
Editorial

Reflections on School Library as Space, School Library as Place

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Welcome to the first issue of *School Libraries Worldwide* co-edited by Marcia Mardis and Nancy Everhart at the Florida State University. Nancy Everhart is the current president of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) and is travelling the country on her "Vision Tour," addressing local meetings of school librarians, and visiting an exemplary school library in each state. From Nancy's journey to date, common themes are emerging: though school libraries in the United States are under siege as a result of economic downturn, the teacher librarians who are able to shine amidst this adversity are deft at connecting their school library programs to the priorities of the larger community. These teacher librarians are adept at tracking community trends and needs and shaping, repackaging, and marketing their school library program to meet these larger needs. Following Nancy's Vision Tour at <http://outstandingschoollibraries.org/>

As I read Nancy's Vision Tour blog and talk with her about her experiences on the road, I cannot help but be reminded of the School Library Journal Summit in Chicago, IL in November 2006. At that event, I had the amazing experience of hearing library consultant and writer Joan Frye Williams's keynote address about possible futures for school libraries. Students, she expressed, entered the school library with three questions in mind: is this my kind of place; can I be successful here; and does this fit into the rest of my life? Her elaboration of these questions has timeless implications for teacher librarians and, in my mind, speaks to the theme of this issue, "School library as space, school library as place."

The idea of space and place in the library has long been explored by a number of historians, theorists, and researchers. Nancy and I have a colleague at the Florida State University, Wayne Wiegand, who is one of the foremost thinkers on this topic. The library can be defined as a place where cultural, social, and intellectual exchanges occur, often mediated by the resources in the library collection; the library is a space defined by the social mood, cultural and civic expression, and intellectual values (like reading) of the larger community (Wiegand, 2005). Wiegand argued that the definition of the library as a place is dependent upon "the library in the life of the user" (2005, p. 77), or the inner and outer space in which the library user resides. In terms of school libraries, Brian Kenney, editor of *School Library Journal* clarifies:

The first is the importance of creating an environment that makes visitors feel welcome-and keeps them coming back. The second is creating a library that serves as an alternate space-a third place-that's different than students' homes and classrooms. While these ideas are interrelated, the first is often about design and attitude, while the second is about the role a library is willing to play in the lives of children and young adults. Both ideas are more about feelings than thoughts, more about the heart than the head (2008, p.11).

Again, Wayne Wiegand and Brian Kenney's interpretations of the space and place of the school library recalls Joan Frye Williams's three questions that resonate in the articles included in this issue:

Is this my kind of place?

When anyone enters the school library, Joan Frye Williams argues, that person looks around and wonders, "Is this my kind of place?" The answer to this question can be found in how well the school library environment reflected his or her values. In 2006, Williams said that students would be looking for evidence that the school library had recycling bins; featured easily accessible technology; and allowed for the creation as well as the consumption of media. Students would be assessing the furniture in the school library noting whether the environment signalled a collaborative atmosphere with tables and comfortable furniture or solo, silent work with carrels, chairs set far apart from one another, and a lack of visual pizzazz.

Elizabeth Lee and Don Klinger from Queen's University present *Against the flow: A continuum for evaluating and revitalizing school libraries* in this issue. This paper elegantly describes a library evaluation model resulting from a study of exemplary elementary school library programs that is adaptable and reflects the unique aspects of the larger context in which the school library exists. As long as the teacher librarian is well aware of the values and forces that form the school environment, he or she will be able to make decisions about collaborative relationships and programming that will keep the school library relevant to the learning community.

In the opening article in this issue, *The potential and possibilities for utilizing Geographic Information Systems to inform school Library as place*, Melissa Johnston from Florida State University and Wade Bishop from the University of Kentucky, authored a thematic literature review in which they provide a fresh take on how the school library can reflect its larger community. GIS can be used to track community demographics and other conditions that can be used to design programs and respond to shifting community needs. This approach has powerful and exciting implications for the international development of school libraries. After all, as Joan Frye Williams said in 2006, "The school library is a place to *try* new things" including using the school library as a "new technology showcase," and "place to crunch scientific data" (Williams, 2006).

Can I be successful here?

The second question potential school library users ask themselves, Williams opined, is "Can I be successful here?" The answer to this question is again a blend of the affective, space-related, experiences in the school library, as well as personal encounters with the physical aspects of the place of the school library facility. In answer to this question, Williams emphasized reducing clutter in the school library, using simplified wayfinding that includes subject-related pictures as well as call numbers on shelf markers, and creating displays that mimic those found in a large commercial bookstore. In an environment with these physical features, teacher librarians should create "information neighborhoods" in which interdisciplinary resources are brought together to reflect students' interests and needs and where teacher librarians provide "bookend service" for students in which they help students to get started on their work and support them with occasional checks, rather than closely supervise the whole process. In every way, the school library and the teacher librarian should support and empower students' independent work.

In his paper in this issue, *Year seven students, concept mapping and the issues of transfer*, James Herring of Charles Sturt University found just such a participant focus on wondering how school library activities promote success in students' academic lives. In his grounded theory study, Dr. Herring asked students and teachers to reflect on their experiences creating and using concept maps. When teachers were able to help students link the concept mapping process to the space of information seeking and the place of the school library, students were better able to use concept mapping to improve their understanding

Does this place fit with the rest of my life?

The final question potential school library users ask is, "Does this place fit with the rest of my life?" Joan Frye Williams made this question specific to the rich online life of students and explored the ideas that students perceived search engines as readier sources of information than librarians and that few teacher librarians had online or physical mechanisms in place for students to share

feedback and suggestions. The key to improving library users' perceptions of library usefulness, Williams argued, was for librarians to increase the ubiquity of the expertise and services through browser toolbars linked to the school library catalog, making library resources and databases available online anytime and anywhere, and integrating the library's marketing and outreach with common Web 2.0 tools like Wikipedia and Facebook.

In perhaps the paper most completely focused documenting on the relationship of the school library to the life of students in and beyond the school, Ken Haycock presents *Connecting British Columbia school libraries and student achievement*, a study of the relationship between school library programs in British Columbia and student achievement. Despite equalized provincial funding, Haycock found:

[H]igher student standardized test scores are associated with a school library that is more accessible, better funded, professionally staffed, managed, stocked, integrated and used...higher student achievement [was found] in those schools where greater resources, from the same limited allocation, have been assigned to school libraries (2011, p. 38).

It is in the response to this question that I return to my initial observation about the commonalities of the teacher librarians and school libraries that are able to thrive while nationwide library programs and personnel are being cut. Many successful teacher librarians use their resources, not their status, as the keys to their success. They find as many ways as possible for their users to encounter and access their resources and, in this way, they make the place of the school library part of the space of community interaction.

As teacher librarians and researchers look for ways to document the differences school libraries make in student learning, the three questions of Joan Frye Williams remind us that our impact can never be separated from the place of the school library and our practice can never lose sight of the ways in which teacher librarians contribute to the "library in the life of the user."

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