



TRANSFORMING MY  
**perspective**

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Transformation is exhilarating, frustrating, and sometimes painful, but it is so critical to our students' success that we regularly challenge and change our perspectives on what it means to be effective school librarians. Like many of us, I started my career in education as a teacher: language arts and social studies, with elective courses in art, media literacy, and study skills. As a teacher my focus was narrow, my curriculum, my students and, of course, the school. I participated in school-level committees (scheduling, parent volunteers, communication), and once I had become the social studies department chair I participated on district-level committees, although the focus was still narrow. After eight years of teaching middle school I decided to get my school library media endorsement through the University of Washington.

When moving to a high school library position, I needed to be aware of some changes, but my focus was still bounded primarily by my school and my program, my students, and my staff. My perspective was still fairly narrow. It wasn't until I started teaching professional development courses and participating in our state organization that I started the process of expanding my perspective. I had always been a middle school and secondary-level educator; having elementary librarians in my classes quickly expanded how I saw not

only library services but my school district. It became quickly apparent that elementary library services were a very different world from what I was doing on a daily basis. Working with the state association allowed me to see how things were different in other areas of the state and how other librarians managed the same issues of budget, time, and community that I did.

When the library curriculum coordinator position was created in my district, several people suggested that I apply for it. We hadn't had a district-level library coordinator focused on curriculum and library services integration in over twenty years. Therefore, no one was really clear on what the job would entail, but they felt that I had the perspective to take it on. Because it was a new position, developing the job from the ground up was an amazing opportunity. I learned so much in the early years; the first key idea was that my perspective had to expand to see things from a district level.

One of the things that I feel I really lacked in my first couple years in the coordinator position was a clear vision and articulated core values around library service for the district's libraries. I knew that I wanted effective library programs and student-centered service, but I hadn't clarified what that meant in terms that could be easily shared and

used as a focal point in leading the district library programs. This is where the rubber really had to meet the road for me in my professional practice. If I was going to be effective I had to clarify my purpose and vision.

## Transformative Opportunities

I credit five things with transforming my perspective throughout my school library career and helping me to develop a clear vision and clearly articulated core values. What I have realized about each of them is that they required me to move beyond my library and even beyond my district. I believe that putting ourselves in a place to transform our mindset about our library, our school, and our students requires that we get the distance to see things from a wider viewpoint that we can then bring back to the service we provide for our patrons.

First, I think the most critical opportunity I received was being invited to go into 80+ school libraries to help librarians do collection development and weeding. This has been incredibly powerful in developing my core beliefs around engagement, access, and literacy. Very few librarians have the opportunity to weed in so many collections, and doing so has drastically changed my viewpoint on the critical nature of weeding in providing engaging

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collections for our students. There is no way to thank all of the school librarians who invited me into their collections and generously shared their perspectives and allowed me to learn from them and their students. Without their trust and generosity I would never have been able to gain such a unique frame of reference on collection development. (I'll elaborate further later.)

Another critical area was being involved in various positions with the Alaska Association of School Librarians while I was still in a school library position. The opportunity to be membership chair and then my three years as president elect, president, and past president truly helped me start to see library services beyond my own district and to begin to build a network of incredibly generous and professional colleagues around the state.

Another transformative experience occurred in 2014. I was honored to be selected to participate in the Lilead Fellowship. The focus of the fellowship was transformational change, and it was the best and the hardest professional development I have done in my twenty-three years in education. It provided a framework for thinking about library services and change that I have continued to implement in my district. And again this opportunity allowed me to



expand my network of inspiring and passionate library colleagues.

Then, through a connection I made while a Lilead Fellow, I was offered the opportunity to run for the AASL Region 8 Director position on the AASL Board of Directors. I am now in my second year on the AASL Board and again am so privileged to be learning from an incredibly energetic and committed group of people who believe in school libraries and service to the profession. They inspire me every day.

Finally, and back at my district, last year I was given the opportunity to work with a group of my district librarians to revise the school librarian job description. This year we will be launching an ambitious training plan to assist all my librarians in providing library services to the students we have now. Not the ones we used to have, wish we had, or even think we have. Transformational change is hard, and I am blessed to be able to help lead that work in my district, no matter how hard it is.

## Influential Changes

The two areas of library service where I think I have undergone the most change are around circulation policies and weeding. Both have a huge impact on student engagement in our libraries. We have to make our spaces welcoming and low risk for students, and our collections must be highly engaging, current, and

relevant to get our students to check out resources and read widely and ferociously.

“Transformation isn’t about improving. It is about rethinking.” *attributed to Malcolm Gladwell*

One of the most painful parts of transformation is rethinking what you “know” to be true and realizing that it may not only *not* be true, but it may actually be counterproductive to achieving your core goals based on core values. This realization is the pivot point at which you have to decide how much pain you are willing to tolerate. One of the things that I had been told when I started as a school librarian in my district—and which seemed at the time to make sense—was that when students had overdue books they couldn’t check out more until they returned—or paid for—the books they already had borrowed. It didn’t matter for some librarians if the prohibition lasted two weeks, two years, or the rest of students’ time in the district; they needed to be “taught responsibility.”

Don’t get me wrong. Teaching responsibility is a critical task, and I do believe that it is the responsibility of all adults to help the young people we connect with to become productive members of a democratic society. But is it the mission of the school library to do that above all other things? I will admit right now that while I didn’t stop kids from checking out for years, I did stop

their checkout privileges for months at a time to try to get them to take responsibility for the books that they had lost. Looking back on that practice I cringe, and here is why. My core values around library service, which I developed after reading Simon Sinek’s book *Start with Why*, are engagement, access, and literacy. My vision for the district libraries is “Books and Information in EVERY Student’s Hands.” So I have to ask myself now, when I blocked a student from checking out books was I focusing my effort on my vision and core values? Is it a high-value task that moved me toward my vision of effective library services for our students? At the time I hadn’t yet developed these core values and vision. However, when I look back at that time, I realize that what I was doing was making the library a risky place for some students when I really should have been making it a low-risk, high-reward space.

“Vision is a destination—a fixed point to which we focus all effort. Strategy is a route—an adaptable path to get us where we want to go.” *Simon Sinek (2012)*

When it comes to weeding our collections I have had the incredible opportunity to weed in elementary, middle school, and high school collections. I have weeded entire collections in a single year, and I have weeded smaller parts of

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collections over time. I have weeded with librarians, and I have had school librarians tell me they just couldn't let go and I should just do the weeding for them. Through their incredible trust and generosity, I have had an experience that most school librarians simply don't have to develop a very broad perspective on weeding and collection development.

When I started in my high school library I was mentored by two very experienced and very aggressive weeders. I remember Nina Prockish telling me early on that "School libraries are not archival libraries. That isn't what we do. Our collections have to be living and breathing collections that respond to the needs of our students." But it wasn't until I had the opportunity at the district level to weed in so many libraries that I came to truly shift my perspective on weeding. I now believe that failure to effectively weed our collections is nothing less than a form of censorship. If we don't weed effectively, either our students need a machete to bushwhack their way to the engaging, relevant, and accurate materials we have or they simply don't attempt to explore the shelves because what they want is buried in the mass of weeds. I now use this belief as one of the pillars of library service to get me to my vision of books and information in every student's hands and align with my core values of access, engagement, and literacy.

## Continuing to Evolve

"The grass is greener where you water it." *attributed to Neil Barringham*

If I had to give a new school librarian one piece of advice on the career it would be that there is no point at which we can say we are done examining and changing our perspectives. We must always strive to rethink practices and priorities, and to remember that most of us weren't trained in the type of librarianship that our students need today—and we don't even know what type of librarianship our students will need in ten years.

Join your state and national organizations. Use the incredibly rich resources that social media have provided. Follow people that think like you and—even more importantly—follow the people who push you into rethinking things. Go to conferences, participate in webinars, present at the local, state, and national levels.

Changing perspectives is not a passive activity. It requires that we continually seek out the people, blogs, articles, tweets, and more that challenge us and evaluate them all in the context of the best interests of our students. It also requires that we see our students and their world with clear eyes. My first year in education I was given a poster that said, "You need to teach the students you have right now. Not the ones you used to have, wish you had, or think you have." It bears repeating: We need to make sure that we are not providing library services for the students we used to have, wish we had, or think we have. Our work has to be about the students we actually have in the world they actually live in.



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