

School Librarian, Teacher Collaborator, and Independent Learner

**A Symbiosis for Equitable Education
in an Alternative High School**

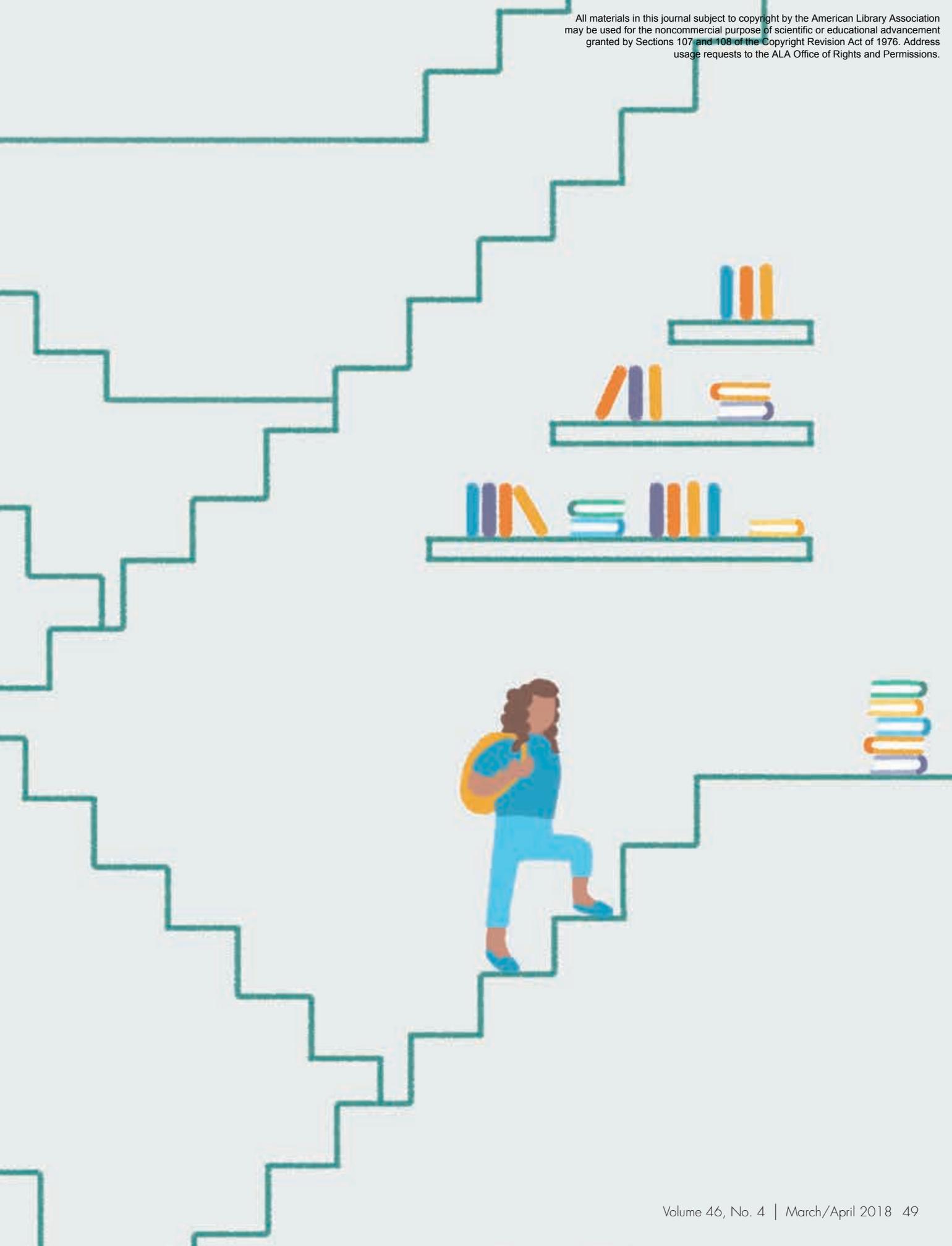
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As the future arrives faster and faster we must ask continually, what do kids actually need from their formal education today and tomorrow? Continuous innovation of method and strategy must be integral to the practice of all teaching professionals. Equitable educators must take a look at the learners in front of them, when and where they stand, and address the needs of each individual. It has never been clearer that we cannot know what tomorrow holds for our students—yet we must be the wizards of the future. While we have no magic wand, the two critical opportunities made visible in this article are the processes to 1) build powerfully honest relationships and 2) teach students to be independent learners. Teacher collaboration with a future-thinking school librarian makes these processes possible and responsive in an alternative school setting.

We work in an alternative education school where the population is majority minority; 80 percent of our students are black or brown, and 90 percent of our student body are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Almost 60 percent of our students have IEPs (Individualized Education Plans), and most have attended larger comprehensive middle and/or high schools but were unsuccessful there. These are the disruptors, the kids who challenge the flow of traditional schooling, the kids who come with highly charged life experience. These are the kids whose only meal of the day may be at school, or for whom the only hours of warmth in winter may be at school. School may be the safest, most secure place they ever go. The school library may be the only place they ever curl up in a comfortable chair with a good story about alternative realities or have access to the Internet other than using their phones.

The idea of teaching students to be independent learners in this

alternative atmosphere is in reality often contrary to current “best practices.” Classrooms or programs are often expected to use a prescribed curriculum intended to address gaps in learning instead of teaching these students *how to learn*. Classroom design and instruction often fosters dependency by placing the teacher, book, or task at the center, instead of the student. For example, many English classrooms still require *The Great Gatsby* to be read by every student instead of using literature circles or choice reading with this classic as an option. Every educator strives for student independence, but we must examine whether the instructional design choices we make actually encourage such. When working with this population of struggling learners, future-thinking school librarians and teachers must come together to provide a consistent experience of success with strategies for how to learn despite setbacks that surround learners.

Learning leadership program research indicates that 93 percent of students in school can tell you what they are “doing” in class. However, when asked what they are “learning” the ability to respond drops to 33 percent (Antonetti and Garver 2015)! We must re-envision our schools and libraries as learning spaces, and for our most-struggling populations we must be intentional and explicit in doing so. The role of school libraries and forward-thinking school librarians in this shift is to be in critical partnership with teachers, parents, and administrators. After years of working with our colleagues as equitable educators of our most-challenged learners, we offer this advice to school librarians and teachers alike as they look to the future.

Engage Minds: Teach How to Learn Independently

Educators assume that by high school students know how to engage their

brains independently in many traditional school tasks. That is simply not true for all students. The library, especially, is known as a space that is designed for students to explore and develop a body of knowledge independently. As a reading recovery teacher (Kristal) and Spanish teacher (Musetta), we have learned that neither age nor number of years in school accurately predicts a student’s ability to learn independently. Students need to experience what independent learning feels like. Our job, to truly be equitable educators, is to scaffold and teach students the skills embedded within independent learning tasks.

We envision educators in 21st-century classrooms and school libraries collaborating intentionally to design methods to model the experience of independence. As educators, we must be considerate of and deliberate about each individual learner as we revise how to teach young people how to learn.

Independent Reading: A Couple of Good Ideas

A struggling reader or literacy-averse high school student rarely walks into a library and browses for a book of choice that will then be read front to back independently. So what are the ways we can get high-interest, level-appropriate books into the hands of the students most in need of literacy skill development?

Create and Maintain Book Pods—A Book Pod is simply a collection of appropriate books and other reading materials. School librarians can work with classroom teachers to design themed, multi-level Book Pod collections for student use, collections that can live inside of the classroom space. Once the Book Pods have been built and delivered to the classroom, the school librarian can work with the teacher to design lessons or routines that embed the

use of the books within the classroom space. For example, during a biology unit regarding energy, students can be asked to choose a related text for daily independent reading. To connect the reading, students can be asked each day to reveal connections to the unit's essential question(s) following the independent reading time. Our future-thinking school librarian has disbursed more than one-third of the school library collection out to classrooms. The response from learners and teachers has been enthusiastic.

Teach Students to Choose Level-Appropriate Texts—Many schools require a reading assessment such as the Reading Inventory to obtain an “objective” analysis of a student's reading level. However, this number means little to readers or is underutilized by the students when selecting texts. Many classrooms and libraries have leveled texts available. For some tasks, it may be expedient for the classroom teacher or librarian to choose level-appropriate texts. Instead of simply providing the leveled text, however, the more effective method would be to teach students how to find and select materials appropriate to their own levels. A future-thinking school librarian could:

- Teach students how to search independently by Lexile score or reading level on Google, in

Newsela, or in the school library catalog. Our school librarian calls this “standing up for your right to read...what you want...in a format that amplifies your knowledge.”

- Have students conduct one-minute reads to evaluate a text and decide if it is too easy or too difficult for them personally. Our school librarian calls this “Speed Dating.”
- Encourage students to identify and discard texts that are too difficult, and then to search for resources that are more accessible. The librarian can use these to build a library of accessible resources for next year's students and to think forward to provide accessible reading materials quickly for current students. Our school librarian regularly selects and brings books from our public library with certain students in mind.

Collaborate to Teach Research Skills

The collaboration between school librarian and classroom teacher can have a profoundly positive effect on students' practice of skills for independent learning.

Teach Skills for Independent Research—Even our highest-achieving students struggle with research. They often lack the skills needed to

conduct an effective search for appropriate sources, comprehend the text in the sources, and then synthesize information and ideas from these valid sources into new knowledge. Too often, research is assigned as a task that we assume children know how to do independently because everyone can Google, right? Wrong. We must explicitly teach our students how to move into meaningful, purposeful, reliable research by teaching all students specific skills.

Teach Best Practices for Keyword Searches—We can't assume that students know how to do a keyword search in Google. Learners need lessons that demonstrate how search results are impacted by various keyword choices. Students need to learn how Google results are generated and the influences involved in a webpage or document showing up in the first page of such a search. Students benefit from lessons around using precise, concise language and limiters when conducting a search, and they can use their new skills throughout their lives.

Teach about Databases and Academic Journals—Few high school students we've encountered in our years of experience have been explicitly taught about online academic journals and databases. As educators, we must explain to students what these resources are, how to access them, and why they are authoritative.

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Projects that allow for personalized, meaningful research centered around self-identified problems or current issues provide excellent opportunities for students to explore academic journals and databases containing authoritative resources. Our school librarian plans these lessons jointly with teachers, teaches how to organize research in the digital world, demonstrates the time-saving utility of using valid databases, and follows up with students individually to model the academic research process. Our school librarian displays a large poster from ALA that says "...because employers want candidates who know the difference between Google search and research."

Help Students Make the Most of Makerspaces—Many innovative school librarians are already reinventing the library space to include a makerspace. However, once again, simply providing opportunities for students is not enough. We must also provide teaching and learning opportunities for students to learn how to use and create in such spaces while engaging with other learners. Is it crazy that we have to teach kids how to do free play? If given the opportunity to choose an activity to engage with independently, many students will look at their phones, skim social media, text or message, or listen to music. How can we teach individual students to engage differently or leverage that interest in technology to create and to play? Providing space, support, and resources in a makerspace inspires these skills. Embed learning in the Design Thinking or Solution Fluency models inspire students' independent, meaningful innovation.

Reset Expectations—What are the behavior expectations when students enter a classroom or the school library? Are these expectations clear and explicit? Do they match what students want and need to do in the space? How do we know students know our expectations?

If a school library has spaces for collaboration, creation, or games, conversation will be necessary. How can shared, understood, reasonable expectations for these activities best be set and communicated? Educators, including school librarians, should not assume that students are intentionally misbehaving, but instead must find out what learners are doing, and then work with students and other educators to establish—or reestablish—behaviors appropriate for both the activity and the space.

Engage with Students—Both school librarians and students benefit when librarians think about the students that most often frequent the library space. What are the activities students most often engage in while in the space? Reaching out and talking with students who appear throughout the day give librarians opportunities to foster a welcoming atmosphere while discovering what matters most to students. Conducting action research about why students frequent the space and then building resources around the needs of the students is an effective way to improve instruction and learning. Our advice: Student by student, engage, engage, engage.

Address Students' Needs as Lifelong Learners

The future is now. What kids actually need from their formal education is continuous innovation of method and strategy by all teaching professionals. Equitable educators must take a look at the learners in front of them, when and where they stand, and address the needs of each individual. It has never been clearer that we cannot know what tomorrow holds for our students. Yet we must be the wizards of the future. Engagement, relationship building, and collaboration between classroom teachers and school librarians in and out of the library setting are essential to student success.



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