Editorial: “I Appreciate You in Advance”: Outsiders, Outliers, and Safety in the School Library

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This issue of School Libraries Worldwide is based on the theme of Outliers: School Librarianship Enables Success in All Environments. Outliers are all around us—they are moguls, geniuses, pop stars, and everyday people who have made good for themselves. If an outlier is defined as a person who succeeds against the odds, how do school librarians throughout the world enable and ensure this success? This theme was identified by social scientist Malcolm Gladwell who said in his 2008 book Outliers: The Story of Success:

We overlook just how large a role we all play...in determining who makes it...To build a better world we need to replace the patchwork of lucky breaks and arbitrary advantages today that determine success....with a society that provides opportunities for all (pp.74,78).

This issue is centered on the idea that school libraries and librarians can offer all students and stakeholders opportunities to expand knowledge, gain skills, and develop expertise.

One of the pleasures of writing the issue editorial is the opportunity to reminisce about my own career as a school librarian and the ways I still see it reflected in the themes and research presented in this journal. In this vein, I thought about Tom.

Every school librarian has a Tom. Tom was one of the kids I called my “library hounds” — students who were always in the library at the Catholic boys' high school where I had my first school librarian job. Tom was a handsome and popular senior (grade 12 student) and had a reputation for not being very bright. With his characteristic good humor, he laughed along with the jokes about his apparent lack of intelligence and even made fun of himself. Because Tom played football and wrestled, he fit in with his classmates in many other ways and never seemed to take the jibes to heart. Still, many days of his senior year, there he was to greet me when I came in the library in the morning and walk me to my car in the afternoon.

For Tom, the library was the one place he let someone know about how frustratingly slow reading and writing were for him. I had stumbled on Tom’s secret quite by accident one morning when he was sitting at a computer looking despondently at the screen. He explained that he just couldn't look at the screen any more and he just couldn't type fast enough. I asked him if he’d like me to type while he talked. He agreed and our daily ritual began.
Tom’s grades began to improve because he was turning in more and better quality assignments. He became more confident and participated in class more often. When Tom’s teachers asked him to explain his turnaround, he credited my assistance. Tom’s well intentioned ascription landed me in the headmaster’s office where I was questioned about doing Tom’s homework. I explained that I didn’t do his homework; I just typed what he told me to type. I also explained that Tom complained of not being able to concentrate and not always understanding what he read. Ultimately, I was cleared of all suspicion of wrongdoing and Tom received screening and assistance for his learning challenges. By the end of the school year, he had gained strategies to help himself and visited me less often. The last day of school, Tom walked me to my car, gave me a huge beautifully wrapped box, hugged me, blushed, and ran off. In the box was set of matching bath towels and a lovely note in Tom’s halting script: “I appreciate you in advance.” I had never heard anyone say this strange phrase before. As I have pondered it in the ensuing 20 years, I think it means “I appreciate that you could see who I could be.” Tom is now a successful corporate lawyer. We stay in touch through Facebook. The towels are in my bathroom linen closet.

How Outsiders Become Outliers
Tom was followed by Scott, Stephen, Michael, Nikki, Emily, and many others. I soon found that every school library has its “library hounds” who hang around, initially to read books and magazines, but eventually just to talk to the librarian. Many of these kids have heartbreaking stories. Their home lives are chaotic. Their peers scorn them. Their teachers don’t understand them. They are too bored or distracted to sit in class. They seek refuge in the library and the companionship of an adult who doesn’t scold them for unfinished homework or a messy room. As librarians, we listen. We recommend books for them to read that will make them feel connected and normal. We give them jobs to do that make them feel useful (and help us get little tasks done). In short, we make them feel safe. So profound is the feeling of safety that the Association of Superintendents and Curriculum Developers (ASCD) in the United States has a campaign called “The Whole Child” to raise awareness about children’s needs to be healthy, challenged, engaged...and safe.

Each semester, in my collection development course, I have students read about The Whole Child and think about ways the school library collection and the work of the school librarian can support safety. Each semester, many of my students recount their own days as library hounds (I must admit that I was one, too) and recall the ways they felt safe in the library. The poignancy of their comments always affects me. I had the honor to collect some of the most moving ones in a February 4, 2013 ASCD Whole Child Blog post entitled “It Takes a Whole School: School Librarians’ Roles in The Whole Child.”1 One of the quotes I shared was from a school librarian-to-be who said:

My definition of a library is one in which a child feels comfortable and relaxed, stimulated and challenged, joyful and creative. It contains a variety of activities and visual aids to engage students while educating them. In this library there are plenty of nooks and crannies for children to cuddle up in with a book, worry free, to allow their

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1 See the post at:
http://www.wholechildeducation.org/blog/it-takes-a-whole-school-school-librarians-roles-in-the-whole-child
imaginations to soar. There are plenty of warm and friendly librarians [who] students trust and feel comfortable in asking any question that they might possibly have. A library is a space where students do not have to fret over the prospect of not being able to find what they need or do what they need to do because of proximity, bullies, an unhelpful staff, a lacking collection, or a cold and uninviting atmosphere. I cannot think of a better description of the school librarians and libraries that make library hounds feel safe and that turn outsiders into outliers. Gladwell (2008, pp. 112-113, 115) pointed to a key difference between outsiders and outliers: “[Outsiders] lacked something that could have been given to them if we’d only known they needed it: community around them that prepared them properly for the world....no one, not rock stars, not professional athletes, not software billionaires, and not even geniuses – ever makes it alone.”

In This Issue
For this issue, we encouraged the submission of original research papers that explored how school librarianship and libraries serve a range of users and contexts. As usual, the wonderful researchers of the school library community did not disappoint us. Some researchers examined the exceptionality of children; some examined the exceptionality of their geography or the singularity of the school library’s influence. In each paper, interesting questions are raised that get at the power of the school librarian to honor and develop students.

In the debut of a new occasional column called “The Researcher’s Perspective,” Jennifer Branch and Joanne deGroot discuss the challenges of bringing themselves as well as their far-flung students into truly immersive distance education experiences in Canada. Rebecca Hunt and Lara Luetkehans explore using blended professional development to allow teacher librarians-to-be to develop understanding of and build relationships with U.S. classroom teachers. Kristina Šrot, Branka Ćagran, and Milena Ivanuš Grmek studied the ways Slovenian high school students made use of the University of Maribor Library to develop their own learning continuums. Taghreed M. AlQudsi-ghabra, Ammar H. Safar, and Nedaa M. Qabazard documented the differences between public and private school libraries in Kuwait and posed some possible impacts. Melissa Johnston charts an exchange between librarians from Germany and the United States in mutual attempts to determine what made each location unique and what each set of professionals could learn from one another. Nancy Knapp focused on the students and effective ways to improve their reading skills to help them reach their potential. Gianina Cabanilla presents a powerful study of the ways in which children from the Philippines’ indigenous communities used their cultural anchors to relate to Filipino culture based schoolwork. Andrea Paganelli and Cynthia Houston map the availability of and growing need for Spanish e-books for children in the United States. Again to Slovenia, Urška Repinc and Primož Južnič studies building community and information literacy through a yearlong collaborative guided inquiry project. And, in the final paper, Kafi D. Kumasi and Renee F. Hill gathered library and information studies (LIS) students’ perceptions of their coursework’s cultural competence content and implications cultural competence has for school library education in a distance mode.
I appreciate you in advance for enjoying these papers as much as I enjoyed pulling them together for you. As you read, I am sure you will think about your own “library hounds” and their journeys from outsiders to outliers in the safety of the school library.

References

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