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Meeting the Challenge: Preparing Librarians for Urban Schools

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Introduction

“Books...in beautiful school libraries developed with the artfulness of skilled librarians, remain the clearest window to a world of noncommercial satisfactions and enticements that most children in poor neighborhoods will ever know” (Kozol, 2000, p.46).

Teaching in urban school settings is an experience filled with challenges and rewards. For library media specialists serving in urban schools, additional roles of information specialist and instructional partner (AASL/AECT, 1998) increase those challenges.

This article begins by describing some of the factors that differentiate work in urban schools and how those factors relate to library resources and services. It also tells the story of an academic program, Preparing Librarians for Urban Schools (PLUS), specially designed to prepare librarians for service in the elementary schools of New York City as told through the voices of the international team of faculty, advisors, and students who made it happen!

Issues in Urban Schools

Lois Weiner, a former New York City teacher, describes a number of combined factors unique to urban schools. These include size (resulting in poorly-functioning bureaucracies and a maze of regulations), inadequate funding, lack of resources, greater cultural and ethnic diversity, and a higher proportion of new immigrants than is typically found in suburban and rural schools (1999).

Of all of these factors, Weiner considers *size* to be the defining characteristic because the larger the school, the more intrusive the bureaucracy, the greater the isolation of educators from each other and the communities they serve, and the less access there is to decision makers and participation in the decision making process. For example, the

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New York City School System, consisting of 1200 schools slightly more than half of which are elementary schools, is organized into 10 regions. Each region has a Regional Superintendent who supervises 10-12 Local Instructional Superintendents who, in turn, supervise principals of the schools within their local districts (<http://www.nycenet.edu/OurSchools/default.htm>). This type of bureaucratic structure with its many layers might explain why urban schools are often described as "rigid" and "impersonal" (Weiner, 1999).

New York City's School Libraries

While New York State now mandates certified library media specialists in its secondary schools, it does not do so for libraries on the elementary level. As a result, some school districts, undergoing economic hardships look to their elementary school libraries as a place where they can either cut positions or use non-certified personnel.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the New York City schools where fewer than 5% of elementary school libraries are staffed by certified professionals (they are often staffed by cluster teachers or aides) and some elementary schools have no library at all. According to Jonathan Kozol (2000), New York City began dismantling its school libraries more than 30 years ago. "Libraries in many elementary schools were soon reduced to little more than poorly stocked collections of torn, tired-looking, or outdated books" (Kozol, 2000, p. 1). Librarians were "retired" and not replaced until fewer than 30 certified school library media specialists remained, in a city in which nearly 60% of the students read below grade level (Lau, 2000).

While this may be understandable from a financial point-of-view, it is educationally disastrous, seriously affecting those children, teachers, and parents who need the resources and services of a school library the most. Compounding this problem is the pervasive safety fear of many working parents in New York City to let their young children walk to the nearest public library. Even school reform initiatives like Library Power, intended "to enhance student learning by improving library services" (Pharr, p. 1), were largely ineffective without libraries and librarians. Urban school districts across the country are just beginning to recognize the important role of libraries and library media specialists in addressing their students' deepening reading deficits and lack of essential technology skills required of 21st century learners and workers. It is this recognition that led to an innovative program to prepare librarians for service in the elementary schools of New York City.

Preparing Librarians for Urban Schools (PLUS) Program

Picture it. You're an elementary school educator: a classroom teacher, a staff developer, a technology coordinator, a reading teacher. Suddenly you find yourself participating in an adventure that requires you to not only change careers, but to do so under extraordinary circumstances. You are told that you will not only be entering a whole new profession (after as many as 30 years in the classroom), but over the next two years you will also become a graduate student in a master's degree program in a city 250 miles away, use a variety of technologies (many of which you had never even heard of before) to communicate and learn, take two, sometimes three, courses at a time while working full-time in a school (possibly one in which you had never worked before), all of this as your brand new, fully-equipped library is being built around you.

Now, imagine not one person participating in this heroic adventure, but 31! Science fiction? Hardly! This is the story of the courageous, motivated men and women who participated in Syracuse University's Preparing Librarians for Urban Schools program and the multi-institutional group of faculty who collaborated to customize and teach a curriculum that addressed the needs of this special group of learners.

While classrooms are only as good as the teachers that manage them, it can also be said that libraries are only as good as the library professionals that manage them. To make sure that these beautiful new libraries had the best prepared librarians, the New York City Department of Education and Syracuse University joined forces to provide a professional library and information science program with school media certification to a group of current New York City educators. This program became known as PLUS (Preparing Librarians for Urban Schools).

The PLUS program, a groundbreaking project partnering Syracuse University's School of Information Studies, the New York City Department of Education and the Robin Hood Foundation, was designed as a distance learning program. This program combines brief, intensive, campus-based summer courses with a combination of Web-based courses with 2-day face-to-face learning residencies (both in Syracuse and New York City), courses consisting of three face-to-face weekends (each consisting of two full-day sessions in New York City), and totally online courses. What made this program unique was the assembling of an international group of leading school library media faculty to teach several of the program's courses.



Preparation

An intensive, year-long professional development program called "Reinventing the Elementary School Library" was intended to provide an introduction to the many different aspects of the school library media field, including a series of workshops taught by Dr. Carol Kuhlthau of Rutgers. Carol describes the experience as a very exciting time for all involved as they saw the librarians turn from a certain degree of cynicism about actually being able to improve their schools, to full endorsement and commitment to the prospect of bringing renewed engagement in learning to their students. She found it inspiring to work with these talented professionals who were dedicated to their students, had a clear understanding of the urban environment and a vision for improving their schools through the school library.

The Adventure Begins

In August 2002, 31 PLUS students met for the first time at a high school on the upper west side of Manhattan to have breakfast and subsequently board a chartered bus that would take them on the five-hour journey to the Syracuse University campus.



These 31 newly-minted graduate students were well-educated and experienced. Twenty-four of them had master's degrees in a variety of areas (e.g. reading, instructional technology, early childhood), including four who already had a master's of library science but who chose to study for a second degree (i.e., School Library Media) in the same area. They averaged 13.7 years of teaching experience, 13.3 years with the New York City schools. They represented schools in all five boroughs of New York City. Thirty of the 31 students were female.

As the journey neared its end and the bus winded its way up "the hill" to the main campus, the students caught their first glimpse of the majestic buildings surrounded by manicured lawns and flower gardens, giving out a collective gasp. Most of them had never been on a "real" college campus, as many of them had attended city colleges. They also expressed great anticipation at the prospect of spending the next ten days living in a college dormitory; many had never seen the inside of one before. They were both excited and nervous as they prepared to embark upon this new and challenging experience.

During their ten days in Syracuse, the students took two courses and received training on distance learning technologies they would be using for coursework and communication with faculty, staff, and each other for most of their program once they returned home. They were also introduced to Syracuse's faculty and staff, toured the campus and attended several social functions in their honor, including a dinner in their honor at the Chancellor's residence.

The Teaching Faculty

The nobility of this project captured the imagination of not only the Syracuse faculty but some of our most outstanding colleagues in other graduate school library media programs. Syracuse faculty eagerly volunteered to teach the library and information science core courses. Leading school library media faculty from programs in the U.S. and Canada enthusiastically accepted invitations to lend their expertise to the program as advisors and/or instructors of the school library media core courses. Each of the authors of this article played a key role in the program.

The Curriculum

All of the courses in their 37-credit program were tailored to ensure that content was relevant to New York City educational policies, curriculum, and standards. Because of the widespread literacy skills deficiencies of the children in the schools in which our PLUS students work, many courses provided an emphasis on literacy development in the context of information literacy and technology fluency. For example, courses in library systems and processes and youth services used their new book collections and electronic resources as a starting off point for collection development and program planning activities and assignments.

In some of their course assignments, PLUS students had the opportunity to participate in some current national projects, including the *International Children's Digital Library* and *S.O.S. for Information Literacy* projects. Pam Berger served as their local academic advisor, monitoring students' progress, providing learning support and encouragement, and helping to arrange fieldwork and practicum experiences.

Social Interaction

While it was not surprising at the speed in which the students bonded during that first weekend in Syracuse, the depth and frequency of social interactions throughout the two-year period was exceptional. Students seemed to crave every opportunity (both real and virtual) to be together, to interact, and to share ideas. This was evidenced by the development of numerous PLUS listservs, WebCT sites, and social events totally devoted to interaction among these students.

This interpersonal aspect that the students themselves brought to the program proved to be an extremely important factor that contributed to their overall learning. PLUS students felt comfortable asking each other questions, sharing special readings they had discovered, and discussing approaches to assignments and activities with each other. Rather than competing, the group became a cooperative learning team in its truest sense.

Teaching and Advising



The students enjoyed taking courses from renowned faculty from throughout North America. They received pre-program training in reference services. Every course was tailored to the needs of librarians serving in high needs, urban schools. Below are a couple of examples of these courses.

Their course in technology, taught by Dr. Ruth Small of Syracuse University, was especially exciting because (1) they were integrated with the other distance students attending Syracuse University so they interacted with students from all over the world and (2) their technology projects resulted in opportunities for collaboration across schools and across

boroughs. For example, two PLUS students (one from Staten Island and the other from the Bronx) worked together and with classroom teachers to create an electronic pen pal program between fifth graders in their schools. This project was intended to facilitate the writing process and provide a motivating way for students to practice their writing skills. For another example, two PLUS students worked with third grade teachers in schools in Queens and Brooklyn to have students find Web sites from which they could learn about each other's borough. The students shared information on things like the Brooklyn Bridge and the "Latchkey" program sponsored by a Far Rockaway library. For this project, the PLUS students took pictures of the children, showed them how to create short videos, and worked with them to create a PowerPoint presentation on what they had learned.

Students quickly learned the power of collaboration. One PLUS student referred to this course in this way, "Here I learned that I can create curriculum and present it electronically. This is something the teachers in schools cannot do and its definitely going to impact learning, and change the perception of a library as a static place." Another stated, "Our school's library in the past had been under-utilized. The former librarian never collaborated on projects and basically the library was always closed because she was the testing coordinator. Syracuse has taught me the importance of collaboration. Through collaboration, we will be able to meet the needs of the students. The library is not a one man show...everyone in the school is a stake holder."

Professor Jacqueline Mancall, Drexel University, taught the management course which



provided a framework for managing that is both broad in terms of working with people in organizations, and applied in terms of useful tools for practice. This course applies theories and techniques of management to urban school library media centers, concentrating on political processes, leadership, communication, human resources, decision-making, planning, change, and collaboration. Students were expected to be able to understand how the basic concepts, theory and practice of management apply to school library media centers, understand the basic human elements within organizations, develop a personal philosophy of management, and acquire selected mechanical skills (e.g., budgeting, planning) related to management.

The challenge for Dr. Mancall was to make the course specific to the concerns and interests of school library media specialists working in urban schools, and to put it together similar to an executive weekend course. The culminating assignment was a synthesis paper on leadership as it was touched on in the research literature of the course and as it applied to their current or anticipated work setting. The emphasis of this course was on students' clarifying and strengthening their role as leaders in a school setting and enabling them to understand change factors in place and how to adapt to them. Jackie described the students as "among the most dedicated students I've ever had the pleasure to have in a class setting."

The PLUS students were equally enthusiastic about the skills and knowledge they gained from the course. One student commented, "The one thing that I learned that stands out is flexibility. The librarian must be flexible with the staff, the needs of the students, and the community." In regard to effecting change in her school, one student stated, "A lot of the change will have to come from me being a role model, using what I learned at SU."

Well-known consultant, trainer and author Ms. Pam Berger served as the PLUS student's academic advisor and mentor. The mentoring role is especially important because these students work in a heavily bureaucratic urban school district where educators often do not feel empowered or supported and in many cases do not feel respected. Having someone to talk to, to problem solve, and sometimes just to vent is important. It can make the difference between staying in the program and dropping out.

Pam described the issues and problems that the PLUS students face as different from other librarians in rural and suburban schools receiving their master's degrees because of the context of their work environment by asserting:

Librarians in large urban school districts face additional challenges, such as the need to develop strategies to connect to students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. These librarians always need to address the students' ethnic, social, language and safety needs, as well as their academic growth whether it is gaining student's cooperation while in the library, choosing books or developing collaborative curriculum units. Strong connections needed to be made between the graduate course content and their teaching/library practice within the context of an urban setting.

The Outcomes

The mission of the PLUS program was for students to be able to use what they have learned at Syracuse to change the culture in their schools and increase the perceived value of school libraries in New York City. There is already some evidence that this is happening, as reported informally in email messages and in-person conversations. Here are some of their statements:

All of the knowledge I acquired in the courses with Syracuse has made me a stronger leader within myself. I learned the importance of school libraries within an urban environment. I slowly have tried to during this year to give my school staff the understanding of the importance a library and what it can contribute to the school curriculum. Most of the teachers have participated in some form in integrating the library within their class projects and students achievements. It has been a difficult task because changing an entire school culture takes years to develop. Teaching information literacy and technology skills has resulted in huge developmental learning for my students and in their slowly becoming more independent in finding information.

Staff development and projects in the library for students, teachers and parents has increased the value of the library. Administration and region coaches have begun to participate in events, projects and grade meetings in the library have resulted in a better understanding of the value of the school library. But, what I strongly feel has given my school library a stronger curriculum is sharing my knowledge from my courses at Syracuse with all of my patrons in whole, small and individual group activities. It's like selling a product in a silent way and slowly seeing the buyers invest. My standing strong with the great knowledge I have gained has allowed my library to thrive through good and hard times.

Our school's library in the past had been under-utilized. The former librarian never collaborated on projects and basically the library was always closed because she was the testing coordinator...The library can be a fun, educational and crucial part of the school. Because of my Syracuse background, I now have the tools to accomplish this.

I believe the biggest impact my SU coursework will have on my school's culture and the perceived value of the library will center around collaboration and effective lesson and unit planning.

Finally, PLUS students commented on how they planned to sustain their roles as school library media specialists in light of the uncertain economic times facing New York City schools. They cited three keys to long-term success: PR to administrators, information literacy instruction for students and grant writing. Here are some of their comments:

I plan to sustain my role by selling myself and the program all the time. I plan to collaborate with teachers on projects and make sure administration knows about it. I will report circulation statistics, use of library and compare it to test scores. I plan on forming relationships with the district/region (this is crucial) and communicate regularly about all projects, reports, etc. I plan on attending conferences and present when I can...While presenting, I always include my principal and students in the conference via video conferencing to share their experiences. It is always important to include administration. I will be the advocate for reading, constantly recommending books to staff and students. I will also offer workshops to staff, parents and all community members.

I think I will have to work to establish the relationship between student work in the library and improvement in student achievement. I am convinced that 'information literacy' is the key to our success. Students learn the basic literacy skills in the classroom, but the ability to seek out information, then go on to identify, evaluate and use the information is not being addressed. In learning to master information literacy skills, kids will be working with materials that motivate them and doing work that is meaningful. ...We must work to meet the learning needs of the children we are working with, but I think we must always keep in mind where we want these students to be in terms of information literacy, and teach these skills. If library media specialists can teach the students to be information literate the library will be seen as vital in our schools.

Pam Berger summed up the PLUS experience in this way:

Beginning with the 10-day summer residency at Syracuse University, the group bonded. During the school year they continued to support each other, meeting afternoons at each other's schools to collaborate on projects, communicating online most evenings in WebCT and IM (instant messaging), sending supportive email to one another (one Brooklyn student sends a weekly email update on the number of days left to graduation accompanied with a motivational message!), meeting occasionally for dinner and coming together for an annual summer barbeque with spouses and other family members. They have made close personal and professional friends that they'll keep long after they process down the aisle at Syracuse University's graduation in May. Working with these librarians has been one of the most rewarding professional activities I have experienced. I have come to know, respect and absolutely love working with this group of librarians!

What's Next?

Beginning in summer 2006, two new cohorts of 65 NYC-PLUS students, funded by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the New York City Department of Education, the Robin Hood Foundation, and Syracuse University, began their adventures in the PLUS program at Syracuse. Ms. Pam Berger again served as advisor and several well-known faculty from other institutions were brought to the program to teach. For example, Dr. Ross Todd, Rutgers, taught the technology course and Ms. Barbara Stripling, Director of Library Services for New York City's Department of Education, taught the literacy course. As a result, this group of students are having many new experiences. To be continued...

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