

ADVOCATING FOR THE SCHOOL LIBRARY THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS



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When I was a candidate in a school library preparation program (circa 2005–2006), my instructors informed me that I would need to continually advocate for my school librarian position. The rationale was based on the reality that school libraries are regularly underfunded and the first to be cut during lean budget times. I was taught to advocate via two methods: first, to design presentations to deliver to various stakeholder groups and second, to develop an elevator speech to quickly communicate why the school library should be supported. I dutifully complied and put these practices to frequent use as I began my career as a school librarian. However, I quickly discovered that not many people had the time or desire to listen to a full presentation. Though listeners would nod politely or perhaps get a little excited about the possibilities I presented, I often did not reap tangible results from either effort. After transitioning into the role of an educator of school librarians, I began to question what was actually driving the need for these perpetual advocacy efforts and if there was a more effective method to employ.

This questioning led me to the subject of my dissertation research, in which I sought to develop an understanding of why California

K–12 public school administrators distribute instructional leadership responsibilities to either instructional coaches or school librarians and how the two roles compare within the context of the implementation of the California Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts/Literacy (CCSS ELA). In California schools have hired large numbers of instructional coaches to assist site administrators with instructional leadership with CCSS ELA implementation. Though school librarians have been trained and credentialed to do this, administrators generally have not considered them for this task. In my study I found a potential reason to explain this disparity: administrators' previous working relationships with instructional coaches or school librarians either positively or negatively affected how they chose to select and utilize individuals serving in those roles. Unfortunately, if the administrators had any previous experience working with school librarians, that experience tended to be negative (Lewis 2018).

The administrator participants who regularly worked with instructional coaches shared that they had little experience with the instructional role of a school librarian. A few had only encountered the traditional role

as "keeper of the books." District administrator Laurel described her experience:

Most of the librarians that I have worked with—I haven't done that in California at all, but in Arizona, Texas, and Ohio, there was one at the school that I subbed a little bit in in Ohio, they seemed to just do book checkout. They didn't do any type of instructional or any standards or anything like that. It was mostly just managing the books, resources.

Two administrators had no knowledge of the school librarian position. When asked how she learned about the role of the school librarian or if she knew what that was, site administrator Angela responded, "No, I don't know what that is and I'm not even exactly sure what that is." Site administrator Joanna similarly admitted:

What I'm familiar is what we have is our library media tech. When you—when this kind of came our way, your research study came our way, instructional coach Julie and I have been like, "Huh, what is this all about?" Here, our library media assistant and our [International Baccalaureate] instructional

coach, their roles are so vastly different and so we've been very curious to learn more about "What is this?" It seems like such a—that it couldn't overlap, but I think it's something that I just don't know about.

District administrator Alice also shared how a negative model impacted her perception of the role of the school librarian:

When I first came to this district, we were out of compliance and we were assigned a retired teacher librarian, and no offense, she was like 100 years old and she was all about the Dewey Decimal System and keeping track of our collection. That is not what we're after. We can't have that.

Lack of knowledge and understanding of the instructional role of the school librarian has prevented many administrators from working with their school librarians to provide professional learning within daily instructional practice. Administrators generally view school librarians as experts in research and the management of instructional materials whom they can call on to provide occasional instructional support to teachers. This support may include access to instructional materials and technology resources, assistance with the implementation of new curriculum and technology initiatives, and the teaching or co-teaching of research lessons. This provision of support can be limited by a lack of administrative vision, leadership, support, and ongoing training for the school librarian role (Lewis 2018).

Reflecting upon these results, I made a clear connection to the relationship I had with the principal that hired me for my first school librarian position. Thankfully, he held a positive perception of the instructional role of the school librarian.

This perception was formed through his experience with a school librarian with whom he worked in his first teaching job. Having made this connection, I called Mr. Alvarado to ask for more details about his experiences. Mr. Alvarado was happy to talk and shared with me that he began his career as a high school science teacher. As a classroom teacher, he knew he had some responsibility to teach students how to conduct research and cite sources, but he struggled with how to best accomplish that despite his efforts to try to figure it out on his own.

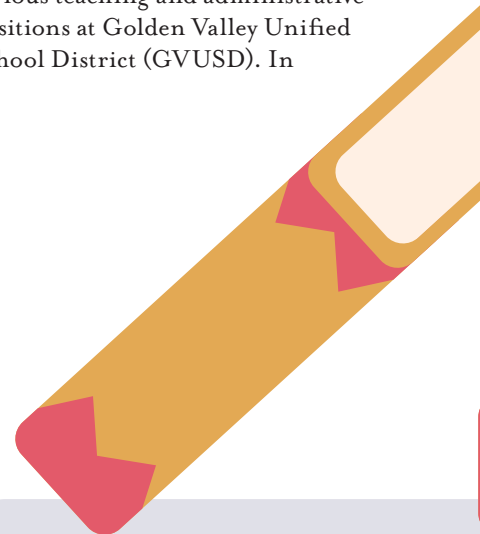
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Carol López Doerksen was the school librarian at the high school where Mr. Alvarado began his teaching career. I happened to know Mrs. López Doerksen, so I called her to inquire about her perspective of this shared experience. She responded that in those days there was a need for interdepartmental collaboration with research, so she organized those efforts with the English, science, and social studies teachers. One of those efforts was a cross-curricular project between freshman science and English in which the students

researched science-related content within their science courses and completed the writing portion of the project with their English courses. It was this project in which Mr. Alvarado learned about the instructional leadership potential of the school librarian.

Mr. Alvarado said he was greatly impressed with Mrs. López Doerksen's efforts to expertly guide students through the research process. She taught them how to navigate the physical library and the Internet, find relevant resources, and organize their information. He described watching the students' eyes light up when they learned how to effectively use the information that was available at their fingertips. He shared that it never would have happened with just him trying to teach this. Mr. Alvarado also said he greatly appreciated the cross-curricular nature of working on a joint project between science and English. He said, "It just made sense," and that the rapport that Mrs. López Doerksen had with him, the other teachers, and the students made it a positive learning experience for everyone.

Mr. Alvarado eventually left that school and moved on to serve in various teaching and administrative positions at Golden Valley Unified School District (GVUSD). In



his first year as principal at GVUSD's Liberty High School (LHS), Mr. Alvarado and the superintendent attended a Model Schools Conference facilitated by the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE). They were so impressed by what they learned that they immediately devised a plan to integrate ICLE's "The Rigor/Relevance Framework" (2019) into the LHS curricular program. They decided they wanted to achieve this through the design and implementation of cross-curricular research projects that incorporated a high level of rigor and relevance. They knew that none of this could be accomplished without strong, positive relationships between the administrators, teachers, and students. So, they adopted the school-wide theme of "Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships" and rolled it out with a plan to transform the LHS curricular program in 2006. Little did I know that I would play a pivotal role in this plan.

I was hired as LHS's first full-time school librarian in April 2006, just as the administrators began to

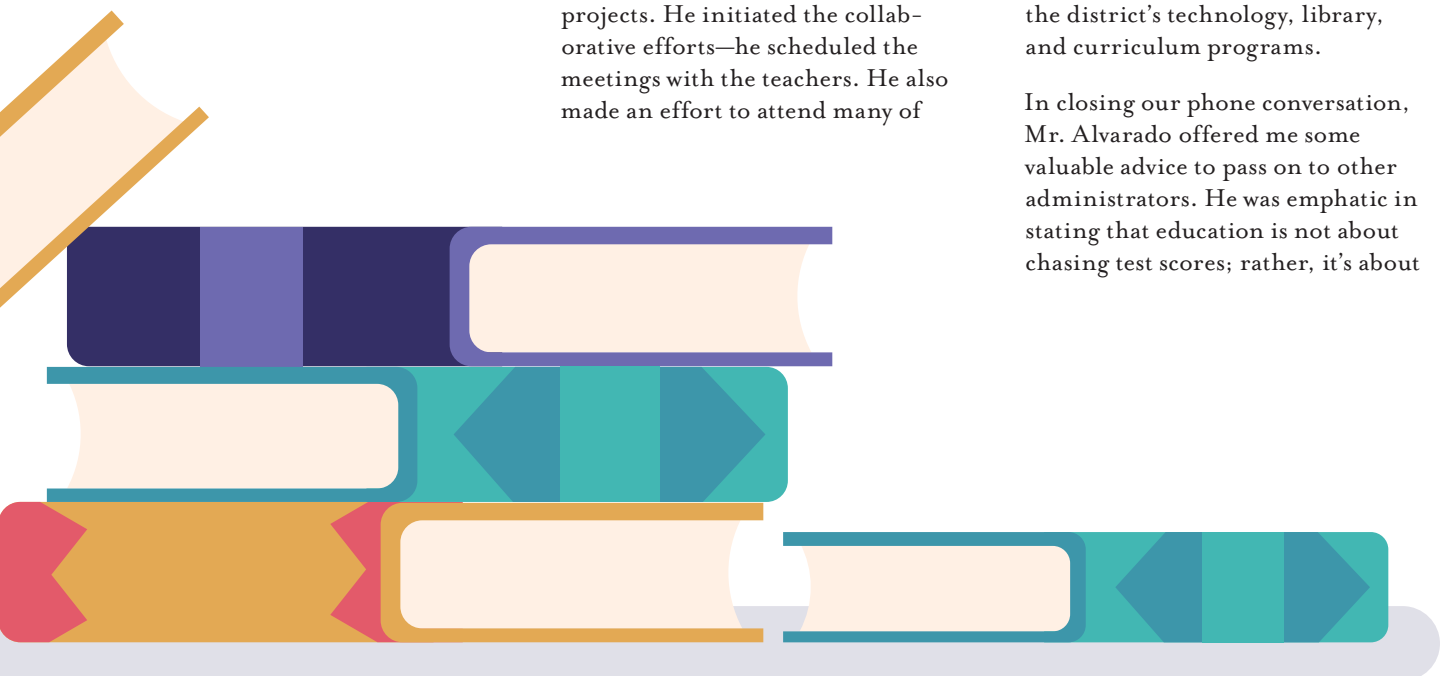
implement their "Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships" plan. In one of his first directives to me, Mr. Alvarado stated, "I want you to collaboratively design and deliver cross-curricular research units for each grade level—all teachers and students will participate. I will facilitate the meetings with teachers to get this started, you just let me know what you need." Given that I had just begun the job mid-semester, was only half-way through my school librarian certification program, and had never heard of the Rigor/Relevance Framework, I found this to be more than a bit daunting. However, I accepted the challenge and spent the next eight years working with Mr. Alvarado and the classroom teachers to develop and implement large-scale, cross-curricular research projects with English, science, social studies, and math courses. There were a lot of bumps in the road to implementation, but we eventually experienced a measure of success with student achievement and positive relationships between all involved in these projects.

Mr. Alvarado's support was integral to the success of these projects. He initiated the collaborative efforts—he scheduled the meetings with the teachers. He also made an effort to attend many of

these meetings, during which he reiterated to all in attendance that he had full confidence in my skills and expected them to work with me in the planning, delivery, and assessment of the projects. If I ran into a problem Mr. Alvarado quickly addressed it so that we could move forward. His door was always open to me, and we met frequently to discuss progress. In addition, when I needed additional resources such as books, research databases, and technology applications, he found a way to purchase them as soon as possible. He supported all my requests to seek out professional development for my role and promoted our successes by co-presenting at local educational conferences with me.

Mr. Alvarado eventually moved into the district office, first as assistant superintendent and then superintendent. Throughout those moves, he and I continued to collaborate together on how to best meet the needs of the district's students through each school's libraries. My role eventually evolved into a full-time administrative position in which I served as part of his leadership team, overseeing the district's technology, library, and curriculum programs.

In closing our phone conversation, Mr. Alvarado offered me some valuable advice to pass on to other administrators. He was emphatic in stating that education is not about chasing test scores; rather, it's about



building relationships. Without a relationship, an administrator can't develop teachers or build upon their expertise and experience. He believes that success with student achievement begins with leadership; a leader must be able to effectively guide teachers and students to reach their goals. Given his positive instructional experiences with school librarians, he believes that administrators need to include school librarians as members of their school's leadership team so that they can enable teachers to "do what they need to do with their students."

Mr. Alvarado's advice closely mirrors what I found in my study—that administrators truly want to provide support to their teachers but are limited in their ability to accomplish this due to the competing job responsibilities. They greatly appreciate having another individual on site that can serve as an instructional expert, especially one that has time to provide the support teachers need to help students succeed. These administrators viewed their relationships with their instructional coaches or school librarians as the key to enabling them to realize their instructional visions for their schools.

Reflecting upon this, I see now how relationships can serve as a powerful form of advocacy. Mr. Alvarado's relationship with Mrs. López Doerksen directly affected how he chose to design his future instructional plans and partnership with me as the school librarian in his next position at LHS. Mr. Alvarado is now superintendent of Central Unified School District in Fresno, CA, and his relationship with all of the previous school librarians with whom he worked are now guiding his decisions for intentionally integrating school librarians into the Central USD instructional program.

Practical Advice for Developing Positive Relationships with Administrators and Teachers

Through my experience and research, I've gleaned the following principles that may help guide school librarians in developing positive relationships with administrators and teachers:

1. Focus on fulfilling the school and/or district's mission and vision and serving students. If you don't yet know your school's mission and vision statements, learn and commit them to memory now. Continually connect to your

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school's mission by demonstrating how you are fulfilling that mission through your daily tasks. Harness the power of social media by highlighting positive relationships with teachers, administrators, and students. Show how you are impacting the instructional program through your collaborative instructional projects and efforts to promote literacy through free voluntary reading.

2. Meet regularly with your site administrator to discuss goals and progress. Yes, the administrator is often busy and his or her schedule may not have room for a formal meeting. You

might have to get creative about how you will meet with him or her. Try scheduling an informal lunch meeting, perhaps even provide the meal. Invite him or her to stop by the library at any time to have a cup of coffee and quick chat. Try the "walk and talk"—walk alongside the administrator as he or she is walking to a meeting or classroom observation. Ask to sit in on classroom visits and talk about them on the walk back to the office after the observation concludes.

3. Build credibility with teachers. Teachers must first value what you have to offer before they will let you into their classrooms or bring their students to you. Therefore, engage in the same work as the teachers; strive to learn what they are teaching and become familiar with the content standards for each subject area. Seek out resources to support lessons based on these standards and look for opportunities to share them. Attend faculty meetings, professional development sessions, and professional learning communities even if you are not officially invited. Should you show up without an invitation, it's unlikely you'll be turned away if you greet attendees with a statement such as, "I'm just here to listen so I can learn how to best support you and your students."
4. Model lifelong learning and improvement. The school library and instructional technology fields are evolving at a rapid pace, so make continual efforts to stay current. Your administrators and teachers need to see that they can rely on you to keep them informed and up to date to meet the needs of their students. Determine the best method for regularly sharing the information and resources you

gain through collaboration with your colleagues and attendance at professional learning events.

5. Listen to the concerns of the teachers and exercise patience with them. Some teachers will be resistant to your support at first. Exercise patience with these teachers, because once they see how you positively interact with other teachers and their students, they will be more open to your support. Observe what teachers are teaching and then offer your assistance to support them in a specific area. When classes would schedule time in my library's computer lab, I would implement what I liked to call the "sneak attack lesson." I would spend some time observing the lesson or task the students were asked to complete and then ask to interrupt for a few minutes to deliver a mini-lesson that either enhanced or extended their learning. I don't believe one teacher declined that request, and most often he or she expressed gratitude for the support and was excited to have learned something new!
6. Protect confidentiality. Administrative assistants, custodians, and librarians are the school personnel that interact with all members of a school's community on a regular basis. They are often privy to confidential information of both students and staff, whether that comes through personal interaction or the viewing of confidential records. If you provide a comfortable and welcoming environment in your library, the teachers will enjoy visiting and inevitably come to you with issues and concerns. It is important to provide a listening ear so you can discern the needs of your students and staff, but equally important to protect

confidentiality of sensitive information they may share (within reason, of course—as a mandated reporter, you are compelled to share confidential information in certain situations).

7. Demonstrate trustworthiness by following through on your offers and others' requests for support. If you're not able to fulfill a request right away, keep them updated as to when you will be able to do so.
8. Be personable, approachable, visible, and available. Provide a warm and welcoming library environment, and greet everyone with a friendly countenance. Keep in mind that for some the default perception of a school librarian is an unapproachable individual that sits behind a desk with the singular task of checking books in and out. To change that perception, you must remove the barrier of the circulation desk. It's your responsibility to take the first step, which is away from the circulation desk. Get up and talk with the teachers and administrators that visit your library. Circulate the library and talk with students. Be proactive and assertive; don't be afraid to reach out or wait for individuals to come to you. Find out what they need and how you can help them. Don't let the absence of a library assistant prevent you from doing this! There are many creative ways to solve this problem, such as setting up and training students to use self-checkout; training parent volunteers or student aides to provide basic customer service and fulfill basic operational tasks; or using a mobile device to receive and respond to requests via a messaging application.

Overall, strive to set a positive example as an instructional leader of multiple literacies to your admin-

istrators, teachers, and students. Though presentations and elevator speeches can be useful in certain contexts, the relationships you develop with these individuals just might be your most powerful advocacy tool.



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focuses on identifying and mitigating barriers to the full implementation of the instructional leadership and information specialist roles of the media specialist. Dr. Lewis currently serves on the AASL Practice Committee and as an AASL-CAEP Program Reviewer. Her dissertation, titled "A Collective Case Study to Examine Administrators' Instructional Leadership Perspective of the Role of Instructional Coaches and Teacher Librarians in California Public Schools," was featured in American Libraries "Notable Dissertations 2019."

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