

Communication and Cooperation Between Public Librarians and Public School Teachers: A Review of the Literature

by

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Introduction

In an article in the previous issue of *Indiana Libraries* (vol. 15, no. 1, 1996), Anne E. Wells stressed the importance of public librarians' extending their services to community schools. She described five channels through which outreach efforts could be implemented.¹ Going a step further, Colleen Costello envisioned an ideal world in which teachers alert librarians to assignments, students come to the library well prepared to handle their assignments, and libraries have the materials on hand to meet the students' needs. In Costello's ideal world, communication flows freely between school and library, and teachers and librarians work closely together complementing and supporting each other to meet the educational needs of the students.² The literature shows that, unfortunately, the reality may differ greatly from the ideal. Despite efforts by librarians to learn ahead of time about mass assignments, last-minute requests on obscure topics and droves of students seeking information on the same subject continue to be the bane of librarians. Unreasonable, poorly planned, and poorly thought out library research assignments result in students being unable to complete assignments, librarians frustrated at their inability to provide service, patrons angered by being ignored while librarians assist students in long and unfruitful searches, and teachers dissatisfied with libraries which appear to be unsupportive of education.

Carolyn Caywood echoed the lament of more than one public librarian when she wrote of a teacher's requirement that each of some thirty students in a class write on a different endangered species when the library had only five books on the topic.³ One reads with chagrin, a description of the frustration of a student calling her teacher to beg for a change in the assignment because all the books on spiders had already been checked out.⁴ The writer remembers well a similar assignment about different types of bats and the

frustration shared by students and librarians alike at the Monroe County Public Library, Bloomington, IN.

Jeri Arent advised librarians to watch for clues which may save them from the "question-at-the-end-of-the-chapter quagmire."⁵ Such questions often take up hours of search time without yielding an answer, because sometimes the answer can be found only in the teacher's manual of the textbook. An example is: How many boats did Washington use to ferry his troops across the Delaware?⁶

Roger Sutton faced the problem of dealing with a teacher's insistence that students not use an encyclopedia, even though the encyclopedia had the best information on the required topic. He also had to try to cope with thirty-five students who had been told by their teacher that the library would have thirty-five individual copies of *God is my Copilot*. He found especially unnerving the assignment that each student in a class bring in fifty pictures of famous black Americans. Wonderful books on African-American history and culture lay untouched while students formed an assembly line at the copy machine.⁷

As Frances Jacobson stated, librarians wonder at the assignments students bring with them, assignments that range from trivia questions to inappropriately advanced research tasks.⁸ Such endeavors neither improve upon library research skills nor enlighten students on the nature of independent research. Instead of promoting sound exercises in information gathering, the assignments teach that the library is a place to spend hours of frustrated confusion in pursuit of the inessential.⁹ That opinion was shared by the organizers of a workshop for teachers and librarians in North Carolina.¹⁰ They lamented that, while students miss opportunities to learn valuable lessons, they do learn that "the system" does not work. Indeed, the system does not work because, in cases like those cited above, teachers making assignments which require students to use library resources have not first checked with the libraries affected to ascertain that the necessary materials are indeed present in the collection. Do they assume that "the public library has everything?"

One can add to the above litany, bibliographies for reading assignments with "radically" incomplete or incorrect citations, reference book scavenger hunts or treasure hunts that wear out the materials, and assignments that require multitudes of students to use rare and/or fragile materials.¹¹

The above situations are not recent developments. Some fifty years ago, public librarian Ethel Garber wrote of a seventh grade girl told by her teacher to find something about a famous Russian whose name began with a "V," a question which even a specialist in Russian history would have had difficulty answering. Another teacher had sent a student to the library to learn about a certain Andrew Humphreys, an Englishman whose name appeared once in the eighth grade history text. Garber implied that she could supply a hundred more similar anecdotes but then went on to discuss suggestions for ameliorating the situation.¹² A quarter of a century later Ralph Perkins wrote of library research assignments which gave more "library practice" to librarians than to students. As in Garber's experience, Perkins found that teachers often sent elementary and junior high school students to the library to seek answers to questions more suitable for doctoral candidates.¹³

Outreach Efforts by Librarians

The response of librarians to situations described in the previous section range from reactive to proactive. Having experienced the onslaught of desperate students all seeking information on the same topic, librarians soon learn to prepare for a similar invasion at about the same time the following year. In a like vein, some librarians have suggested techniques for dealing with topics which appear to be annual events, such as investing in paperback versions of books on the subject, purchasing extra copies of hardbacks for reference-only use, collecting vertical file materials, and having in mind search aids to use when all of the books on the topic have left the library.¹⁴

Another tactic is to give unsuccessful student seekers of information a pre-printed form to take to their teachers, with check-off statements that list possible reasons why the library could not help the students with their assignment.¹⁵ The form may also request that the teacher contact the library for information or clarification.¹⁶ Although such a form is an attempt to communicate with teachers, it is an after-the-fact, somewhat negative technique. In fact, some such examples of what Parker called "successful assertiveness" appear aggressive in nature, such as returning to the teacher for correction any incomplete or incorrect bibliographies.¹⁷

A more positive approach is that of librarians who send "assignment alert" forms to teachers early in the school year. Daniel Callison found that both school and public librarians consider the assignment alert a very important tool.¹⁸ Among thirty responses to a survey about methods of establishing cooperation sent to public librarians in Illinois, at least ten mentioned the alerts.¹⁹

Some librarians make herculean efforts to communicate to teachers their ability and willingness to assist with planing assignments, procuring materials, and guiding or teaching students to use the library. Librarians in rural Edgecombe County, North Carolina, prepared library exercises to complement the objectives of the state social studies curriculum. The illustrated exercises did indeed help the teachers make their lessons "interesting and challenging and meaningful"!²⁰

Librarians are willing to visit schools, as evidenced often in the survey of Illinois librarians mentioned above.²¹ Visits to schools by the Schaumburg, Illinois, librarians feature puppet shows and stories for younger students, and booktalks for the older ones.²² One library has been fortunate enough to employ a full-time school liaison who concentrates on one grade per month between October and April.²³ For most librarians however, visits have to be fit into an already full work schedule.

Classes are invited to the library, despite the extra burden the visits impose on staff, facilities, and other patrons.²⁴ Mary Jo Biehl has described tours with intriguing names like "Choose Your Own Reference Adventure" and "Snooper & Trooper."²⁵ In order to demonstrate to teachers and students what librarians can do for them, some libraries hold science fair workshops.²⁶ One library offers local faculty a display of all its new materials at a Teachers' Fair during a teachers' institute.²⁷ Handouts with tips for both teachers and students on using the library and preparing papers are popular items.²⁸ Suggested reading lists and annotated bibliographies are other features that attempt to show teachers how librarians can assist them.²⁹

The Kern County (California) Public Library has established a Volunteer Homework Brigade. Retired teachers and community volunteers are available to assist with homework assignments and to staff the "Homework Hotline" during peak hours.³⁰ Julianne Good has described a term paper workshop which takes students though the entire process of writing a paper; from selecting a topic, to library research, and the actual writing of the paper.³¹ Another proactive approach for dealing with the annual phenomenon of "term paper blues" is a Term Paper Resource Center, equipped with everything from bibliographies and search guides to index cards and computer workstations.³²

Teachers in Arlington Heights, Illinois, may request that specialized packages be delivered to their schools by van. The packages contain Book Bags, (twenty to twenty-five books and other media on a given subject and

for a given grade level), Treasure Boxes, (forty fiction books for particular grade levels), and Enrichment Cases or "touch-me suitcases" full of interesting realia.³³ Another library in Illinois offers a similar service.³⁴ In Newark, New York, similar packets are called "Teacher's Aide Totes" and are considered by librarians as a bridge between the school and the public library.³⁵

Workshops for teachers and librarians, such as one held in North Carolina in 1987, provide another opportunity for learning and communication.³⁶ In an effort to make inroads with teachers, the Arlington Heights, Illinois, librarians have initiated orientation meetings with student teachers to introduce them to the library and the privileges it offers them.³⁷ Judith Monroe likewise has stressed the importance of "beginning with beginners" and has suggested a program for first-year teachers or teachers new to a particular school.³⁸ There must also be communication with administrators. Janice Douglas has written of efforts in Vancouver, British Columbia, by the public library and the school board to develop initiatives to coordinate and modernize service.³⁹

In 1991 the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund sponsored a three-year pilot project to foster cooperation between the Branch Libraries of the New York Public Library (NYPL) and three community school districts in New York City. Named "Connecting Libraries and Schools Project" (CLASP), the endeavor required the cooperation of the senior staff on the city's board of education and library staff.⁴⁰ The project reflects the long-standing interest of the NYPL in facilitating cooperation between the library and local schools. A staff position for that purpose had been created in 1906!⁴¹

Closer to home, the Rushville, Indiana, Public Library has made laudable efforts to further cooperation with local schools. In addition to providing students a list of "classics", the librarians offer these services to schools: resource kits with lists of suggested readings related to the material in the kits; displays, including some borrowed from the Indianapolis Children's Museum; bibliographies which include audio-visual materials; and library tours.⁴²

Responses of Teachers to the Outreach Efforts

In some cases, efforts by public librarians to encourage cooperation between themselves and local schools have been very successful. In Oswego, Illinois, for example, both teachers and principals have come to feel such a sense of "ownership" of the public library that they volunteer as "story

sharers" on weekends and in the summer.⁴³ The Arlington Heights, Illinois, public library has seen a great increase in requests from schools, not just for materials but also for services and programs.⁴⁴ The term paper workshops for students at the St. Louis library were so successful that teachers have expressed a desire to learn more about the library's specialized services.⁴⁵ The Rushville, Indiana, schools willingly assist the public librarians with projects, and teachers inform both students and their parents about what the library has to offer.⁴⁶

A "Stump the Librarian" contest, part of New York City's CLASP, generated a tremendous amount of good will.⁴⁷ CLASP was so successful that, when the private funding ended in 1994, the New York City Council provided monies to enable the program to continue uninterrupted in the three pilot districts. In addition, two more CLASP districts were funded as the first phase of a plan for citywide implementation. The New York City project even inspired a similar undertaking in six cities in Germany!⁴⁸ More information about CLASP can be found on its Web page at <http://www.nypl.org/branch/services/clasp/clasp.html>.

Yet, despite undertakings such as those described previously, there are still libraries inundated by ill-prepared students sent by their teachers on hopeless quests for both information and information literacy. In describing the Policy of Mutual Expectations drawn up jointly by the public librarians and school board in Vancouver, British Columbia, Douglas often wistfully mentioned "in the ideal world" scenarios. Was she implying that the mutual expectations had not been realized? Especially discouraging was the revelation that sometimes teachers even failed to arrange class visits beforehand, and instead arrived unannounced at the library.⁴⁹

Although a seminar for junior and senior high school personnel in South Carolina was attended by only eighteen of seventy-five individuals who had received a survey/invitation, librarians who sponsored the seminar considered it "one of its most rewarding public relations programs" — indicative perhaps of the low expectations held by planners of such events.⁵⁰ An extravaganza for sixth-grade teachers in Bloomington, Indiana, was attended by more library school students and out-of-town guests than teachers. The public library in Des Plaines, Illinois, distributed questionnaires to teachers in eight elementary schools and three junior high schools. The purpose of the questionnaire was to find out what teachers wanted the public library to offer in the way of services to them and their students. Only sixty of 160 teachers returned the forms.⁵¹

Why, one wonders, do some teachers not avail themselves of the skills and knowledge of library professionals as they plan lessons which they hope will teach their pupils how to use libraries and their resources? One can understand why teachers do not consider librarians as partners in education in a community where public librarians do not reach out to the schools. What needs to be investigated is why, when librarians express a willingness and even a desire to go the extra mile, some teachers respond to their overtures while others do not.

Conclusion

Anne Wells stressed that public librarians should extend their services to community schools in order to ensure the continued survival of libraries into the 21st century.⁵² Perhaps she was right.

Within the larger context of problems faced by public libraries today, problems that deal with their very survival, the occasional irritation caused by an entire class of students seeking information on the same topic may seem minor. Certainly the frustration felt by reference librarians and young adult or children's librarians trying unsuccessfully to meet those demands is not minor. More important, however, is the frustration experienced by the students. Attitude and skills which lead to the effective lifelong use of public libraries are best developed early. How many times do young people have to see their hopes of finding information dashed before they decide that libraries are not reliable sources of information? Perhaps what happens when students come to the library impinges just as much on the survival of public libraries as do seemingly weightier matters. These young people are the country's future citizens, the voters and taxpayers of tomorrow, the very people who will decide whether libraries are worth funding. A negative experience today may result in a vote against a bond issue twenty years from now.

Both altruistically and pragmatically it behooves librarians to seek communication and cooperation with teachers so that students can experience the pleasure of a successful quest.

Additional Recommended Reading:

Fink, Judy. "School Library/Public Library Cooperation: A Selective Annotated Bibliography." *Indiana Libraries* 8, no. 2 (1989): 87-89.

Although the articles are old, the ideas are still good.

Fitzgibbons, Shirley. "Cooperation Between Teachers, School Librarians, and Public Librarians: Improving Library Services for Children and Young

Adults." *Indiana Libraries* 8, no. 1 (1989): 57-69.

Dr. Fitzgibbons presents an historical overview of the trends which mandate a need for cooperation, delineates barriers to cooperation, and describes conditions for successful cooperation.

Illinois Libraries 72, no. 2 (Feb. 1990).

The entire issue is devoted to efforts by librarians to reach out to the community. Although several of the articles have been cited here, there are many others in the issue which describe cooperative efforts and successful programs.

Shrum, Sharon L. "Services and Materials Being Offered to School Teachers by Public Libraries Serving at Least 100,000 People in Ohio and Surrounding States: A Descriptive Study." M.L.S. Research Paper, Kent State University. 1993.

Of particular interest in this document is a summary of librarians' perceptions about which services *can* and/or *should* be offered to schools.

Vandergrift, Kay E. "Cooperative Dialogue: Using an Instrument to Empower." *Voice of Youth Advocates* 17, no.2 (June 1994): 73-77.

Here is an instrument with which to measure your efforts at cooperative dialogue with schools.

Weintstein, Frances R. and W. Lawrence Thwing. "Components of Cooperation: Schools and Public Libraries Link for Enhanced Service and Information Access for Youth." *Indiana Libraries* 8, no.2 (1989): 90-95.

This is an example an excellent program which is the result of active communication and cooperation between the public library and school administrators.

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