Collaborating with a Teacher-Librarian

FATMA FARAJ

Abstract
Teacher-librarians play an important role in the school, not only through supporting students with books and technology, but through collaborating with teachers when planning and teaching. The purpose of my inquiry was to achieve a better understanding of teachers’ experiences and my role in collaboratively planning and teaching using literature circles. In this article, I provide examples and explore themes related to the importance of: open communication and relationships in professional partnerships; and adapting to teachers’ and students’ needs.

The Role of the Teacher-Librarian

As a teacher-librarian, I see myself as an information specialist. I have developed skills in working collaboratively with classroom teachers in planning, teaching, and evaluating students (Ontario Library Association, 1999). I agree with Lankes (2012) that school librarians provide a unique and increasingly important kind of knowledge facilitation. We are not simply teachers in a different kind of classroom. In this paper, I explore three teachers’ experiences in guiding their students through literature circles via collaboration with me, the teacher-librarian.

My research is based on a view of the role of the teacher-librarian as a vital one for overall student achievement. Researchers support my belief, showing that the development of student competence in information skills is most effective when teachers engaged in cooperative program planning and team teaching with the teacher-librarian. Schools with teacher-librarians are more likely to have a higher proportion of grade 6 students who have attained level 3 or higher on reading tests (School Libraries, 2006). A teacher in my school said in an interview: “Whenever you have success, you want to do it again.” She was pleased with the overall experience: the way we set up the tasks, how each student had individual texts and access to the same resources. She was amazed by how organized her students were and by the pride they put into being prepared for all group meetings: “Regardless if I reminded them (the students) or not, they came to school every morning for those three weeks and put the green folder on the corner of their desk. They wanted it there. They weren’t forgetting it. They wanted to do Literature Circles. They were excited to talk about their novels.”

To experience this kind of success, it is important that teacher-librarians have classroom teaching experience before taking on the role. Haycock (2003) asserts that this is critical in developing a strong school library program. My experience as a classroom teacher has helped develop my classroom management skills, my understanding of the curriculum, and my repertoire of ways to work in grade level teams when planning lessons for the students. The experience in the classroom gives me credibility with teachers as we work together to plan and co-teach lessons. When I collaborate with teachers and bring my experience to the table, the library becomes the catalyst to creating a Learning Commons in the school, as it integrates the new and old in a seamless physical and virtual space in which all formats can be assimilated and
studied (Together for Learning, 2010). Today, in my role as teacher-librarian, I am an educator who helps staff and students navigate new resources and at the same time, curates a collection. Additionally, I help teachers to integrate technology in their classroom practice, including using online platforms and providing a space for students to explore their ideas. I am a member of the teaching team, and at the same time, I inform parents, teachers and school leaders of the latest innovations in education.

For teacher and teacher-librarian collaboration to be successful, a clear understanding of how and why teachers and librarians should collaborate is critical (Montiel-Overall, 2010). Teacher-librarians are teaching partners who work with classroom teachers to help students with research and literacy skills. Curry Lance (2012), a respected consultant who has researched the correlation between schools’ reading achievements and the role of the teacher-librarian for many years, shows that students’ performance on reading assessments is higher when teacher-librarians work with teachers and are responsible for library collections.

Methods

The research took place in my sixth year of working as a teacher-librarian in a middle school. The teacher participants in this study were familiar with my teaching and planning style. We developed and nurtured a level of trust over the years that made it comfortable for us to share our experiences with each other.

The School and Library Context

The middle school where I was teaching when conducting my inquiry is in a major suburban city in the Greater Toronto Area. The school prides itself on a focus on the arts, athletics, and academics. It is made up of grade 6, 7, and 8 classes. Also, there have been a variety of special education classes in our building, throughout the years, ranging from ICOM (Intermediate Communication) to IASD (Intermediate Autistic Spectrum Disorder) to IGLD (Intermediate General Learning Disability) classes.

In our team-focused school, teachers work in teams of 2-3 teachers and create programming based on their schedules as a team. Classrooms are made up of mixed-ability students, which encourages teachers to differentiate their instruction. Students are placed in teams where the homeroom teacher teaches math and language to their own class and then the students rotate between or among a number of classrooms for social studies (history/geography), the arts (drama, music, visual art and dance), and science. Students travel out of their team’s classrooms for French, music or dance (or whatever class is taught for their teacher’s planning time).

The principal refers to the library as the hub of the building, as it is the place where staff and students go for materials, ranging from books to technology. The middle school library is open 80% of the day, closed during lunch (except for extra-curricular activities) and the teacher-librarian’s planning times and planning time for one class (three times in a five-day cycle). It is an active building that uses all the spaces effectively. Staff and students use the library on a regular basis, and it is part of the daily routine of the active school. Since it is the hub of the building, it allows teachers to work in a space that is familiar and inviting.
Collaboration with a Teacher

I worked with three teachers to document their stories of teacher-teacher-librarian collaboration. Each teacher had their reasons for participating in my research: one had worked collaboratively on a regular basis and wanted to reflect on her practices; one had never collaborated with me before and was looking for an opportunity to try it out; and one, whose pseudonym is Kayci, wanted to work through a collaborative process to begin incorporating literature circles into her literacy programming as a professional development opportunity. I have chosen Kayci’s story to share, as her experience before and after collaboration stories show the evolution of the collaborative process.

Kayci, a young teacher, was hired right out of the faculty of education to teach at the school. Her flexibility and ability to handle change led her to have many teaching experiences in her first three years as a classroom teacher. She started as a grade seven teacher, then moved to a grade six teacher and, at the time of my inquiry, was a grade 8 teacher. Kayci had a different grade every year for her first few years as a teacher, and there was always this feeling of keeping her head above water. It wasn’t until she was in a grade for two years straight, that she welcomed the idea of creating something new via collaboration with me. These co-teaching opportunities allowed Kayci to observe her students, and interact with them, but she also found that the collaborative teaching helped her to incorporate new ideas in planning and teaching lessons.

Data Collection and Analysis

Throughout the research process, I attempted to write regular journal entries based on my meetings with the participants and my observations of the daily life of being a teacher-librarian in a middle school. Interviews, my primary data sources, were scheduled to take place during lunch hour or after school to ensure there was enough time for an in-depth conversation. Interviews were done before collaboration and after collaboration to document our experience. My interviews were based on a belief that we need to listen closely to the stories of teachers’ lives in and out of classrooms. We also need to tell our own stories as we live our own collaborative researcher/teacher lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). My story as a teacher-librarian and teacher collaborator stories are told through this narrative inquiry.

The questions were divided into categories: experiences and collaboration. They were designed to engage the participants in talking about their experiences as classroom teachers and about what they hoped to achieve through collaboration with the teacher librarian. I gave each of the participants a list of questions to read for a few minutes before the interview started, so they would be aware of the types of questions that would be asked and know the order in which I would be asking the questions. Please see Figure 1 for the interview protocols before and after our collaboration. I used the two categories, experiences and collaboration, to carry out inductive analysis of the interview data.
Figure 1: Interview Questions: Before and After Collaboration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before Collaboration</th>
<th>After Collaboration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experiences</strong></td>
<td><strong>Experiences</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long have you taught?</td>
<td>What did you achieve from this experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What grade levels have you taught?</td>
<td>How do you feel about this experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you collaborated with the teacher-librarian before? In what capacity?</td>
<td>What was applicable to your teaching experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was your experience?</td>
<td>How would you use this experience when planning future lessons?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who else have you collaborated with?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you want to achieve from this experience?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have any apprehensions? If so, what are they?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaboration and the Teacher-Librarian</strong></td>
<td><strong>Collaboration and the Teacher-Librarian</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do you think collaboration is important?</td>
<td>Why do you think collaboration is important?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are your experiences with collaboration in a school setting?</td>
<td>Where in the process is it most important to collaborate?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does collaboration look like?</td>
<td>What experience through this experience did collaboration show itself clearly?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why collaborate with the teacher-librarian?</td>
<td>Why collaborate with the teacher-librarian?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Findings**

Across the three teachers’ stories, two themes emerged: (1) the importance of learning partnerships between teachers and teacher-librarians; and (2) the importance of being flexible to the needs of teachers and students, as the same topic can look very different from one class to the next. Although each of my participants’ experiences adds another chapter to my story, I will focus on Kayci’s experiences.

**Learning Partnerships**

I intentionally created a small reading group, essentially creating a Professional Learning Community (PLC), with the group of teachers interested in collaborating with me. We met three times to discuss a nonfiction trade book that I had picked up at the Horn Book Award Conference. It was a title they were not familiar with and elicited a conversation that was new
and exciting. The text was something they could use in their classroom, as a read-aloud or as a reference when teaching reading comprehension strategies. The PLC provided an opportunity to introduce the possibilities for collaboration with me in a collegial and supportive environment, something I could offer them with their students. That they wanted to collaborate was very clear, as our meetings took place after school and on one of our meeting dates, there was an impending snowstorm. I asked the group if we should reschedule, and they all said “No!” emphatically. Who knew that a nonfiction book, an afterschool meeting, and book talk would be a reason for teachers to want to learn and work together? For two of these teachers, the PLC was a catalyst to future collaboration.

Kayci said that she wanted to collaborate with me because she values the knowledge that I bring, especially when it comes to books. She also values my teaching experience, especially with literature circles, and my knowledge of the different students. She feels that students benefit from working in the library, which is a different setting from their classroom. They also benefit from the greater variety of experience provided by the collaboration. Kayci also saw that working together helped her to create differentiated lessons for the diverse population of students in her class.

Some of the collaborations did not involve planning new units together. Instead, they centered around units housed in the library that had been previously created by other teacher-librarians and teachers. The collaborations were based on my drama experience, and took place in the library because it had more space than teachers’ classrooms to carry out drama activities. Even when the resources were developed with other teachers, Kayci wanted to plan and sit with me and make the lessons match her students’ interests and learning styles. True collaboration was born, even though I had worked on literature circles before and had created PowerPoints and materials, Kayci didn’t want the lessons to be ready-made. We sat side-by-side, working together to go through the materials, creating new slides, finding stories that helped meet her students’ needs. We wanted to make it a true learning experience for teachers and students.

One evening, we talked, disagreed, and then came full circle to create a lesson plan. We walked away from that meeting with a lesson plan that was okay but neither of us felt that it was as strong as we could make it. The next day, we met just before starting to teach the lesson and within five minutes we had improved the lesson. We had left this lesson that we had worked on the evening before, knowing there was something missing but not knowing what it was. Because we were very comfortable working together, it allowed us to reconvene, talk it through and meet the needs of the lesson. This experience reminded us that with collaboration, we are not alone. From our PLC to collaborating on the lessons, we had created a rhythm that took some time to get to. After spending all that time together, we were able to complete each other’s sentences and organize a lesson that reflected the what we wanted the students to learn.

Kayci’s experience is just a snapshot of one experience I have had with a teacher. When people ask what a typical day in the library looks like, I tell them that there are days when the library is so quiet I can hear the books whispering to me. On other days, I can go from team meetings to book talking with a student, to teaching lesson on how to use search terms effectively on the Internet. Just recently, I had to pause a lesson with a class because, even though it was planned and organized, technology was not working and the students were not into it. We shifted gears, changed the lesson into a book talk and book exchange and scheduled
another period to revisit the lesson (after a quick side conversation with the classroom teacher). The classroom teacher, students, myself and the space shifted gears, showing our flexibility in the situation.

My role as a teacher-librarian helped create an environment for collaboration in the teachers’ hectic day-to-day schedule; one that is bogged down with curriculum seven periods a day. That type of schedule could make anyone’s head spin. Working with another teacher makes everything slow down to a more manageable pace and affords teachers some time, flexibility and a partner to help design and teach engaging lessons. Threaded throughout the day plans and the reflections is the fact that I make sure that my space and time are available to staff and students. Staff and students are in and out of the library on a regular basis all day long. Even an informal interaction, such as when someone enters the library to say hello, helps to nurture the partnership. Learning partnerships are a way to transform our teaching experiences to learning experiences for students and teachers (Together for Learning, 2010) and help develop a climate of inclusion for all involved.

In that moment with Kayci, where we changed the lesson we had planned the previous day to something that was more relevant in the moment, I was reminded that I needed to take time to respect the learning partnerships that have been developed in the school. I have to remember that even though I have done a lesson before, it is a new experience for each person. Staff and students are in and out of the library on a regular basis all day long, even sometimes to just say, “Hi!” Those moments are important. However, it is also important to nurture the partnerships because the collaboration is about teaching and learning together. When reflecting on the benefits of our collaborative project, Kayci said that she valued sharing ideas, asking each other questions, working together and observing the students understanding concepts.

**Flexible to Teachers’ and Students’ Needs**

I am flexible to the needs of the school community but sometimes teachers do not use me the way that the role was created. As much as I would like to collaborate with teachers on a regular basis, time is a valuable commodity. Working in a school with multiple teachers and meeting the needs of each person, is where I need to be flexible as a teacher-librarian. This means that collaboration does not always look like teaching and learning (Together for Learning, 2010). My role often includes booking regular library times, teaching research skills on a continuum and putting independent reading books in the hands of every student.

Working with the teacher-librarian allows students to access resources that may be limited in the classroom and at home and provides them with an environment that encourages social interaction. The library is conducive for everyone who comes into the space to work and interact with others, and with some guidance, brings an integrative approach to expanding the students’ minds to connect to the world, the texts and to each other.

I am cognizant of that time is an issue when working with teachers and students, especially when we schedule our collaboratively-taught classes during the first period of the day (students come in late due to appointments, sleeping in and other circumstances). Kayci and I re-scheduled all of our library-based co-taught classes later in the morning or in the afternoon to ensure that all students were at school. The students’ interests moved us in directions that were
often unexpected and unplanned, so much so, that I was meeting with Kayci almost daily to plan and re-adjust our planning to fit the needs of the students. Kayci, the students and I worked together throughout the process, as students helped design the journey, too.

Implications for Teacher and Teacher-Librarian Collaborations

During one of the interviews one participating teacher discussed the idea of collaboration being a lifetime skill. It was at that time that I realized that my role as teacher-librarian involves more than meeting face-to-face and small groups. It also includes writing a note back and forth or communicating online with teachers. Every day I send an email to one teacher, a group of teachers, or the whole school to share new materials in the library or online resources that may be applicable to teaching and learning in the classroom. This may start a dialogue between me and a teacher regarding planning or teaching. Sometimes the conversation goes further, as teachers discuss how they may use materials with their team members or grade division. This moves ideas and education forward in new and exciting ways, encouraging all of us to think differently or at least reflect on what is going on.

Collaboration does not have to end when one unit is finished. The relationship that has been forged through working together with a teacher and their students, opens the door to future learning partnerships. I have sent text messages and dropped by classrooms after collaborative events to let the teachers know I still think of them and hope to work again together real soon.

If I have not seen a teacher and their class in a few weeks, I look at their class schedule and send a calendar invitation to a Book Talk in the library. It is low stress for the teacher. All they need to do is accept the invite, see the reminder pop up on their computer, and bring the class to the library (or I bring myself to the classroom). I am happy to talk books and give some time for a book exchange. There is always an opportunity as students are looking at books to chat with the teacher about lessons and discuss possible upcoming opportunities to work together.

I am known to put a sign on the library door that I can be found visiting classrooms. Walking through a classroom and observing students’ learning helps to get my creativity juices flowing. By the end of a classroom visit, I may recommend a book to support a lesson or I may say something to the students that results in my being invited back to share a lesson or a story. Sometimes it is the students who have encouraged a collaboration that the teacher and I did not see coming!

Sometimes, I connect virtually with classrooms. With the use of Google Classroom, I asked classroom teachers to add me as a teacher on the roster, and I pop into the classrooms online. I can add materials, from videos to links to databases. Suddenly, I start receiving messages from teachers asking where I found the links or if I can help them with something else.

My favourite moments are when another teacher, someone I have not had a chance to talk to, comes by the library to see me about something I have done for another class and asks for the same lesson. These are some of the ways to start collaborative moments between teachers and teacher-librarians. I recommend that teacher-librarians prop the library door open, put a sign on the door and let people know that they are more than the keeper of books and stories. It is important to advocate and promote the work that teacher-librarians do and the work that we can do as a team.
Conclusion

I have now transitioned from being in a middle school library to a primary/junior library and I have been a teacher-librarian longer than I was a classroom teacher. Students and teachers are more informed with the use of technology now, using it regularly in the classroom, the Makerspace and at home. We are online now more than ever, using many platforms to document learning, from SeeSaw to Google Classroom. Feedback is almost immediate when working collaboratively with a group on a Google Doc or sending a virtual example of classroom work via SeeSaw to a parent at home during the school day. 

The transformation from my first year as a teacher-librarian to the present year has been phenomenal, in terms of reflecting on my understanding, my teaching, my use of technology, and most importantly, how I work with my colleagues. Collaboration is an ongoing process. As it ebbs and flows, teachers come and go. Sometimes the collaboration is a five-minute conversation at lunch and sometimes it is a three-year long conversation as we add, change, delete, and update lesson plans, keeping the ever-evolving learners in mind. My finger is still on the pulse of what is new and innovative, but my door is open to learning from the new educators who work in my building and the students who have explored a new online platform.

My story is an invitation to teachers to come into the library to plan and/or to book time with me. It is an opportunity for all involved to learn about the benefits of collaborating with the teacher-librarian, whether the event happens in the library or in the classroom. The library encourages collaboration and co-teaching. We are not only standing together teaching side-by-side but weaving ourselves into the fabric of the students’ learning as we work together to discover and explore text, technology and whatever else the lesson entails.

References


*Author Biography*

Fatma Faraj is a teacher-librarian at Branksome Hall in Toronto. The research is on an ongoing story which started in 2013 at the Peel District School Board, where she was a middle school teacher-librarian.