

Learning About the Endangered Librarian

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Abstract

This article describes interviews with 40 elementary school librarians conducted by pre-service and in-service teachers. The purpose of the interviews was for education students to understand the responsibilities of the librarian, how the librarian might support them as teachers, and the future of the position in today's schools. Results suggest that librarians primarily support classroom instruction and student learning, manage library facilities while offering technology instruction, and promote students' reading interests and enjoyment. The interviews revealed feelings of isolation and under-appreciation, increased responsibilities, declining budgets, and the uncertain future of their positions. Ideas are offered for librarians who want to avoid becoming "endangered."

What do spotted owls and librarians have in common? Both are endangered species. Spotted owls face extinction because of lumbering that has removed their nesting places in the forests of the Pacific Northwest. Librarians face extinction in schools and public libraries across the country for a number of reasons. First, shrinking budgets and the rush to save tax dollars by cutting library personnel is causing their demise (Casey & Savastinuk, 2006; Goldberg, 2009; Vasilakis, 2006). Second, the long accepted role of librarians as support personnel who just manage the physical aspects of library facilities puts them at-risk (Hardy, 2010; Morrill, 1995). Third, the mistaken notion that today's students are technologically savvy and thus know how to understand the accuracy, reliability, and usefulness of virtual information suggests to some that highly qualified librarians are unnecessary (Hardy, 2010; Loertscher, 2004).

However, Krashen (2010) feels quite differently. He says "the most important factors in developing literacy are quality school and classroom libraries and the presence of professional librarians in all schools" (p. 20). Libraries and librarians are especially crucial for high-poverty areas when the school library is often the only way these students can access books. There is also "a general misunderstanding about what today's librarians do, or even what they should be called" (Hardy, 2010; p. 24). While managing facilities is part of what librarians do, they also function in roles that are critical today to the learning of students, teachers, and parents. Librarians still ensure that students and staff are effective users of ideas and information from books and paper resources (Hysten, 2004; Kearney, 2000). Today's librarians though, also provide access to materials in virtual formats. Librarians stimulate interest in reading and viewing both physical and virtual media, offer instruction to foster student competence in the effective use of printed and virtual media, and work with teachers to design instruction that meets the needs of all students.

There is much research to support the relationship between libraries, librarians and student achievement. Hardy (2010) reports that "Dozens of studies from 19 states and one

Canadian province point to the link between high-quality school library programs and student achievement” (p. 24). Foote (2010) shares several studies showing that “School libraries are a stronger indicator of student success than class size, experience of teacher, number of computers or location of school” and says, “There is strong evidence that schools with well-stocked, well-staffed libraries have higher achievement test scores” (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/carolyn-foote/to-raise-student-achievem_b_773056.html). Thus, cutting library staff because of shrinking budgets is definitely a bad idea.

Today, librarians (those not on an endangered or extinct list) are often known as information specialists, media specialists, or library media specialists (Hardy, 2010; Lehman, 2007; Minkel, 1999). This person teaches students and teachers to access the explosion of information from the Internet, assess that information for its currency, accuracy, and authenticity, and integrate this information into the curriculum. Indeed, accessing and assessing this information requires skills that differ from those needed to take information from books, magazines, and other traditional sources. Using virtual information requires the ability to remain focused as one sifts through hypertext that includes images, audio, video, and print containing links to other related and unrelated information such as advertisements and pop-ups. In the quickly expanding e-world of on-line communication and information availability, this role is a critical one for librarians to play.

Interviewing Librarians

As a teacher educator and long-time library user, it alarms me that librarians are endangered or may become extinct. I teach graduate literacy courses to pre-service and in-service teachers, and I wonder if they understand the librarian’s role and the potential precariousness of the position today. It occurred to me that most of my students (32 pre-service and 8 in-service) had not been in an elementary school library since they attended elementary school themselves; for some this was a decade or more ago. I wanted these students to understand the librarian’s role, how this person might support them as teachers, and the future of the position.

I asked 40 students taking my children’s literature course to visit an elementary school library in one of several suburban and urban school districts in southern New York State. I required the students to spend time in a library, interview a librarian about his/her work, and write a paper to document the interview and reflect on what they learned. Students interviewed 39 librarians who had between four and 25 years experience and one library aide with one year’s experience. Students asked these questions: What are the responsibilities of your position? What is most satisfying about your job? What is most frustrating about your job? They were not limited to these questions, however, and could pursue other topics as well.

What Librarians Typically Do

Reading the students’ papers, I looked for themes in response to each topic the librarians talked about. Three themes emerged related to librarians’ responsibilities which I shared with the class. Students found that librarians support classroom instruction and student learning, manage facilities while offering technology instruction, and promote students’ reading interests and enjoyment. The following sections discuss each theme and include related comments of librarians and student interviewers:

Support classroom instruction and student learning. The notion of supporting teachers, classroom instruction, and student learning was prevalent in every interview. One librarian said, “My primary role is to work cooperatively with teachers.” Another librarian said, “I help teachers find resources and even assist in planning units. I see to it that the books and library

resources support the state curriculum and standards. Overall, I try to give kids and teachers the tools for lifelong learning.” A third librarian talked about gathering appropriate materials for teachers on particular topics and said, “I do a range of things. I provide teachers with resources to help them differentiate instruction for individual students, and recently I made a bulletin board for the 4th and 5th grade wing on the scientific method. I included several book jackets and interactive websites where teachers and students could go to learn more.”

One student interviewer wrote, “I was happy to learn that this librarian works closely with teachers to incorporate what students are doing in the classroom into the weekly library lessons she teaches in the library.” Another student wrote, “Mrs. X said her official job description is to support classroom instruction. She had stacks of books ready to deliver to four different classrooms today that were on topics children were studying in science and social studies.” This student also wrote, “I find it amazing that there is so much this librarian does with teachers related to what is going on in the classroom. She goes out of her way to read stories and do projects in the library that relate to the science and social studies curriculum.”

Manage facilities and offer technology instruction. Every librarian spoke about developing and maintaining library holdings and equipment and “weeding” the library collection by getting rid of out-of-date materials. Many librarians said they work within tight budgets to order books, magazines, computers, software programs, and other materials. Most librarians also said they manage the technology and offer technology instruction to students and teachers. One librarian reported “Over 60% of my work is dedicated to technology. I manage two on-line catalogs, 27 desk top computers, 20 laptops, several digital cameras, camcorders, Elmo’s, smart boards, and various other computer programs.” The student interviewer observed, “She teaches Internet skills and seems to have one foot firmly planted in the world of books and the other foot securely in the land of information technology.” Some interviews suggested that managing the library’s technology was a challenge, as this student’s comment suggests. “This librarian said keeping track of all the equipment and technology in the library and making sure teachers have what they need when they need it is the most trying part of her job.”

There were a range of responses related to teaching about the virtual world. Several librarians said they work closely with teachers to incorporate what students are doing in their classrooms into the weekly library skills and virtual research sessions they teach in the library. One student wrote, “Mrs. X said she introduces kindergartners to computers including using the right vocabulary like ‘cursor’ instead of ‘arrow.’ She introduces 3rd graders to PowerPoint, teaches them how to use it, how to perform ‘safe searches,’ and use the online library catalogue. By 5th grade, she introduces Excel. I didn’t realize all this would be part of her job.” A second librarian said, “I consider myself a ‘Tech-Mentor.’ I teach classes to students about research and using Internet databases. I give classes to teachers after school in SMARTBoard software, website design, and any other technology that will allow them to enhance their teaching.” This librarian also communicates regularly with teachers to impact student learning. “I keep an updated listserv that allows a forum for questions, discussion, and delivering new information to teachers about upcoming events in technology that teachers and students can participate in.” A third librarian said she has been appointed the “technology coach” in her building. “I provide training for teachers on how to best use SMARTBoards, Senteos, Elmos, district provided software, and web resources. I teach lessons to students on safe internet navigation and I help inform decisions on software purchases. I attend training for selected programs so I can train paraprofessionals and teachers.” A fourth librarian maintains the library page on the school website. “This is where parents go to see what is going on in the school and what future events

there may be in the library. I also include many links to sites where kids can get help with homework and go to educationally fun sites.”

But, some librarians seemed to do little teaching about the virtual world. For example, one student interviewer said, “This librarian said she had little time to teach about online information with everything else she is expected to do. She said the teachers weren’t really interested in having her do it either.” Another student said, about a different librarian, “She felt her job was primarily to get kids excited about coming to the library and reading. There were no computers in the library. She said her focus was on getting students actively and meaningfully engaged in reading by launching literacy based school-wide program. “This librarian is a strong proponent of books. She believes technology like e-books will potentially be detrimental to the nature of the library.”

Promote students’ reading interests and enjoyment. Results of most interviews suggested that librarians see themselves first as reading advocates. The librarians said they help students find authors, books, and other resources on topics not necessarily related to school but of interest to particular students. Librarians viewed this as a big part of the role they play. One librarian said, “My favorite part of this job is working one-on-one with students when they come to the library.” Only one librarian mentioned a change in students over the past decade of her work. “Today, I see a lack of enthusiasm and willingness of many students to read. So, my main goal as a librarian is to try to instill a love of reading in my students while helping them improve their reading abilities.” Two students cited librarians’ comments that support this role, e.g., “Searching out books for kids is like treasure hunting for me. I absolutely love doing it. When I see the light in their eyes upon finding the right book, it makes my job worthwhile!” and, “I want to help students read and see books as a source of enjoyment and information.”

A few students commented on this role in their papers, saying things like, “I was pleased to see how much this librarian cares about individual students and tries to share her passion for books and reading with them, and, “When I was in elementary school, I remember our school librarian was just like this woman. My librarian was warm and caring and wanted to help each one of us find a book or an author we would love. This librarian reminded me so much of her.”

Some Surprises

As well as learning about the major librarian responsibilities, students were sometimes surprised by their discoveries. Answers to the question “What satisfactions and frustrations do you get from your job?” yielded varied responses. The following section describes four themes that appeared in many answers to these questions:

Feelings of isolation and under-appreciation. Several librarians said they felt isolated, disconnected, and often unappreciated by colleagues. For example, “I feel unrecognized and under-valued by other teachers. They don’t see me as a teacher like they are but I teach classes and do a lot more than they ever realize.” Two other librarians said, “Many teachers in this school have never stepped foot in the library or asked for my help” and “I know my principal supports all that I do, but I feel that only half the faculty takes advantage of me and my resources, and that is frustrating and discouraging.”

One student interviewer wrote, “From what I found, I think the librarian is an under-appreciated and under-utilized staff member.” A second student wrote, “I never knew teachers do not always value or take librarians seriously. I’ve always connected school and learning to librarians and books.” A third student offered as a partial explanation for these feelings. “Most librarians are viewed differently by teachers since librarians do not give grades or have playground or lunchroom duties,” and “Librarians may not communicate their work to others,

thus the librarian role is misunderstood and they fail to function fully as a school resource.” Many students felt a teacher’s failure to take advantage of a librarian could also be due to a lack of time. With pressures to have students meet high standards and do well on mandated tests, teachers often feel they have little time for collaboration with support staff.

Increased responsibilities. Some librarians seemed to have taken on increased responsibilities and broader roles that go beyond what librarians typically do. A few librarians said they felt pulled in many different directions and spread thin in their work because of increased expectations. For example, besides her regular duties, one librarian said, “I am in charge of the school’s website and I update it monthly with upcoming school events, recommended reading lists, pictures of students participating in plays, and information about book clubs, among other things.” Another librarian said, “Time is my enemy. I don’t have enough of it. I write a school newspaper, arrange for author visits, and set up book sales on top of my other responsibilities.” But, several librarians expressed job satisfaction related to their broad responsibilities. One librarian put it this way, “I couldn’t be happier to be so busy even though it seems like I am always jumping from one thing to the next. It makes me feel like a real contributor to the students, teachers, and our school.”

In this regard, several students developed a new appreciation for the librarian’s work. One student wrote, “I thought they mostly signed books out for kids and kept the library shelves straight. I’m not a teacher yet and I never realized how valuable the librarian could be as a resource for the total school.” Another student wrote, “Overall it was a good and insightful experience talking with Mrs. X and observing the range of things she does in the library. After what I’ve learned, when I become a classroom teacher I plan to fully utilize the skills of my librarian!”

Declining library budgets. Declining library budgets worried several librarians. They voiced concerns about maintaining collections that are up-to-date and making hard choices about what to order when there is a limit. One librarian said, “I see how popular graphic novels are with kids. Even kids who don’t like to read are coming in and asking for titles we don’t have. I’d love to order more of this type of book, like the new *Box Car Children* graphic books, but I also have an obligation to support the curricular needs of teachers. I don’t even have enough money to do a good job of that.” Another librarian with a diminished budget wanted to order some *Playaways*, self-playing digital audio books with ear buds. She felt these e-books that look like an iPod would appeal to younger non-readers and unmotivated readers. “The money was not in my budget, so I wrote a grant to add these enticing tools to our library.” A third librarian said “My budget last year worked out to \$6.25 per child, yet most children’s books cost \$15 to \$20 and, I have to buy reference materials, periodicals, professional magazines for teachers, and supplies so that doesn’t leave much money for children’s books.”

Students were sympathetic to these money woes. One student wrote what many students felt: “I think at this point, the future of libraries depends on budgets as well as smart librarians who can stretch a dollar and write grants.” Another student wrote, “With shrinking school budgets, elementary librarians may find themselves obsolete even though their role supporting the education of kids and teachers is really important.” A third student wrote about a school that had an unfilled librarian’s position “We know about the importance of early reading interest and reading success as a basis for later school success, but it doesn’t seem like this district believes a librarian can help with this. The district hired a library aide to oversee the library.”

Uncertain future. During class discussion, two students brought up concerns voiced by the librarians they interviewed about the uncertain future of their jobs. This concern related to

declining budgets, but also the fact that the position of elementary school librarian is not mandated in New York State. One librarian said, “Even though librarians are highly qualified educators, these positions are not mandated in our state’s elementary schools, but they are mandated in junior high and high schools.” Another librarian said, “Unlike classroom teachers who begin with a bachelor’s degree, librarians in our state must have a master’s degree in library science before working in a school library. Even though we are highly qualified, with more and more budget cuts I am afraid we are going to find ourselves out of jobs very soon.”

One student interviewed a librarian who said, “I worry about the quality of my work because I now provide shared services to two schools in one district, when previously I served only one school.” Another student interviewed a library aide who had become the “librarian” when the librarian retired. The aide said, “My salary is much less than hers was and I know of no plans to hire someone to replace her. I need and love this job, but part of me knows I don’t have the skills to do the kind of work a librarian does.”

Related to the uncertainty of the position, students wrote such things as, “I was amazed to find that the elementary school librarian is not a mandated position and I feel it definitely should be.” Another student said, “I have a big concern that schools, teachers, and kids will lose if librarians are cut from budgets. I don’t have the knowledge to do what they do, but what they do is central to what and how I will teach and what and how my kids will learn.” A third student wrote, “I was not aware of the role a librarian might play for me when I become a teacher. I feel the job is central to every school’s mission and every teacher’s success.”

Avoiding the “Endangered” List

These pre-service and in-service teachers found that for many reasons, librarians are key members of school faculties. They agreed with Huyen (2004) that the library media specialist is a teacher’s best friend. One student wrote, “I believe the explosion of information on the Internet makes the librarian a valued teaching partner for teachers and school staff, not just a support person.” A second student wrote, “Even though school budgets are stretched thin, there is no way this staff member should go. The librarian is a keeper and distributor of information sources that are constantly changing. Knowing and teaching students about new technology will help her and us prepare students for future jobs we cannot even foresee yet.” A third student said, “Based on this interview, I experienced how the elementary school librarian is a tremendous asset to me as a teacher. However, it is up to each teacher to take advantage of this asset.” A fourth student added a caveat. “Librarians need to be visible, market themselves, and ‘go public’ with all that they do so they won’t be under-valued and cut from school budgets.”

Several suggestions emerged from the interviews, class discussion, and our reading of related professional articles that might offer starting points for librarians who want to maintain their positions in elementary schools. Hardy (2010) and Minkel (2002) write about the need for librarians to change the way they do their jobs in order to be key members of a school faculty. If librarians do not feel they are important people in the eyes of teachers and students, Minkel says there are many ways to collaborate and become a school’s “chief information officer” (p. 48). Likewise, Walter (2001) offers ideas “to create libraries that will meet the needs of tomorrow’s children” (p. 49). Her suggestions include more effective public relations efforts and changing library organization and policies to meet emerging needs. Other ideas include:

- 1) **Become an information specialist.** Hardy (2010) and Lehman (2007) argue that the digital age has not made the librarian obsolete. Indeed, it has made the librarian an even more vital part of the school staff. For the librarian who wants to be an information

specialist, s/he must give up monitoring teachers and equipment and do more important things (Morrill, 1995).

- Collaborate with teachers to learn about the virtual world. Post sign-up sheets on equipment so teachers can sign out their own equipment and books and be responsible themselves for reserving what they need. Explore the virtual world and new technology with interested teachers during their planning times.
- Stay up-to-date with the digital explosion and strengthen your technology skills. Attend technology workshops or courses offered by the school district, teacher center, or a local university; surf the Internet; read technology journals like www.eschoolnews.com; network with other librarians and teachers who are tuned in to the virtual world; and write a grant to obtain media equipment.
- Ask a teacher of upper grade students for help from his/her class to conduct a survey of students and teachers to understand their virtual IQs. Knowing students' and teachers' technology-related habits and desires can provide valuable information and ideas for reshaping your role.
- Collaborate with teachers to organize a book club for one grade level to explore graphic novels or e-books which are grabbing the attention of students (or another genre, e.g., mysteries, sports, humor, information, poetry, etc.). Take the first 20 students who sign up and offer the club for 30 min. before or after school. Help students use the Internet to find information on authors and topics they are reading about. Get student feedback at the conclusion of the club, make changes, and offer another book club with a teacher from a different grade level.

2) **Seek new collaborations.** Minkel (2002) writes about a librarian who attended an in-service workshop where she learned to reach out to teachers more often with the result that teachers increasingly called on her to collaborate on projects. The passive librarian who feels under-utilized might make new friends and offer his/her services to them. Communicating to teachers that curriculum units that make use of a librarian's skills are more likely to boost student achievement and test scores.

- Socialize with teachers and communicate directly or through e-mail to determine the units they will soon teach. Offer help with the curriculum to ensure the best use of library resources and improve student learning. If it is difficult to reach every teacher in a large school, connect with teachers at one grade level first to show the positive effect you can have in their classrooms.
- Schedule regular booktalks in classrooms to coordinate with units of study and spur students' interest in reading. Talk about books that relate to a unit of study, new additions to the library collection, seasonal or holiday picks, or a certain genre. Leave several books in the classroom afterwards to encourage student reading and future library use, and to enhance your image.
- Enlist your principal to help you convince teachers to see the library as an extension of the classroom. Make an appointment with your principal, share your frustrations and goals, and brainstorm together how to make you a more effective faculty member. The principal has a powerful voice in helping staff understand, appreciate, and use you to enhance student learning.
- Reach beyond your school's teachers and students to improve communication with parents. In communities where English is not the first language of families or where the literacy of parents is in question, start a family literacy program. Teach

parents how to select appropriate books for their children, show them how to ask questions and talk about a book's pictures and print with a child, model reading aloud for them, and encourage parents to check out these books.

- Provide in-service sessions for para-professionals who are often left out of the professional development schools offer. Para-professionals play a critical role in student achievement and learning. Help them understand how you organize books in the library and how to help students access and assess online information. You help paraprofessionals' understand how to help students learn in the physical and virtual world of the library, and thus free up some of your time for other work.
- 3. Document outcomes.** Walter (2004) believes people are generally uninformed about the public librarian's skills and services. This may also be the case with elementary school librarians. Even though librarians know they are not obsolete, clearly they need to convince others of this (Minkel, 1999). Providing evidence of effectiveness is one way to validate the librarian's critical role and dispel misconceptions.
- Send weekly or monthly emails to your principal and teachers describing your activities. Talk about how many and what kind of research lessons you taught, how many booktalks you gave, which collaborations you engaged in with teachers, and what other projects you have going on (Minkel, 2002).
 - Regularly submit an article to the school newspaper about what is happening in the library. If there is no school newspaper, offer to begin an e-newsletter. Highlight new books or software, teachers with whom you have collaborated, units you have helped with, or a class's recently completed special project. Attach digital pictures of students' activities to the article.
 - Get to know a local newspaper reporter and submit an article about your school and the learning that occurs in the library. Invite him/her to visit when you have a family literacy program planned, when you are providing an in-service to para-professionals, or when students will share such things as photo stories or movies they have created to accompany a unit of study in the classroom.

In Conclusion

After examining students' papers and discussing the results of the interviews in class, I realized the usefulness of this assignment. These pre-service and in-service teachers discovered the librarian to be a critically important staff member who can support them and their students in a variety of important ways. They came to agree with Hardy (2010) that "School librarians are needed more than ever now to deal with the changes in the instructional environment" (p. 23). They now understand the vital link between competent librarians and student achievement (Foote, 2010). Last, they support Krashen's (2010) notion that the position of librarian should be "protected" in the future, despite budget cuts.

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