
The Librarian's Role in Fostering School-Wide Positive Reading Culture in Georgia Schools

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Introduction

Interruptions to learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and other obstacles have negatively affected literacy rates in the United States. Throughout the United States, student literacy rates suffered because of the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kuhfeld et al., 2023), and the state of Georgia was no exception (Georgia Department of Audits and Accounts, 2021). Since the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic has only recently passed, long-term adverse effects are still being realized and, unfortunately, are predicted to be long-lasting (Ashta et al., 2023; Azevedo et al., 2021). Other potential obstacles that can negatively affect dormant readers include the pervasiveness of technology—smartphones, texting, YouTube, social media, and more—that vie for our students' attention (Onwubiko, 2022). Additionally, a lack of access to relevant and engaging reading material can also deter literacy growth, while exposure to a reading-material-rich environment influences student engagement with reading (Adejimoh et al., 2021; Loh et al., 2017; Mason & Merga, 2019; Onwubiko, 2022; Samuel, 2022; Ternenge et al.,

2022). Overall, there is a need to focus on reading culture in schools to combat these literacy deficiencies, and librarians, our schools' in-house literacy leaders, are well-situated to ameliorate these circumstances.

Statement of the Research Problem

Most currently published literature focusing on school reading culture fostered by school librarians is based on 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 schools (Daniels & Steres, 2011; Deuschle, 2017; Feirsen, 1997; Fitzpatrick, 2022; Kordeleski, 2017; Makatche & Oberlin, 2011; Tate, 2011). This research aims 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 will need to address barriers that may deter the establishment and growth of a school-wide reading culture (Adejimoh et al., 2021; Mason & Merga, 2019; Onwubiko, 2022). As mentioned before, leadership support and community collaboration are associated with fostering a reading culture, so unsurprisingly, a lack thereof can create a barrier. Additionally, if students hold negative

attitudes toward reading, it is difficult for a school-wide reading culture to develop and thrive. Overall, it is beneficial when reading is seen as a pleasurable and positive experience, and supporting a reading culture cannot solely be the school librarian's responsibility.

Methodology

The design is a qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), which will include two phases. Phase one will consist of semi-structured individual interviews, while phase two will involve conducting a focus group. The participants of the interviews will be part of 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. 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 will be conducted to narrow down the sampling to participants who, in particular, are exemplars of reading culture development and sustainment. The LMSOTY participants who are exemplars of reading culture development and sustainment will move on to phase two, which is the focus group. Interviews and focus groups will be transcribed, coded, and examined using a thematic analysis approach.

Findings

The first theme that emerged was "It Takes a Village." Participants spoke about how they perceived that the librarian was highly influential in developing and sustaining school reading culture; however, it could not be done alone. Collaboration was key.

Another theme was "Student-Centered with Student Involvement and Ownership." Participants shared that the library's programming, collection development, and other aspects of the library need to be student-centered with the goal that students become involved in developing a reading culture and take ownership of it and the library.

A third theme was the importance of “Intentional Community Building.” Eighty percent of participants spoke about the need for students to feel valued, to be seen, and to have a sense of belonging in the library. The participants shared that creating a climate of intellectual and emotional safety for students led students to become more actively engaged in their own reading journey and the school’s overall reading culture.

The fourth theme was “Positivity Begets Positivity.” Many participants used the word fun to describe their library or library programming. A phrase that appeared twice in one participant’s interview was “Positivity Builds.” This phrase seemed to describe a recurring message in the data—that positivity builds because positivity begets positivity.

The final theme focused on overcoming barriers. Participants conveyed the need to overcome barriers of time, access, and mindsets.

Conclusion and Further Research

Overall, this study provided examples of best practices for fostering school-wide positive reading cultures. These practices can be adopted by librarians as well as other school community members, such as 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 an 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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Biography

Sarah Sansbury is a school librarian in Atlanta, Georgia. She currently is working on her doctorate in School Improvement, with a focus on how the media specialist improves the school.