Librarians and leadership: The change we seek

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School librarian preparation programs must prepare the twenty-first century school librarian to confront the evolving changes that are facing our profession. The need for change in our traditional roles to meet demands of our profession is evident, and we have opportunity to shape the change we seek by developing emergent school library leaders during their pre-service library education programs. In this study, the researchers surveyed a sample group of school librarians about their perceptions of leadership development within their graduate education program. The results of the study suggested that increased emphasis on leadership development in graduate school library programs will more effectively prepare school librarians for service as educational leaders, change agents in the curriculum and instructional process, and partners at both the local school and wider global communities.

Introduction

Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change we seek.
-- President Barack Obama, February 5, 2008

Change in the 21st century is front-page news. The need to adjust, evolve, respond, and react to both positive and negative influences demands changes in the ways we work and play. Effective change, however, requires effective leadership. A looming question for those in librarian preparation programs concerns whether or not our graduate programs are adequately addressing the concept of leadership. What defines leadership for the librarian working to effect progressive change for schools, and how can that leadership be instilled? The optimum future development of library science skills and practices in conjunction with the development of leadership skills depends upon an answer to these questions.

Like the doomed fishing boat, the Andrea Gail in Junger’s The Perfect Storm, school librarians now face their own “rogue wave” in the form of fundamental changes to their traditional roles. Our own perfect storm is driven by the digital revolution, “No Child Left Behind” (2008), severe budget deficits, competition with singularly focused charter schools, burgeoning media access and evolving literacy issues. In order to prevent the profession from suffering the fate of the Andrea Gail, every effort must be made to develop effective librarians who will be powerful leaders within their schools. To explore concerns about leadership development for school librarians, this study examined the extent to which a sample group of practicing school librarians in the southeastern part of the United States believed they were prepared for leadership through their academic preparation.


**Realities for 21st Century Practice**

School librarians must adapt rapidly to fundamental shifts in the environment, or the profession risks being marginalized. The best, perhaps the only way, to weather our own perfect storm is by developing emergent school library leaders during their library education. Plummeting budgets, increasing demands, failing schools, rising drop-out rates, out-of-touch administrators, legislators, and other principal leaders, are among the factors creating the need for a re-examination of the concept of leadership in schools educating students 4-18 years of age. A sense of urgency should pervade professional school librarians as we meet these challenges (Valenza & Johnson, 2009).

Historically, the school librarian’s role has centered on the promotion and use of resources and media accessible within or from the library. This role has expanded along with learners’ access to all forms of ubiquitous information media. The greater emphasis today on teaching students to learn to think critically demands increased interaction with other professionals, including teachers, administrators and peer librarians. The need for change in our traditional roles to meet demands of our profession is evident, and we have opportunity to shape the change we seek through knowledge, skills, and leadership.

School librarians encounter a broad spectrum of abilities and technological skill levels among both students and staff. This is due, in part, to the increasing diversity and mobility of students, administrators and faculty. Libraries serve as the central hub of connection in schools for millions of diverse people nationally and internationally, due to the centrality of equipment and technology. The school librarian as an information specialist, well versed in the field of information, should be instrumental in imparting knowledge related to the search for information, information literacy skills, and the use of information technology to all stakeholders regardless of diversity or stakeholder skill level (Bush & Jones, 2010). A creative leadership role for the school librarian, in the access and dissemination of information, as well as assessment and evaluation of information needs is essential. This is especially important when we recognize how rapidly technology and resources have impacted our stakeholders. School librarians can support teachers and students by guiding learning experiences in the increasingly diverse and technology enhanced environment, by infusing information literacy skills and technology learning into as many learning experiences as possible (Loertscher, 2006). Technology is constantly changing and expanding the boundaries of information, and the increasing need for students to be able to evaluate and analyze information, using skilled inquiring minds has never been more critical (Rogow, 2011).

No longer is the librarian concerned primarily with activities that occur largely within the confines of a library or with simply making resources accessible. Rather, the role demands a school librarian become more interactive, collaborative and technology literate as a school wide leader, impacting the overall school by coupling skills with resources for and with other instructional members in the wider, global community. The inevitability of this shift in focus has progressively heightened with the 21st century advent of ever-developing and evolving technologies bringing greater access to information and inquiry to students.

Strong, visionary school library leaders are called to recognize and react to constant change related to emerging concepts, information, media, and technology (Anderson, 2004; Kuhlthau, Maniotes, & Caspari, 2007). They are also called to recognize and react to the present socioeconomic and ideological crisis. Librarians can address all these issues through greater leadership in service; guiding both teachers and students in the development of needed technology skills and core principles for critical thinkers. The time has come to rethink and redefine our roles as leading school librarians, in effect, to embody the change that we are seeking.

**Leadership Defined**

What leadership competencies are necessary to move the profession beyond the factors that appear to be merging into this “perfect storm?” How will the process of teaching and implementing these competencies look for librarian educators and librarians? Today’s school librarian is called to foster change and to encourage and support colleagues as they discover and adopt innovative concepts in their classrooms and curricula (Harada & Hughes-Hassell, 2007). As school leaders, librarians have an integral role to play in guiding colleagues through a collaborative practice; Maxwell (2007) maintains, “Leadership is influence.” This has never been more true to any group than for the school librarian today. The opportunities for librarians to influence with purpose, through
Instructive, facilitative, supportive, mentoring staff and modeling leadership enable the visionary librarian to be a guiding force in educational organizations. Twenty-first century education is calling for a transition from authority-centered leadership to more learning-centered models that focus on leading for learning (Todd, Kuhlthau, & Ohio Educational Library Media Association 2004). More than ever the concept of leadership resonates with librarians, bringing leadership, for the twenty-first century school librarian into greater focus as the role continues to transition. “Library media specialists are in the right place at the right time to play a significant role in the transformation of teaching that must occur in K-12 education” (Zmuda & Barada, 2008, p.18).

In conjunction with academics, librarians, administrators, and other policy-makers from both the education and librarianship sectors, a number of national organizations have developed professional guidelines that include leadership. These guidelines offer a solid focus for the significance of leadership competencies and highlight the rising need for leadership by school librarians in effectively guiding increasingly diversified stakeholders in the access and use of rapidly evolving media and resources. The mission of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) clearly indicates the need to advocate for excellence, facilitate change, and develop leaders in the school library field if we are to effectively impact on students in the 21st century. The American Library Association (ALA)/AASL’s Standards for Initial Preparation of School Librarians (2010) affirm the need for school librarians’ continued commitment to education by participation in professional growth and leadership opportunities to gain skills to provide leadership to contribute to student achievement. In an advocacy statement the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE, 2010), further defined the significance of librarian leadership from a technology perspective with a collaborative, international “Advocacy Statement for School Librarians” supporting their premise that school librarians play a critical role in the infusion of educational technology in their schools. The role of leadership for the librarian is embedded in the guidelines developed by each of these professional associations.

The identification and development of leadership competencies for librarians has been extensively debated (Ammons-Stephens, Cole, Jenkins-Giggs, Riehie, & Weare, 2009; Loertscher, 2006; Shannon, 2002; Zmuda & Harada, 2008). Articles describing librarian leadership competencies include a broad spectrum of concepts. However, there are some constant themes throughout the literature and professional documents. In addition to the national conversation on leadership, a local document relevant to school librarian leadership was included in this literature review, the North Carolina Media Coordinator’s Performance Appraisal Instrument from the Department of Public Instruction (2005). Specific key leadership competencies for school librarians that emerged from a review of the literature included the following:

- Vision for the organization
- Program administration
- Assessment of information needs for the organization.
- Mentoring others
- Modeling best practices and behaviors in the use of information and instructional technology
- Communication
- Staff development
- Advocacy

The core principles upon which multiple professional groups have defined leadership offer a solid foundation from which school librarians may step forward. In light of these principles, school librarians are the logical ones to promote and lead both students and teachers, in understanding of media literacy education and emerging technologies.

The Problem: Developing Leadership

As access to information and teaching/learning methods change, there is no question that it is critical that the librarian play a leading role if schools are to benefit from the knowledge and experience they have of the school wide institution, media literacy, and technology access on local and district levels. There is concern, however, as to whether or not librarians are adequately prepared for the leadership roles the profession demands as a result of their academic preparation. In order to answer aspects of this concern regarding leadership development for school librarians,
research was designed to discover to what extent a sample group of practicing school librarians in the southeastern part of the United States believed they were prepared for leadership through their academic preparation. Quantitative and qualitative data derived from this study provides the foundation for this article. The study was guided by the following question:

To what extent do school librarian graduates of a large southeastern United States university believe that the library science coursework and internship experience prepared them for leadership as school librarians?

**Method**

A survey/questionnaire was used initially to seek answers to concerns about leadership development. Surveys or questionnaires enhance precision when considering questions that recognize varying degrees of the concept under investigation (Fishman & Galguera, 2003). Through an online survey, a sample group of school librarians were questioned about their perceptions of leadership development within their graduate education program. The specific portion of the survey addressing competencies specific to perceptions of preparedness for librarian leadership provided the data from which this article is drawn.

The survey was distributed to school librarian graduates of a university Library Science program in the southeastern part of the United States. The population for this research was delimited to practicing school librarians who were graduates of the southeastern United States university over a five-year period. The sample was selected because the chosen population could contribute valuable information regarding the effect of the program upon leadership skills development. One hundred and forty nine school librarian graduates of the program were surveyed using contact information data obtained from the Department of Library Science in conjunction with the Department of Public Instruction databases and listservs. An acceptable overall return rate of 64% was realized. It is important to note the representativeness of the professional sample. Krathwohl (1993) stated that significance lies not in the number of questionnaires returned but in the representativeness of the sample reached, an important consideration for this study, which was further, determined by the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy. The KMO for this analysis was determined to be .803 and thus the sample was deemed adequate.

Data gathered through the survey was subjected to a factor analysis and descriptive statistical analysis. Collected data was coded, summarized and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), a comprehensive and flexible statistical analysis and data management system. The online survey used a 5-point Likert Scale to obtain quantitative data regarding the librarians’ perceptions. The survey questions were answered by the participant selecting the response that best matched how he or she felt about the statement using: Strongly agree”, “Agree”, “Disagree”, and “Strongly Disagree”. A comments/concern section was included to provide opportunity for librarians to express concerns that were qualitative in nature and could not match the choices offered by the Likert scale.

**Findings**

From an examination of the coded survey data, three major trends relating to librarians’ preparation for the leadership role(s) were of significance for this article. The first trend exposed a wide variety of leadership activities reported by librarians. Not surprisingly, the leadership activities of school librarians represented many of the general programs and concepts that schools routinely and traditionally have supported, such as program leaders or chairs for quiz bowls, spelling or geography contests, new teacher mentors, peer helper program leaders, and roles related to parent teacher organizations or other school groups. The varied activities indicated the wide range of involvement school librarians enjoy within the school community. Significantly, the findings show clearly that librarians in this sample continue to be very traditional in their approach to teaching and leadership. In light of the perfect storm threatening our profession, and the evident need for a visionary, innovative shift towards active school-wide leadership by school
librarians, this static approach is a major concern. Failure to respond to contemporary school needs is not an option if we are to weather the imminent crisis.

A second trend became apparent upon further analysis of the data concerning the leadership role that librarians fill as members of media and technology committees or technology leaders. The literature (Everhart, 2007; Harvey, 2010) affirms the skilled leadership role librarians play in advocating for the incorporation of technology and all forms of media into the daily program. The school librarian is in many cases the primary contact with the district-level technology department in the determination of school technology needs (Everhart, Mardis, Johnston, & Smith 2009) making a presence on school level technology teams vital. This evidence of librarians as technology leaders promoting use of all forms of media is further supported by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE, 2010) advocacy statement to address the rapid changes in technology, instruction, and learning environments.

In this survey however, less than 30% of participants indicated that they served on Media and Technology Advisory Boards or committees, a vital area in contemporary education. Again, disturbingly, findings from this survey show librarians to be somewhat static in their approach to the role of technology leader, a role for which ideally they should be prepared to fill. The lack of a librarian presence on this important school initiative is troubling.

Reasons for the lack of involvement on technology teams may point to graduate school preparation. The 2009 findings, by Everhart, Mardis, Johnston, & Smith, showing that “when teachers are not comfortable integrating new techniques and tools in their practice, they tend to avoid embracing innovation” (p.2) applies to school librarian teachers as well. There is a rising opportunity for librarians to embrace all forms of media in order to be able to teach and enable others to do so as well. Clearly attention is needed to increase the comfort level of future librarians with use of emerging technologies to ensure they are able to meet staff needs. Interpretations of findings in this survey point to a specific need for an expanded focus on leadership development and awareness in regard to use of technology, in order to align the preparation of future school librarians more solidly with the mandates of the profession. In graduate level work instruction related to technology is vital (Mardis & Dickinson, 2009). Librarians prepared to lead and equipped with technology skills will be better able to support students and faculty in schools in regard to the ever changing demands of technology.

Finally, a third major trend indicated involvement from respondents serving on School Leadership Teams or School Improvement Teams specifically. Of individuals reporting leadership roles and responsibilities, approximately 70% reported serving on a Leadership Team or School Improvement Team. These encouraging figures, looking specifically at librarians serving on teams or in groups, purposely directing the programs and administration of their schools, highlight the presence of the librarian in leadership of the school community and further indicate the significance of preparation of school librarians for leadership upon graduation and entrance into the field.

**Discussion: Charting the Change**

If we are to strengthen librarian preparation programs, it is important to acknowledge the trends that emerged from this analysis of survey respondents’ perspectives in order to chart our course toward the change we are seeking. The school librarian’s position is undoubtedly becoming more complex and demanding, requiring multiple areas of expertise, and an increasing awareness of diverse participants and participant needs (Bush & Jones, 2010). The intricacies of this complex situation demand thinking outside of the traditional boxes (Martin, 2004), specifically through the development of a leadership identity to be better able to meet multiple needs. While professional school librarians need to embrace the concepts of working collaboratively across boundaries with administrators and teachers, and sharing development of both skills and vision, the data collected in this survey was not totally encouraging. Unfortunately, as indicated by the first trend, survey respondents reported that they were not moving beyond the traditional and perhaps less influential event and celebration planning types of activities. In the climate of site-based management, increasingly prevalent in 21st century schools, librarians are called to emerge from the confines of the school library and make themselves, their vision, and their skills known to faculty and administration.
As school leaders, school librarians must span the curriculum; provide the technology coordination, support, and leadership school wide, identifying strengths, resources and keeping current on both school level and district level (Everhart, Mardis, Johnston, & Smith, 2009). In addition to the information and inspiration an effective librarian can offer, teachers can also benefit from librarian modeled guidance and instruction in the development of technology skills in order to make vision become reality. The need for school librarians to share their expertise by leading through service on media and technology committees and by providing technology staff development to the school faculty has never been more critical yet the second trend exposed in this analysis indicated a lack of initiative on the part of the school librarian to accept this opportunity, an unacceptable response in the educational climate today.

The third trend offered a more hopeful view. Traditionally school administrators held primary responsibility as beacons guiding leadership within schools. School administrators today, however, should understand the significance of the leadership role of the school librarian in developing informed, reflective and engaged learners. School librarians must first educate administrators about the professional role of the school librarian and their vision for a comprehensive school library program firmly integrated into the culture and function of the school (Church, 2008; Wall, 2003). To begin this process, a school librarian should be expected to establish a relationship with this influential administrative partner (Wall, 2003) through frequent communication and taking opportunities to step forward when needs or occasions arise. The importance of maintaining currency with the literature, technologies and professional development cannot be overstated if school librarians are to be able to share the scope of what they can offer with other school leaders when needs arise. Awareness of current education initiatives and resources and the support of the administration facilitates a librarian’s objectives to provide service through leadership to bring her/his vision for the school to fruition. While respondents in this survey indicated a solid presence in terms of membership on teams directing programs and missions of the school and sharing in the leadership of the overall school community, an active leading role must be encouraged in pre-service programs.

The findings of this study affirm the significance of a graduate library science program’s attention to the development of leadership for future professionals. Further, results indicate a strong need to carefully align coursework with leadership development across the curriculum in order to fully prepare future librarians. Concentrated efforts by graduate faculty to teach core principles of leadership to future librarians is essential in order to keep the school librarian as a significant entity within the organization (Anderson, 2006; Callison, 1995; Kuhlthau, Maniotes, & Caspari, 2007; Shannon, 2002; Tilley & Callison, 2001). In the United States political climate today, after years of the No Child Left Behind act (2008), it is more important than ever before for school librarians to demonstrate skills, initiative, and value to the school if our professional purpose is to survive. School librarians must be equipped to step forward to model, mentor, instruct and offer their services as teachers and leaders. Librarians prepared to step forward, establish partnerships, and lead faculty toward the vision and mission of the school can help schools successfully promote the academic and social development of students. Ever expanding opportunities to share skills and training to facilitate advancement for the teachers and students in their schools continue to unfold for the visionary librarian (Kuhlthau, Maniotes, & Caspari, 2007).

Today’s political, economic, and educational climate, for the school librarian, demands purposeful leadership with a view towards guiding interaction and collaboration by those who hope to continue to impact positively upon the system. Although most educators are aware that all faculty members directly affect the success or failure of the goals and objectives of the school, budget deficits cause school administrators to seek areas of waste and inefficiency which can be reduced or cut entirely. School librarians more than ever before, must make opportunities for increased interaction for sharing their talents and expertise. Expanding leadership roles for school librarians present opportunities to enrich the process of education and help media literacy and research become infused with value, extending far beyond the scope of simple assignments.

This role is ideally suited for a qualified school librarian. The opportunity, as “gatekeeper” (Kuhlthau, Maniotes, & Caspari, 2007) to mold the learning organization through communication, mentoring, modeling, and bringing people and resources together, fits aptly within the directives of the school librarian role. The challenge to develop and enhance leadership skills will serve to bring enlightened vision to reality.
Without question, effective librarian leadership impacts the entire school providing energy, direction, creativity, challenge and accountability to all involved. Challenged to support and empower students and faculty, the expertise, education, and talents of school librarians are increasingly significant to the total mission of the school community of which they are part. Development of strong effective visionary library leadership skills to produce instructional leaders supporting the curriculum is required to keep the librarian role in the forefront impacting the entire school, opening doors to greater education and life-long learning for both faculty and students.

The leadership competencies identified in the review of the literature for this study can be effectively addressed in the reality of graduate level library science coursework for the future librarian. An effective program, infused throughout with clearly identified competencies, can lead to the development of strong leadership skills. The work of graduate library educators to develop leadership skills, and help individuals, (potential leaders), gain and maintain influence has a lasting impact on the future. School librarian educators can nurture this development through interactive and practical experiences within their programs. Graduate programs, thinking outside the box, can be well situated to heighten the level of technology training and exposure to multiple technologies to prepare future librarian leaders. The knowledge of and comfort with multiple technologies gained by students in a program fully incorporating aspects of technology throughout, make it more likely students will enter professional roles prepared to lead in this area. Coursework in all areas should incorporate components of leadership development and use of emerging technologies.

The issue with the crisis of leadership demands increased attention from all involved with library science, not only for graduate programs, but also for the beginning librarian, and for veteran professionals throughout careers in the field of librarianship. The change we seek is to create librarians who are educational leaders, change agents in the curriculum and instructional process, and partners at both the local school and wider global communities. Library schools have begun a new era charged to inaugurate a new generation of school librarians ready to serve as leaders in their schools. In every sense, we can embody the change we hope to see, and it is imperative that we do so if we are to be saved from the perfect storm looming ahead.

References


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