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Ken Haycock
San Jose State University, ken.haycock@sjsu.edu

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Collaboration: Critical Success Factors for Student Learning

Ken Haycock

School of Library and Information Science, San José State University, USA

Several studies identify collaboration between classroom teachers and teacher-librarians as a key factor that affects student achievement. Studies in teacher-librarianship have established procedures and processes for effective collaboration. This study examines collaboration from a broader theoretical and research perspective, beginning with 20 factors that specifically influence successful collaborations. These are clustered in six areas: factors related to the environment, to membership characteristics, to process and structure, to communication, to purpose, and to resources. Research from teacher-librarianship is then applied to substantiate and reinforce the factors and provide context for successful collaboration and thus effect on students' learning in schools.

Introduction

Several studies suggest that teacher-librarians have a positive effect on student achievement (see Haycock, 2003; Lance & Loertscher, 2005; Lonsdale, 2003, for summaries and sources). Many of these studies also identify collaboration or partnering between classroom teachers and teacher-librarians as an effective method for improving student learning, by more than 20% on measures of achievement in some studies (Lance, Rodney, & Hamilton-Pennell, 2000).

Benefits to collaboration have been similarly well documented in the research literature. In a study of the results of an institute on collaboration, Grover (1996) found that there were benefits for all members of the team—teachers, teacher-librarians, administrators—as well as for their students. Collaboration ignited creativity among teachers, and the "creative fire" spread to learners. Modeling collaboration resulted in more collaboration among faculty in schools. Modeling collaboration also influenced students, teachers, and parents to learn to share ideas. When students worked in teams, the role of teacher changed to that of resource person and learning facilitator. The students' role also changed, and they learned to interact with people inside and outside the school. Students were more involved in their learning, and their work was more creative. Administrators also believed that they benefited professionally from their participation in teaching teams. Grover concluded that teachers, principals, and librarians communicated more frequently and that the library media program was integral to the collaborating teaching model. Bush (2003) adds that professional satisfaction derives from collaboration with colleagues.

In the light of this evidence, one might reasonably expect that collaboration would be commonplace in schools. Such is not the case, however, as

many researchers have found (most recently, Bailey, 2005). Regrettably, most of the literature on teacher-teacher-librarian collaboration appears in journals and other publications read by teacher-librarians themselves, and consequently, the lack of acceptance of collaboration as a norm of teacher behavior is also a common theme in this professional literature. Despite the difficulties, however, there are many examples of successful collaboration and of its positive benefit for both students and teachers.

Collaboration is an issue for community organizations as well as for individuals. Indeed, the research base for collaboration between agencies provides a useful framework for determining predictors of success in school environments. One might argue, for example, that the classroom and library are agencies represented by individuals who have mutually rein-forcing purposes for student learning. Collaboration at its best accomplishes tasks that improve community conditions, reinforce social fibers, and increase the capacity to get more done (Mattessich, Murray-Close, & Monsey, 2001). In education, there is also evidence that collaboration enables districts and schools to address more successfully the needs of all students (Green & Etheridge, 1999).

Research evidence supporting successful collaboration between agen-cies reflects and extends the evidence that supports successful collaboration in schools, particularly between teacher and teacher-librarian. Understanding a theoretical groundwork or foundation can thus enable teacher-librarians to address missing elements in the school setting.

Collaboration Defined

Collaboration in this context is defined as

> a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more
> organizations to achieve common goals … the relationship includes a commit-
> ment to mutual relationships and goals; a jointly developed structure and
> shared responsibility; mutual authority and accountability for success; and
> sharing of resources and rewards. (Mattesich et al., 2001)

The researchers go on to say that collaboration depends on trust, shared vision, and communication.

In setting forth a theory of collaboration for teacher-librarianship, Montiel-Overall (2005) proposes that:

> Collaboration is a trusting, working relationship between two or more equal
> participants involved in shared thinking, shared planning and shared creation
> of integrated instruction. Through a shared vision and shared objectives, stu-
> dent learning opportunities are created that integrate subject content and
> information literacy by co-planning, co-implementing, and co-evaluating stu-
> dents' progress throughout the instructional process in order to improve
> student learning in all areas of the curriculum. (Section A, para. 9)

Mattessich et al. (2001) provide a meta-analysis of the research and lit-erature on factors that influence successful collaboration. The resulting 20 factors that influence the success of collaboration can be clustered by six elements.

- factors related to the environment;
- factors related to membership characteristics;
- factors related to the environment;
- factors related to process and structure;
- factors related to communication;
- factors related to purpose; and
- factors related to resources.

The purpose of this article is to apply the research-based factors specifically to the in-school dynamic of teacher and teacher-librarian collaboration drawing on evidence from teacher-librarianship that replicates or demonstrates the broader success factor. Earlier applications of this framework to teacher-teacher-librarian collaboration were undertaken by Grover (1996) and Haycock (2004).

Predictors of Success

The factors are thus addressed by the six clusters: environment, membership characteristics, process and structure, communication, purpose, and resources. For each cluster, an implication or "translation" to the school environment, and specifically teacher and teacher-librarian collaboration, is provided. Discussion then centers on the research base for the cluster from other studies, specifically from teacher-librarianship in K-12 settings.

Factors Related to the Environment

1. A history of collaboration or cooperation in the community.
2. The collaborative group is seen as a legitimate leader in the community.
3. A favorable political and social climate.

Implication

There is a history of collaboration or cooperation in the school or district; in other words, there is a longstanding expectation and tradition of collaboration. Clearly, where collaboration is expected, teachers and teacher-librarians find it easier to collaborate. Those who collaborate are seen as reliable and competent, as legitimate leaders. Respected role models are thus available to student teachers and new colleagues. Administrators and opinion leaders, those who control resources, create and nurture a favorable political and social climate for collaboration.

Discussion

At the school district level, the positive perceptions of superintendents and district staff, including the advocacy of a school library coordinator, create this climate for collaboration (Underwood, 2003). Studies related to the effect of school culture on the role of the teacher-librarian are relatively recent, but help to explain why some teacher-librarians find it more natural to collaborate in their particular school context than do others. The foundational work of Bell (1990) and Oberg (1999) is especially use-

ful here and has been validated by other researchers (Chapman, 1990; Hughes, 1998; Small, 2001).

Similarly, Tallman and van Deusen (1994) found in the United States and Haycock (1996) found in Canada that when the school principal expects team planning between teachers and the teacher-librarian, whether as grade-level groups or subject-area groups, team planning occurs more than when the principal does not expect such collaboration. This will be of little surprise to teacher-librarians, but it does point to the leadership issues and non-monetary expectations that help to shape school culture.

In order to be credible, teacher-librarians must be highly skilled in collaboration. Those who have education and training in collaboration tend to collaborate more (Haycock, 1992).

There is also ample evidence that teachers who collaborate with teacher-librarians develop a more positive view of the role of the teacher-librarian and consequently continue to collaborate and indeed welcome closer collaboration (Callison, 1979; Smith, 1978). This creates a history and tradition of collaboration that informs and infuses the culture of the school.

Factors Related to Membership Characteristics

4. Mutual respect, understanding, and trust for members and their respective organizations.
5. An appropriate cross-section of members.
6. Members see collaboration in their self-interest.
7. The ability to compromise.

Implication

Teachers and teacher-librarians exhibit mutual respect, understanding, and trust. Although not everyone may be involved in collaboration, there is no obvious lack of participation by particular levels or teams. Teachers and teacher-librarians see collaboration in their own self-interest, offsetting their costs of time and loss of autonomy. Self-interest might be seen as improved teaching, improved student learning, or improved confidence in inquiry and the use of learning resources. The teaching team is able to compromise; in other words, collaboration is indeed a partnership.

Discussion

The current movement toward learning communities can only facilitate the development of collaborative work environments. Principals, teachers, and teacher-librarians collaborate more in professional learning communities. School reform research reports that schools with high levels of professional community are not only more effective, but have school climates wherein teachers' work patterns are cohesive and collaborative. Positive perceptions and expectations about consultation and collaboration are developed through role clarification, modeling, active involvement, and personal experience (Haycock, 2002).

Factors Related to Process and Structure

8. Members share a stake in process and outcome.
9. Multiple layers of participation.
10. Flexibility in both structure and methods.
11. Development of clear roles and policy guidelines.
12. Adaptability or the ability of the collaborative group to sustain itself amid changes.
13. An appropriate pace of development.

Implication

Roles and responsibilities are clear and supported by policy guidelines. The role of the teacher-librarian is delineated by district or school policy and mutual understandings: it is not a support role; it is not a service role; it is a partner role. Teaching partners share a stake in both the process and outcome of collaboration as it reflects school expectations and a beneficial practice for student learning. All levels of school personnel might be involved, including other non-classroom specialists and support staff. Flexibility and adaptability are the norm. There is an appropriate pace of development of collaboration without overwhelming the group's capacity.

Discussion

Clear roles for the partners in collaboration—teacher, teacher-librarian, principal—are critical to success. In terms of the teacher-librarian, the lack of role clarity, particularly as witnessed by misconceptions and misperceptions, has been a barrier to successful collaboration (there are many role perception studies; see, e.g., Charter, 1982; Hambleton, 1980).

Flexible scheduling, or at least mixed scheduling (combining flexible and fixed scheduling), is related to collaboration according to many researchers (Beaird, 1999; Callison, 1979; Nolan, 1989; Putnam, 1996; Smith, 1978; Yetter, 1994). This is true also of studies in education generally (Haycock, 1990).

As outlined earlier in the research of Tallman and van Deusen (1994) and Haycock (1996), teacher-librarians plan more units with teachers regardless of the type of schedule if the principal expects team planning. However, teacher-librarians in schools with flexible or mixed schedules develop significantly more units than those on fixed schedules by a ratio of 4:1. Beyond frequency and length of planning sessions, teacher-librarians who plan with teams of teachers rather than with individuals are more involved in identifying objectives, planning activities, collaborative teaching, and student assessment. Involvement in assessment assures a greater stake in outcomes for the teacher-librarian.

Teacher-librarians who are committed to collaboration, not surprisingly, engaged in more collaboration (Ruffin, 1989); commitment, skill, and structure thus enable the ability to sustain collaboration amid change.

Factors Related to Communication

14. Open and frequent communication.
15. Established informal and formal communication links.

Implication

Open and frequent formal communication is supported by more informal personal relationships and communication.

Discussion

Collaborative program planning and teaching require a knowledgeable and flexible teacher-librarian with good interpersonal skills. Studies in teacher-librarianship suggest that the more successful teacher-librarian is less cautious and exhibits more extroverted behavior than his or her colleagues, thus being available to and connected with teaching colleagues and instructional planning in the school. Some have suggested that more education and training in social interaction may be helpful (Adams, 1973; Urbanik, 1984).

Factors Related to Purpose

16. Clear attainable goals and objectives that are communicated to all partners and can be realistically attained.
17. Shared vision.
18. Unique purpose.

Implication

The teaching team has a shared vision with concrete, attainable goals and objectives for the curriculum unit(s). Their purpose is unique, that is, it could not be accomplished by either partner alone.

Discussion

Shared vision has been identified as an important component in collaboration (Muronaga & Harada, 1999; Small, 2001). The need to envision mutual goals and objectives, which includes shared resources and responsibilities, was highlighted. Beaird (1999) also noted the importance of "shared ideas and resources" as enhancers to collaboration.

Kühlthau (1993) notes that shared commitments such as to modes of inquiry and constructivist views of learning enable improved collaboration.

It is evident that numerous factors affect the process of collaboration. Farwell (1998) concluded that the collaboration was affected by the individuals involved, the school climate, time for planning, organization of the school, the facility, and collection and training. She also found that the most variables for successful collaboration were the characteristics and actions of people involved. These individuals must be knowledgeable about the curriculum, the library collection, and instructional design and delivery; welcoming to classroom teachers and use good interpersonal skills; com-

mitted to information literacy instruction; and willing to act as a change agent. Of course, principal support is vital.

Factors Related to Resources

19. Sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time.
20. Skilled leadership.

Implication

The teacher librarian and administrator provide skilled leadership and are supported by sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time.

Discussion

Assumptions are made that teacher-librarians are committed to collaboration and that it is teacher behaviors or lack of administrator support that prevent collaboration from taking place. Some studies suggest, however, that the teacher-librarian is not always committed to collaboration. Teacher-librarians may recognize the critical importance of their participation in curriculum development, but their actual involvement in collaboration with classroom teachers may not match the theoretical role or the role they were trained to perform (Haycock, 1999a).

In her review of the literature, Shannon (2002) notes that teacher-librarians do not perceive the role as highly important (Johnson, 1993), that their involvement in the instructional program is marginal (Jones, 1997; Kinder, 1995; Lewis, 1990; Pickard, 1990), and that they engage in this role less often than they were trained or would like to do (Bishop, 1996; Jones; Kinard, 1991; Stoddard, 1991).

There are obviously inhibitors to collaboration, and time is frequently mentioned (Beaird, 1999; Ervin, 1989; Lumley, 1994; Stoddard, 1991; Underwood, 2003), but there is some suggestion of differences of opinion as to what prevents quality collaboration. Kolencek (2001) found that principals believed that funding was the primary issue, but teacher-librarians believed that teachers' attitudes prevented instructional collaboration.

Time is not an insurmountable barrier, and there are many examples in the literature of creative approaches to finding time with skilled leadership by the principal (Tools for Schools, 2002).

The principal is thus a key player in supporting collaboration between teachers and teacher-librarians. Skilled principals establish evaluation procedures, integrate the library in instructional programs, encourage student and teacher use, and provide flexible scheduling (Haycock, 1992). Researchers over the past 20 years have pointed to the key role for the principal. More recently, Farwell (1998) similarly found that the support of the principal was vital. In some instances, the leadership function will be shared by teacher-librarian and principal based on a shared vision (Haycock, 1992).

Principals of schools with well-integrated, flexible programs demonstrate specific supportive behaviors during both the implementation and maintenance phases of any restructuring. The attitude alone of the principal affects teacher-teacher-librarian collaboration. Effective principals assume the roles of decision-setter, facilitator, and communicator; they exemplify vision-building, evolutionary planning, empowerment, resource mobilization, and problem-coping/monitoring. They are willing to take risks and provide strong leadership (Haycock, 1996, 1999).

The role of the principal is enhanced by the visionary leadership of the teacher-librarian. In addition to energy, personal stamina, and enthusiasm, the teacher-librarian exhibits initiative, confidence, communication skills, and leadership qualities, together with a willingness to take risks. Teacher-librarians can facilitate, support, and shape diffusion. However, this requires them to act as change agents, innovators, opinion leaders, and monitors (Haycock, 1995).

Conclusions

Collaboration is not solely a function of teacher interest, personality characteristics, or commitments to learning. A complex foundation and context support efforts to collaborate far beyond the interest and commitment of one teacher, in this case the teacher-librarian. This article does not address the process of collaboration or the many approaches to successful partnerships and successful teaching and learning based on it.

Teacher-librarians need to be educated and trained in effective collaboration and develop professional and personal commitments to teacher partnerships. Beyond this, however, rest the critical factors of school and district expectations and leadership, a shared vision for teaching and learning, effective communication in the district and school, mutual trust and respect among the partners—administrator, teacher, teacher-librarian-time or at least commitment to finding opportunities for collaboration, much communication, skilled leadership by the principal and teacher-librarian, competence in collaboration by the teacher-librarian, and of course favorable administrative structures such as flexible scheduling.

These factors do not develop on their own, easily, or at once. Skilled leadership does make a difference, as do opportunities for professional growth and staff development as the school community learns together (Giorgis, 1994).

Collaboration is not easy. But collaboration is the single professional behavior of teacher-librarians that most affects student achievement. Surely this alone makes understanding and working toward success factors a critical obligation. Collaboration between teacher and teacher-librarian not only has a positive effect on student achievement, but also leads to growth of relationships, growth of the environment, and growth of persons, all conducive to improved experiences for all members of the school community.

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Author Note

Ken Haycock is a professor at San Jose State University, San Jose, California, USA. He was formerly a professor at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. Dr. Haycock has contributed to the professional and research literature for the past 30 years, most notably articulating the role of the teacher-librarian and the effect of that role on student achievement through collaborative program planning and teaching. He has been honored by several associations including the American and Canadian Library Associations for outstanding contributions to the profession.