Earlier this year, I wrote a post about how teams of teachers can work together across subject areas to improve student reading. I received comments on the piece from two school librarians, pointing out that they have important contributions to make to the effort, and questioning why I had not included school librarians in my suggestions in the first place. Well, they are absolutely right about this, and their voices prompted my reflection on the topic.

I've taught in four public schools in New York City and only ONE had a true functioning library with a certified librarian in it. Let me tell you, that one school library was small, but game changing, thanks to the wonderful work of the librarian, Leslie Gallager, and the wise choice to fund it by school leaders at Brooklyn Prospect.

When the school (which was new) created the library, I was not accustomed to having the resource of a school library or librarian, so it took me some time to figure out how to utilize it in my ELA class. Luckily, our librarian was quick to reach out to teachers, making it known she had resources and skills that could benefit our students and enrich our teaching, while at the same time making our work more manageable.

Skilled School Librarians Benefit Students & Teachers

Knowledge of Books: One major way Leslie helped my students and me was with her vast knowledge of books, both fiction and non-fiction, classic and current. In the past, I had prided myself on knowing a wide range of great YA books, but when our librarian started showing me exciting new titles, I realized that I had not been keeping up as much as I once did. I could have beat myself up over this, but the truth was, I was busy reading student writing from my large load of students, and keeping up with teacher blogs and articles on teaching practices and education policy. I had slipped on a key aspect of my discipline—finding new books to feed my students' reading interests—and my school's librarian lifted me back up.

Over time, I got used to her being there to support my students and me to find books related to all kinds of interests. This aspect of my role as ELA teacher got easier and at the same time more exciting. Leslie opened the door to the reading world wider than I could do on my own.

Making Connections: Our school librarian helped students connect to reading and digital literacies in a variety of ways. She found out what students were learning about in history and science class and found interesting reading materials to connect to those topics. She helped us bring local authors to visit to talk to students about their work. She helped students and teachers access periodicals and other helpful programs online.

I had the chance to talk on the phone with Dorcas Hand, one of the school librarians who commented on my earlier blog post. She's now retired and runs a grassroots advocacy group in Houston, where the public schools of HISD are now seeing a great rise in available positions for school librarians.

Dorcas told me about one of the wonderful ways she connected with students' writing—through an annual school-wide project called "History As Story." In collaboration with English and Social Studies teachers, the project involved students in writing literary non-fiction on topics students had previously researched in their classes. Each year, Dorcas brought a different non-fiction author to conduct master classes with the students. The students would write about their research topic novelistically, from the point of view of a person they had researched from the time period. By narrating an episode in that person's life, they would reveal "the effect of the times on the person and the person on the times."

Dorcas explained that one of the amazing things about this was that students went through the process each year from fourth through eighth grade, each time with different topics and different authors guiding their work. "It was phenomenal to see the quality of students' writing in this genre by eighth grade," she said.

As a teacher, this example highlights one of the key benefits of having a highly skilled school librarian—they are in the position to influence and support the culture of reading and writing across a school. Can this project be done by an individual teacher? Yes. But it's something different when one person with a vision and the time to implement it leads it consistently for the entire school, every year.

There is a cumulative benefit to students and teachers, both academic and cultural, when a school librarian becomes a literacy leader.

http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/whole_story/2018/05/why_school_librarians_are_lite.html?print=1
Can Classroom Libraries Replace School Libraries?

Maintaining a school library is another task that positions librarians as literacy leaders. Classroom libraries maintained by teachers are wonderful and essential—this is not an either/or argument. But when we cut school librarians and rely solely on teachers to curate classroom libraries we open the door to several problems I have experienced first hand, and close the door to other key benefits:

- The first issue is **manageability**. It takes a tremendous amount of work to maintain a vibrant classroom library. Continually researching books, doing the advocacy and paperwork to get copies of new books ordered, keeping them organized and appealingly laid out, managing check out and return processes (even when students are in charge, this is still a responsibility for the teacher), and so forth is challenging. While some schools take measures to support teachers in doing this, most often it takes time we don’t really have. That means we either don’t do a great job, or we do it at the expense of something else we are supposed to do, or we work unsustainable hours (and as the data shows, eventually leave the classroom, along with that great classroom library).

- The second issue is **consistency** and, consequently, **equity**. When we leave this work to individual teachers, the results will vary by classroom and grade level. Teachers will prioritize differently. Students will have years where the classroom library is amazing and other years where there may be virtually no classroom library. Some libraries may feature a range of books with diverse characters—others won’t. Who ensures an equitable experience for students across a school? Maybe a literacy coach can effectively do this, but again, coaches are charged with a number of responsibilities and their focus will vary. A librarian can make access to books a priority every day.

- Another issue is **space**. Just as there are huge benefits to having classroom libraries, where teachers can facilitate students’ exploration of book choices in an immediate, hands on way, there are special benefits, too, of a **designated library space**. Dorcas explained that the library becomes a place where many students feel at home, especially when they might not elsewhere in the school. I remember seeing this happen for a number of my students, and I remember being one of those students myself. I spent study halls in middle school and high school in the school library, and it was a needed haven. For students who don’t have internet or computer access at home, the library can be a crucial after school and summer support. (Check out this Middleweb article on how school libraries can **slow down the summer reading slide**.)

- Finally, having **someone other than their teacher** to recommend books to students is also valuable. Children and adolescents need multiple models and influencers when it comes to reading, and a school librarian has the added advantage of being able to cultivate those relationships with students over a number of years.

In New York City and across the country—but especially in urban schools—school libraries staffed with **certified librarians** have become harder and harder to find. I assume that’s because cutting them can seem like a viable way to stretch a limited budget and maximize often crowded school facilities. If student achievement is the goal, though, then this option is neither positive nor pragmatic. Research shows a strong correlation between the presence of a certified school librarian and student achievement. Just because many of us haven’t had the privilege of working with a school librarian recently, let’s not forget how important they are. Let’s recognize vibrant school libraries as a key component of a quality education—one that benefits students and teachers alike.

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