had a huge role in the success I am having now.” Several new teacher-librarians spoke about mentorship - from other teacher-librarians in their school districts and from instructors and colleagues in their graduate programs. Several of the new teacher-librarians also spoke about the importance of informal mentorship through following blogs and Twitter feeds of practicing teacher-librarians around the world. Mentors were seen as a critical support system in the first year as a new teacher-librarian. For one teacher-librarian, “asking big questions and sharing successes and failures with mentors” was the key to her growth as a new teacher-librarian.

The new teacher-librarians did feel that there were things that wished they knew more about. One felt that she needed to know much more about “designing an engaging physical space.” Another teacher-librarian found that she needed help with book preparation and the clerical work. A third wished she knew more about effective searching. Several spoke about the lack of district leadership in school libraries.

Discussion

This study documents the experiences of five new teacher-librarians as they transition into their new roles and seeks to understand their experiences as new teacher-librarians. The first research question asked what factors influenced these new teacher-librarians to take on the role of a teacher-librarian. Participants indicated that instability in their teaching role, exposure to teacher-librarians, desire for change, sharing a love a reading and/or inquiry-based learning, and desire for more of a leadership role in the school were some of the reasons to become a teacher-librarian. Participants listed many opportunities for their first year as a teacher-librarian. They were excited to be collaborating with teachers, building a reading culture, promoting literacy initiatives, and trying to have an impact on the whole school. These findings remind us of the importance of a strong sense of professional identity (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2007).

All of the new teacher-librarians articulated barriers and challenges they saw in their new role. These included: filling in for a teacher-librarian, working with teachers, lack of understanding of the role of the teacher-librarian, technology and connectivity issues, library design and space issues, the amount of clerical work, time and priority management and debunking stereotypes about librarians. These struggles with “conflicting beliefs, goals and knowledge” mirror the work of Enyedy, Goldberg and Welsh (2005). The teacher-librarians had a clear sense of the work they should be doing in their school libraries and struggled when they were unable to do that work.

Successes for the teacher-librarians included: literacy/reading initiatives, research and information sharing, good rapport with staff, physical and virtual library space changes, and feeling welcomed, praised and rewarded for their work. As Olsen (2008) noted, it is essential to pay formal attention to personal and emotional effects of identity transitions. Celebrating successes and understanding barriers and challenges were a part of the ongoing identity construction for these new teacher-librarians (Horn et al., 2008).

The research study sought to determine what previous experiences (formal and informal) the new teacher-librarians valued as they transitioned into their new roles. Findings included: importance of the learning in their graduate programs, exposure to new and emerging technologies, discussions with fellow students, previous teaching experiences, knowledge of literature, having an English teacher background, knowledge of inquiry, comfort with teaching with resources, and mentorship both local and global. The researchers feel that it is essential for teacher-librarians to look to their past to see how this informed their new identities (Folio-Ruane & Williams, 2008).

Implications and Conclusions

As instructors in a program that educates teacher-librarians, we feel it is essential for us to understand the early year experiences of teacher-librarians as they transition from being classroom teachers. We also believe that new teacher-librarians, other teacher-librarianship educators and researchers in the area of school libraries will also be interested in the findings of this study. There is very little research about the first few years of becoming a teacher-librarian and nothing looking at teacher-librarians in the Canadian context. This study contributes to our understanding of the early experiences of teacher-librarians and brings in the framework of possible and provisional selves as a lens to examine teacher-librarian identity.

Several themes emerged to help new teacher-librarians as they transition to their new roles. We heard that the new teacher-librarians built on their own personal strengths - whether it was inquiry, literacy or relationships with teachers. They were trying to make themselves indispensable. The participants all mentioned that they were becoming curriculum experts and were demonstrating that they could be technology leaders in their schools. The participants were championing their collections - whether it was readers' advisory for fiction and popular non-fiction or sharing resources from databases and the web. In the interviews, the new teacher-librarians highlighted the importance of developing relationships with teachers and building a support system with mentors. It was also noted that these new teacher-librarians were taking advantage of opportunities and championing the role of the teacher-librarian in their schools and school districts.

This study informs classroom experiences, assignments and projects in pre-service teacher-librarian courses, the professional development experiences required for new teacher-librarians, and the way we model the role of the teacher-librarian in pre-service teacher-librarianship programs. More broadly, this research may also help school districts and professional associations develop formal and informal learning experiences and mentorship opportunities for new teacher-librarians. Most importantly, this study will help new teacher-librarians understand the experiences of those that went before them as they navigate the shift from teacher to teacher-librarian.

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