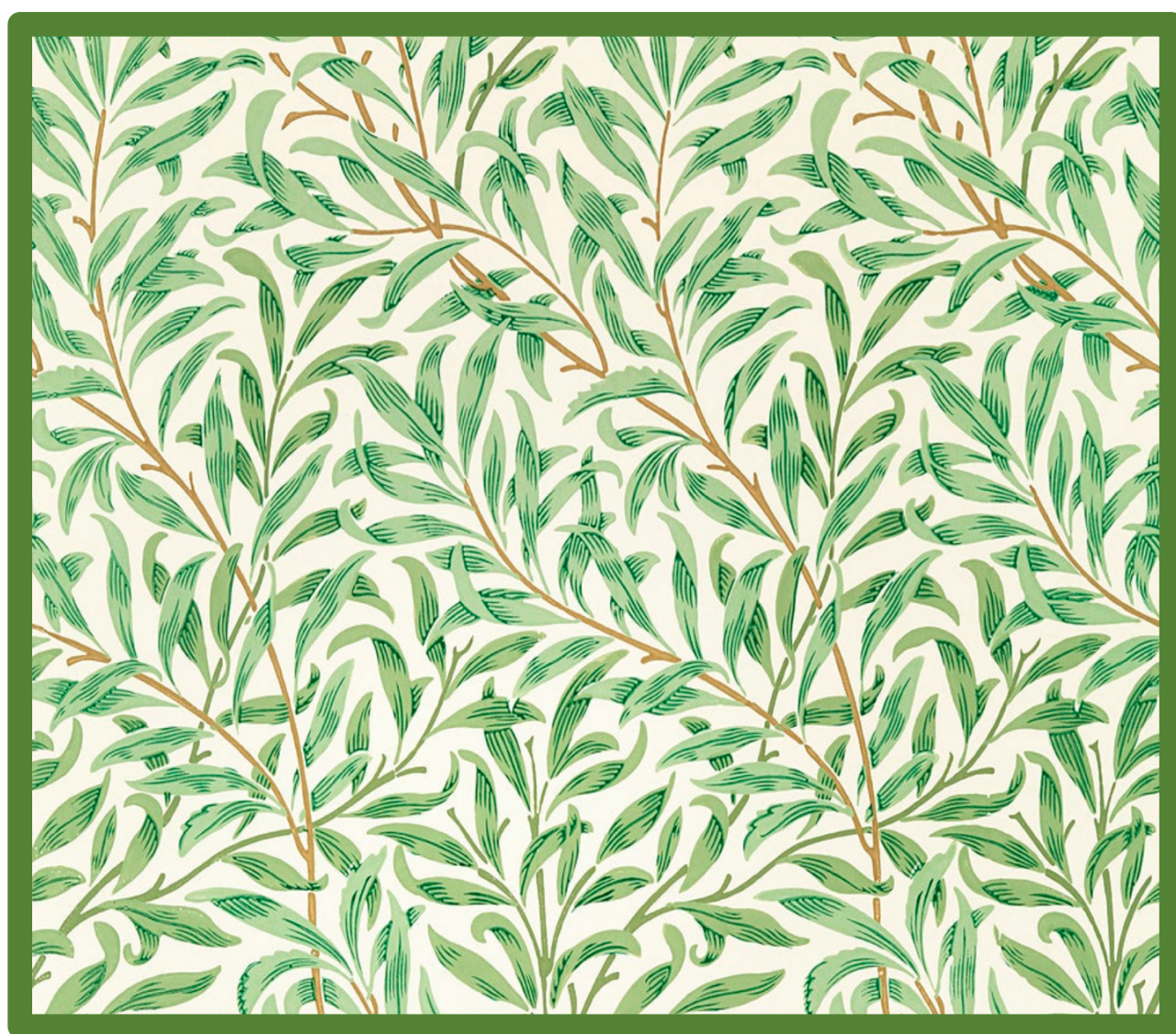




Decision-Makers About School Librarian Employment

A Literature Review

Deeth Ellis



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A Literature Review

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SLIDE: The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution?

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Decision-Makers About School Librarian Employment:

A Literature Review

Deeth Ellis

This narrative literature review focuses on recent studies and articles that describe an aspect of how public school staffing decisions are made that have an impact on school libraries. The aim is to examine not only who the decision maker is but how their decisions are influenced by forces at the school, district, state, and even federal level. First, background is provided that presents literature exploring the perceptions held by school leaders, in particular the principal, toward school libraries and factors that contribute to these perceptions. Secondly, the influence that district administrators and policy have on school libraries is discussed. Finally, literature is discussed that examines how decisions during and after the pandemic continue to erode equitable access to school libraries.

School principals are guided by professional standards from the National Policy Board for Educational Administration to lead staff and manage resources to ensure “students’ academic success and well-being” (NPBEA, 2015). Principals follow national standards of school leadership to set a mission and vision, “strive for equity of educational opportunity” (p. 11) and “develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment” (p. 12) and “the professional capacity and practice of school personnel” (p.14). Principals take different approaches to meet each of these standards and highly influence decisions made about how a school is staffed and the model that is developed for achieving district goals. Their understanding of their staff’s skills and job responsibilities contributes to how personnel’s capacity is built to achieve school and district goals and how each member of the staff contributes to student achievement. The staffing choices hinge in part on the principal’s views and experiences but also on a series of external factors such as the budget, district administration, students’ needs, and community stakeholders. This literature review first considers the school library in relation to the principal’s perceptions of the librarian’s job responsibilities and skills. Next factors are discussed that shape school leadership’s views. Finally, the influence on staffing decisions by district leaders, budget, and legislation are considered.

School Leader Perceptions

To what extent principals’ perceptions hold the power to sustain or erode a library program was first studied in the early 2000s in studies that examined specifically how decision makers’ perceptions were shaped and knowledge gained about the school librarian (Church, 2008 & 2010; Hartzell, 2002; Roberson et al., 2005; Shannon, 2009). Around the same time several states conducted studies that demonstrated increases in reading scores on state tests in schools with school libraries (Lance et al., 2000, 2002, & 2014; Lance & Schwarz, 2012; Rodney et al. 2003; Smith, 2001 & 2006). These early researchers explain that principal leadership is essential to a strong library program, but there are gaps in the principals’ knowledge of the role of the school librarian. There are several reasons for these gaps. First, principals do not learn about professional collaboration as teachers nor as a principal (Hartzell, 2002). Secondly, principals “stay attuned of problems and possibilities through their own journals and meetings - and

library media specialists have been conspicuously absent from these information sources” (Hartzell, 2002, p. 97). Lastly, principals indicate they most often learn about the role from their own school librarian (Church, 2008, p. 1; Taylor, 2016). These empirical studies recommended improving education and training programs, more consistent definitions of high-quality school library program, and expanding access to information and research that could educate leadership on the value of a strong program (Church, 2008; Hartzell, 2002; Roberson et al., 2005; Shannon, 2009). More recent studies indicate that earlier trends continue (Gordon & Cicchetti, 2018; Loh et al., 2021; Newsum, 2018; Stevenson, 2018; Wright, 2022). Decision making by leadership is not always fully informed about the school librarian’s role and outcomes for school library programs have been inconsistent across districts and states.

Several articles present leaders who work with exemplary librarians and rely on their collaboration to meet school improvement goals. Celluci & Harland (2022) present an analysis of a transcript from a town hall with principals and superintendents who have experienced and understand the value of their school librarian and programs. By examining the transcript, exemplary practices of shared leadership between the school librarian and principal are described. Kachel (2017) similarly explains that school librarians should focus their goals on the principals' needs and goals to contribute to school improvements and provide opportunities for collaboration and education of the principal to show them how the library fits into their goals. Pickett & Combs (2016) take a district wide view in their Delphi study that describes the "knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed by K-12 administrators to direct effective school library programs" (p. 1). They assert that by doing this, an impact on “student learning through a library program” (p.8) can be demonstrated. These examples of practice are to be strived for but are still not found in many schools and districts.

The Role of School Librarian

Principals and librarians continue to define roles differently. An ambiguity of role, ineffective evaluation, and the emphasis by administrators of one role over another (instructional, management, library supervisor, technology instructor, or source procurement) can weaken key areas of practice (Merga, 2019; Shannon, 2009; Stevenson, 2018) that are essential according to the American Association of School Libraries (AASL) standards (2018).

Defining roles has been emphasized in the research since the early 2000s and is still not settled. Johnston & Green (2018) conducted a systematic literature review that included empirical research studies published between 2004 and 2014. Of the 110 studies included 52 focused on the role of the school librarian (p. 6). Despite these studies to better define the role, ambiguity is perpetuated by the over reliance of principals learning from their own school librarian. Kizzier (2021) finds that “the role definitions seem to be highly dependent upon the person occupying the school library position as they can influence perceptions through relationships and influence the school library itself” (p. 70). When administrators only learn from their school librarian and do not receive formal training about the role of the librarian and how to supervise them, barriers continue to hold back the school librarian as a leader and an effective collaborative partner with a clearly defined role within the school (Kizzier, 2021; Loh et al., 2021; Lupton, 2016; Taylor, 2016; Stevenson, 2018). Barriers might include library or librarian schedules, unclear professional

and program goals, or staffing decisions that limit collaborative, leadership, and instructional opportunities. Underutilization of libraries can be linked to "unclear knowledge about the role and work of the school librarian" (Loh et al, 2021, p. 550). Leaders and teachers given the choice, value different roles of school librarians. Kizzier (2021) finds "Two school administrators emphasized the school librarian's role as teacher while another administrator emphasized the librarian's role as being a support system for stakeholders. Conversely, classroom teachers emphasized the librarian's role as collaborative partner and technology leader" (p. 69).

Stevenson (2018) examines how administrators who do not have an educational background in library science make decisions that result in differing roles "in regard to the school grade levels, service programs, instructional opportunities, and administrative expectations" (p.226). A popular role for the librarian is as technology leader. As technology demands have grown, so has the principals' view of the librarian as technology leader in their school (Baker et al., 2020; Dooney, 2021; Johnston, 2015; Newsum, 2018). In this approach it is evident that the principal desires to use the librarian as a professional development partner to transform practices in school. However, it also demonstrates a potentially overly narrow view of the role of the librarian that excludes key areas of library practice, such as reading motivation, collection and library management, and information literacy instruction. Using librarians as technology leaders ultimately can have mixed results (Ahfield, 2019; Newsum, 2018) for the library program.

Principals who take a shared leadership approach and view the school librarian as an asset and influence on school outcomes can take steps to build the capacity of the school librarian as a leader in the school. This leadership can take different forms. Librarians might provide resources and support for school wide initiatives, become key instructional partners, contribute to student learning outcomes, or promote technology and literacy. These roles are enabled when the principal articulates a vision for the school librarian within a school or more broadly at the district level (Ahfield, 2019). However, when comparing the principal's view of sharing leadership with an instructional coach versus a school librarian, Lewis (2019) explains that principals are apt to think of the instructional coach as an extension of themselves in the classroom, a familiarity that is rooted in their own experience in the classroom (p. 16). Conversely, principals may have difficulty clarifying the educational role of the school librarian and determining how to share leadership with them.

Centerwall (2019) describes librarians being rendered invisible when their subordinate role is emphasized. Such common librarian tasks such as providing classroom teachers with books, resources, or librarian-developed curriculum and instruction leads to the librarian's work being absorbed into the classroom teacher's practice or lessons. Using infrastructure theory, Centerwall (2019) suggests improving visibility by shifting the school library "from background to foreground" (Centerwall, 2019, p.6). Lupton (2016) provides an example of a principal, who may not be informed of the role of the librarian, has not successfully leveraged their school librarian, and is not able to describe the librarians' contributions to the school. The participant states "you pay for the 'T' part of the TL [teacher librarian] and you don't get any 'T' from the TL. That's an issue with me...So my difficulty is a teacher-librarian is employed under the same conditions as other teachers but doesn't do anywhere near the contact and face-to-face" (Lupton, 2016, p. 53).

Principals' advocacy for librarian positions influence funding, role definition, and staffing levels of school librarians (Ahlfeld, 2019; Kachel, 2018; Kachel & Lance, 2018). A key role of the principal in school library advocacy is to inform district leaders of the librarians' leadership role and instructional value (Baker et al., 2020; Celluci & Harland, 2022; Kachel, 2017). The AASL Standards are used in numerous studies to describe best practices, articulate the role of a strong library program, and advocate to school and district leaders (Beck, 2020; Cellucci & Harland, 2022; Harland et al., 2021). Harland et al. (2021)'s analysis of a transcript of a town hall with principals and superintendents details the leadership traits of school librarians aligned with AASL Standards. Although there have been a number of studies that use the AASL Standards to examine job descriptions, role definition, and perceptions of stakeholders (Elkins, 2018; Johnston & Green, 2018; Kizzier, 2018), fewer examine how the AASL standards influence programs (Johnston & Green, 2018). Johnston & Green (2018) in their systematic review of literature finds that the role of the school librarian has been an area often examined over the last decade. They find that librarians' actions on student learning outcomes, use of technology in the library, and the impact of the AASL Standards on school library programs are less examined. They call on graduate programs to continue articulating the roles of school librarians and study the methods of learning in school libraries. They state, "Combining a rigorous research process with practical knowledge could provide additional evidence-based results sorely needed for further grounding research for the profession" (Johnston & Green, 2018, p. 22).

Districts can take steps to clarify and strengthen the school librarians' role. Reviewing and updating job descriptions can update perceptions of the librarian and change the role within a school or district (Croft, 2022; Elkins, 2018). Boulden et al. (2019) examines the effectiveness of action research as part of an in-service district professional development that strengthened support for school library programs and built relationships with stakeholders, including district administrators. Knight (2022) recommends professional development for librarians and district leadership to overcome obstacles and barriers within district leadership to effect change and improve school libraries. Merga et al. (2021) proposes measures for evaluating collaboration between school librarians and teachers taking an evidence-based approach and presents ideas for collecting data on how often a library is used, satisfaction of teachers, students' growth as independent readers, and professional development for educators. This approach would educate teachers and administrators on what collaboration looks like and how it can contribute to improving student learning outcomes.

District Decision Makers

D'Orio (2020) writes that school board decisions are influenced by state laws and district and school leadership. He recommends reorienting advocacy toward state legislatures and administrators because "[m]ore than 10,000 librarians lost their jobs from 2009 to 2016, according to the NCES, a 19 percent decrease in the total number of positions, and boards have been a part of these cutbacks" (p.30). School boards voted for these cuts that were recommended by district leadership. Advocating toward administrators is not effective when there is a high turnover of upper-level administrators in schools and districts. This disrupts continuity of district goals, initiatives, staffing decisions, and support for school improvement plans. Some of the highest turnover has been recently documented in

the largest school districts (McMurdock, 2022; Rosenberg, 2022) and has been a chronic problem in rural districts (Ewbank, 2021).

Hiring library district administrators is one way to strengthen education and communication for district leaders about school librarians, who can offer professional development and support librarians in their schools. The school district library leadership or supervisors' role was examined in the Lilead study to determine their roles, responsibilities, and tasks (DiScala et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2017). Without clarification of the purpose of school libraries within a district, the responsibilities of library coordinators and librarians become murky and often do not align with AASL Standards. With the increased number of administrators in districts that do not have school librarian experience or background, there is an essential role for the library coordinator to provide professional development, create a vision and mission for library programs, develop policy, and advocate at the school and district levels (DiScala et al., 2019; Weeks et al., 2017). An idea studied by Branch-Mueller & Rodger (2019) is the professional growth of librarians into district leaders outside of the library department. The findings were that the development of skills and experience as a librarian well prepared them to transition to district leadership roles although few make the move.

In a literature review, Massey et al. (2016) further examines the perception that other district leaders hold of the library supervisor. Like school librarians, the role of the supervisor varies from district to district. Consistent responsibilities include advocating and supporting building-level programs, providing professional development, and ensuring consistent integration of technology, instruction, and leadership by school librarians. Another conclusion is that “[t]hey can provide a crucial advisory role to other district administrators in how the SLP [school library program] can improve student achievement” (Massey et al, p.399). A strong and consistent district school library administrator can provide stability for staff and programming, particularly in districts with high administrator turn-over, a key factor that influences the staffing of school librarians nationally (Kachel & Lance, 2018). However, the number of district library administrators is diminishing, leading to weaker school library programs and overreliance on librarians to fill leadership gaps and administrators with no librarianship experience (Croft, 2022).

Budgets & Legislation

Budgets are often the reason provided for eliminating school librarian positions. However, it is not the only factor influencing staffing decisions and can be paired with other reasons: lack of the library program’s effectiveness or a need for increased staff in another department (Kachel, 2018). Research over ten years that focused on the role of and impact of school librarians has not influenced funding decisions (Johnston & Green, 2018). In SLIDE, Kachel (2021) examines districts with high needs students that tend to eliminate school librarian positions and use funding for other programs. “While funding can be a serious factor, local school priorities and site-based decisions are just as likely to determine school library staffing” (p. 50). Shifting staffing dollars for professional positions to instead employing instructional support positions, often classified or paraprofessional, is one factor influencing the staffing of school libraries nationally (Kachel & Lance, 2018). There may be some influence from the school leader rooted in local building needs, but funding is often pre-determined at the district level leaving school leaders to make

decisions about staffing and resources within the limits of the budget (Ahlfeld, 2019). Even with a desire to strengthen the position of school librarian or libraries, a strong library program eludes some states and districts.

Legislation that intends to support school libraries has had mixed results on strengthening school libraries. Funding staffing, adopting curriculum standards, or developing incentive programs have been the purposes of some recent legislation. Young (2021) describes Washington state legislation that requires a specific level of school librarian staffing in every school but does not fund the staffing. Despite funding and improvements to school librarian state certification approved previously, school-based decision making has led to inequitable access to school libraries and librarians (Vercelletto, 2017). Young (2021) explains that "[m]any school district leaders and lawmakers have little to no knowledge of what a school librarian does today" (p. 28).

A number of articles in *Knowledge Quest*, the AASL's journal, present cases in which the 2018 AASL standards have been adopted at the district or state level. In each case, support from the departments of education underpinned each state's adoption, although the purposes vary. Alaska adopted the standards with the hope of making access to school libraries more equitable. Currently most librarian positions are in larger districts not smaller rural areas (Madsen & Rinio, 2021). Arkansas's adoption, led by the department of education school librarian representative, was part of a larger effort to help districts develop standards-based curriculum (Barnett, 2021). Kentucky's history of promoting school libraries and support by the state department of education naturally led to the integration of the AASL standards (Northern & Gardner, 2019). In one Vermont school district, integrating the standards was a collaboration between a librarian and the curriculum coordinator for the district (Ehler-Hansen & O'Meara, 2019). The Pennsylvania School Library Association collaborated with the Pennsylvania Department of Education to centralize the standards and online professional development that would trickle down to districts and schools. (Mackley, 2021). In New Jersey, a bill passed requiring students to receive instruction to increase their media literacy and research skills (Sitrin, 2023). To what extent integration of standards has an impact on staffing is not yet clear, but these states are positioned to align curriculum, instruction, and student learning goals with the AASL Standards and evaluate outcomes.

Knight (2022) highlights the limitations of turning around school library programs that are diminished from lack of funding and staffing. In Missouri, state legislation attempted to improve school libraries statewide by providing the opportunity to receive an exemplary library status. However, district and school staffing were so diminished few schools applied for this because they deemed it ineffective at improving their program (Knight, 2022, p. 14). This can be contrasted with a state initiative to make New Jersey schools "future ready" that was a participatory process and included stakeholders and education leaders including the New Jersey School Library Association (Lipuma & Leon, 2022). The result was that "150 districts and nearly 500 schools consulted the indicators and worked to gain certification" (Lipuma & Leon, 2022, p. 32).

Buress & Martin (2022) argue that school librarians should be prepared to "become full education players at local and state planning tables" (p. 227) to ensure their interests are inserted into legislation or when federal funds are available. State leaders' perception of the contribution of school libraries to school improvement plans was

uninformed, which resulted in only 31 of 51 states including school libraries in their initial applications under Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (p. 220). The ESSA funds are described as being for “Supporting Effective Instruction,” “to develop, revise, or update comprehensive literacy instruction plans,” or “provide access to technology and training” (Bures & Martin, 2022, p. 224). In the analysis of applications, Bures & Martin (2022) found school library references were included not in the original document but in the stakeholder feedback.

In a rural school district, Okhremtchouk and Jimenez-Castellanos (2018) examine the local politics that influence decisions to spend federal money from the American Recovery & Reinvestment Act allocated under the Obama administration. Firsthand accounts describe the process and politics of fund allocation that can impact staffing. Initially, the superintendent and school board decided together to cut budgets, including school libraries. It was not until families objected which ultimately led to the school board and superintendent being voted out. When librarians are legislatively active, they can better ensure that legislative decision makers support budgets and staffing that include school library staffing.

Impact of the Pandemic

Staffing challenges from the pandemic remain in schools and at the district level. Not only is there turnover in leadership positions (McMurdock, 2022, April 7; Rosenberg, 2022) but districts are reluctant to hire permanent positions with federal pandemic relief funds, anticipating a shortage of budget funds to sustain these positions when federal dollars run out (McMurdock, 2022, Aug. 23). Short term positions such as tutors and paraprofessionals are more apt to be hired over more permanent teaching and librarian positions. Torres (2022) describes how administrators, who do not understand the role of the librarian, are replacing certified librarians with inexperienced, emergency licensed staffing. This presents a particular risk to low-income schools because of the high number of unqualified or untrained staff. These staffing changes are eroding the role of the school librarian as an essential component of students' literacy education, including protection of students' freedom to read and access to books with diverse experiences, characters, and voices.

By emphasizing the longstanding roles and responsibilities of school librarians to promote literacy, as an instructional partner, and technology leader, Wright (2022) asserts in a recent that school and district leadership can use librarians to help with students' learning loss and social and emotional needs resulting from the pandemic. Wright's (2022) research examines the changing role of the school librarian during the pandemic and their struggle to remain relevant during remote instruction. School librarians describe being marginalized after the pandemic and never being integrated into the remote learning school. After the pandemic a virtual school option was maintained by the district but without a defined role for the school librarian. Even for librarians returning to school after the pandemic, their responsibilities had blended with other positions (education technology , instructional coach) as schools worked to meet district goals of standardizing technology and resources for all students.

Conclusion

Principal leadership was first studied in the 2000s and grew from state studies conducted around the same time. The negative impact of lapses in principal training on school librarianship have been documented in studies over the last 25 years with most recent attention being given to the erosion of the role of school librarians during the pandemic. Inconsistently defined roles at the district, state, and national levels can lead to an over-reliance on learning from one's own librarian and less skilled evaluations of school libraries. Identified were institutional barriers that perpetuate underdeveloped programs and facilitators that can help school libraries set and meet programmatic goals. School schedules, staffing decisions, and district budgets are cited as both impediments and potential drivers of collaboration and instructional and leadership opportunities. Without a unified vision of how school librarians contribute to student learning outcomes and whole school improvement goals, equitable access to school libraries and librarians continues.

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