



My Transition from an Elementary to a High School Library

Building a Better School Library Model

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After thirteen years of teaching as a middle school language arts teacher, I returned to school and earned a second Master's degree to become a licensed school librarian for grades Pre-K–12. There were no deep bouts of meditation. Instead, the transition occurred organically. It came as a result of my quest to discover who and what would fortify and sustain me in my professional career and personal life journey. Not surprisingly, my longing to focus on my primary role in education was guided by purpose. In a library space, I desired to become more centered in my thinking on how my role could be used to shift mindsets about what teaching and learning look like in the field of formal education. I wanted everyone who shares that space to imagine the school community as a network of learners.

In the Beginning

Making the transition to the position of a K–8 school librarian was not too challenging. In fact, it was oddly very similar to my role as a classroom teacher. Within the district most librarians used a fixed schedule for classes, and the expectation was to teach “library skills.” School librarians were charged with empowering our students to become more effective users of the library. Typical lessons, conducted only by the librarian, included learning how to use the online catalog system, the Dewey Decimal System, and reference materials, plus safe and proper use of the Web. The lessons relied heavily upon routine procedures and the use of print materials. The skills were important to teach because when our students possess this skill set they can function better as learners.

Not surprisingly, within the district, this library model was viewed as the norm, allowing classroom teachers time to take a break or catch up on grading. These visits to the library

for lessons in library skills had many names: “specials,” “extras,” or even “unified arts.” However, all the sessions served the same purpose: providing relief for teachers. Furthermore, in the district K–8 students don't have access to a full-time school librarian; instead, each K–8 librarian is responsible for making scheduled visits to at least eight schools and sometimes as many as ten. This situation made those fixed times for library visits necessary—and even more cherished by students and teachers.

Serving K–8 students was rewarding, but serving so many schools limited my time and access to most students and teachers. I was also concerned about the limited focus of the class visits to the library; focusing only on a few skills is not the sum total of how we should function as school librarians.

As a former teacher, I am sensitive to an elementary teacher's classroom schedule and fully understand the need to refresh oneself and maximize student-free moments to get administrative tasks done. However, I am not an advocate of teachers' use of library visits as catch-up time; it doesn't best serve students or the school community at large. For me, the situation was reminiscent of antiquated models of teaching and learning. In the twenty-first century, we need our students more engaged and involved in inquiry-based projects, solving problems through application of principles. Teachers should be actively participating in collaborative projects with school librarians, and administrators can be more supportive of school libraries and how they function. School librarians can be agents of change if given the space, time, and resources. As a member of a community of professionals who endeavors to transform learning, I knew there was a better and deeper way to serve the school community.

The Transition

What and Why

I soon learned that I could have more interaction with students and fellow educators as a high school librarian in our district because a high school librarian serves full time at one location. Therefore, when the opportunity presented itself for me to apply for the position of lead school librarian at a high school, I did and was fortunate enough to be offered the job. Transitioning to the position of head librarian, I was challenged to create and collaborate, to develop and implement innovative ways of managing a 21st-century space. Though I encountered obstacles like outdated books, little technology, and entrenched “old and usual ways” of doing things, I was determined to learn as much as possible with the goal of making our school's library a model learning hub within the district.

After only a few days at the high school I found myself reflecting on why I had selected a position that would keep me connected to the school community. My primary reason was my continuing commitment to teaching. However, if I am honest with myself, my reasons for getting a second Master's degree included having thoughts of myself as the classroom teacher who had become uninspired. The process of teaching and learning was not what I had envisioned. I felt constrained, boxed in, underutilized, and undervalued. I was sure other teachers felt the same and thought that maybe in my role as school librarian I could serve as a catalyst for change by helping others function at a higher level and reimagine their own roles—whether they were teachers, counselors, nurses, or administrators. Thus, I had a two-fold purpose in my new position in a high school library. My first purpose: Within

the school community—and maybe the district—redefine the role of school librarian from keeper of books to curator, collaborator, provider of professional development, and learner. Doing so would surely help me better serve the school community (students, staff, and parents). My second purpose: Explore and expand teachers' ideas on the meaning and value of collective work.

Aligning myself with a school community within which I can engage in synergistic relationships allowed me to grow as a professional and add value to others' learning. As a school librarian, I grew by building a skill set that helps me transform others' ideas of teaching and learning. I wanted to be a resource for others—from the custodian to the principal. I wanted to impact and be impacted.

I found it interesting that those who created and proposed new school reforms were seldom fully engaged as practitioners and seemed unaware of what it truly takes to prepare students to become literate, informed, and engaged world citizens. In contrast, the new standards from AASL are a model of how to invite and embrace the expertise of school librarians who then become collaborators and co-creators. Because I found our role as school librarians honored

and respected by AASL, professional development is important to me and keeps me abreast of new trends, standards, and innovative ways to create, teach, and curate. I have presented at Ohio Educational Library Media Association conferences, and attended conferences of the American Educational Research Association, American Association of School Librarians, and local literacy conferences.

These opportunities inspired me and helped me better understand how to build relationships with young adults in high school and guide them in their learning journeys. To begin, I invited the school community to see the library as a learning hub with mobile furniture designed for gatherings, presentations, problem-solving sessions, meetings, and—yes—even socializing. A grant and an increased budget enabled me to purchase new books, furniture, and technology. No fixed schedules! Instead, students and staff are welcome to visit throughout the day to read, compose, research, write, and get advice. Later, the creation of a simple makerspace enabled students to put puzzles together, make duct tape projects, play games and cards, crochet, and sketch.

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While our book circulation statistics were low, I knew that our students are part of a generation that heavily uses the Internet to read and to learn about and communicate with the world. Sure, they read print books, but they seem to find fulfillment when they are evaluating, analyzing, and creating, which are the top tiers of Bloom's Taxonomy. For that reason, I wanted students to have project-based learning experiences in which they applied information in products they helped to co-create.

How

From Fixed Schedules to Project-Based Learning for High Schoolers

It's clear that the resources of the Information Age have granted learners access to resources from around the world. With the promotion of open-source material, the Internet helps students to explore and collect information to build knowledge and problem solve. Some barriers to communication with national and international communities have been eliminated. Additionally, as citizens of a technology-driven world we—and our students—have the potential to create circles of friends both near and far with whom we can learn, engage, and collaborate on common projects. Students needed to experience collaborative learning.



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I have always been excited about the possibilities of following new pathways to learning, and worldwide access provides an almost unimaginable array of resources available. This is especially true when it comes to academic content, but I'm also interested in resources for developing and cultivating all aspects of the whole student: the intellectual, personal, and social.

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collaboration via technology and in person? The answer was right in front of me.

Our high school sponsored a young women's organization that functioned as a leadership and community service group. After two years at the high school I had the pleasure of advising them. Promoting projects that made them feel good about lending a helping hand to the community gave students some significant accomplishments to place on their resumes. Though these were positive achievements, they should never sum up the overall mission of an organization. This was a great opportunity to showcase my skills as a librarian and empowered learners by modeling how collaboration can take place with teachers and the larger community. Throughout my career I had used collaborative technologies and on-site collaborations to teach students and meet their academic and, sometimes, social and emotional needs. For me, these were more than feel-good moments, they were concrete ways to demonstrate growth, hard work, and discipline. Modeling collaboration through community service and project-based learning would be no different.

Effecting Local and Global Change

One example of this personalized and empowered approach occurred in 2016 with our young women's organization, when we set out to effect change in local and global communities. Though we sponsored several projects, two stand out as most impactful.

The first project entailed a collaboration with a national service-learning organization that sponsored a four-hour conference held in our school on the topic of human trafficking; the participants were all the young women in grades 9 through 12. Student leaders' preparation for the conference included research, organizing the program, finding guest speakers, and planning activities. A survey had been distributed earlier to ascertain what our female students knew or did not know about the topic. While our student leaders were well informed and educated about this topic, the survey revealed that others were not.

All conference attendees were empowered by the various presentations. On the day of the conference, a local police officer who works in the division that focuses on human trafficking crimes supplemented a slide presentation with a Q&A

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session. Red flags and characteristics of unhealthy relationships that can serve as a catalyst for human trafficking were identified. In another presentation attendees learned how human trafficking has been redefined to include not only vulnerable women from afar or those who play fictional roles in movies, but also includes people who grew up within our own communities. Perhaps, the most powerful part of the conference was the final presentation made by a survivor of human trafficking. Afterwards, our student leaders conducted evaluations administered to all attendees. Respondents reported that they had received a wealth of useful, thought-provoking information, and requested additional empowering sessions in the future.

Our second project was a global effort that included collaboration with a locally based empowerment organization that offers resources and services to women who live in the Oromia region of Ethiopia. Our introduction to the organization included meeting the director who shared her passion to generate revenue for women who live in impoverished and rural Ethiopia. The funds are used to promote entrepreneurship by helping

women develop small businesses so the women can take care of their families. One young woman from our organization was so moved by the presentation she interned with the organization and developed a series of marketing materials and literature to educate others about the work that's necessary to bring change in those communities. In essence, she became a global collaborator who understood the power of building communities. As a result of her internship we raised \$1,000, which went towards the purchase of fifty sheep for a small village in Oromia. The village women, in turn, used those sheep to produce milk, cheese, yogurt, and other products that were then sold for profit.

In sum, the community service projects both locally and globally were very important lessons in how to network and manage learning environments beyond the four walls of a school building. More importantly, learners gained soft skills that allowed them to *empathize*—not just sympathize—with community citizens and take action. Our students' learning was transformed through experiences with classmates, teachers, and community members.

My continuing quest to redefine my role and expand people's understanding of what school librarians do has made significant progress. While the school library has traditionally been known as a place for cool book selections, fact finding, and lessons about research and references, I've learned to expand my role from one of merely showing students problems and possible solutions to demonstrating the importance of gaining and using knowledge to empower communities.



AASL member **Chiquita Toure** is school librarian at Eastmoor Academy, a public high school in Columbus, Ohio. She is

the 2018 recipient of the Helen Jenkins Davis Award presented by the Columbus Education Association to recognize a teacher who has worked to promote social justice, diversity, and human and civil rights. She recently authored "Not Your Mother's School Library: Transformational Thinking and Innovation to Impact Learning for the School Community" and "A Serendipitous Moment Sparks a Writing Club" for the Knowledge Quest blog.