The school library in a pandemic: Research to practice strategies for survival

By Carol A. Gordon

Snapshot

In this edition of Research into Practice, its regular author, Carol A. Gordon, explores two research stories, one told by an historian, the other by a scientist. In doing so Gordon makes a case for the transferability of these scenarios to the practice of teacher librarians as they face the challenge of educating youth in the midst of a public health crisis.

As the COVID-19 pandemic lingers communities around the world face complex issues as they plan and implement the re-opening of their schools. A research to practice approach sees this challenge as an opportunity to inform and shape the role of teacher librarians in a post-pandemic world. *The Conversation*, a tax-exempt public charity ' … aims to unlock knowledge from experts, helping to bring facts into the public discussion and to counter misinformation.' (**The Conversation, 2020**) To this end, experts from diverse fields of study provide their research findings to contemporary challenges such as the re-opening of schools during a pandemic. *The Conversation* places these findings side-by-side on its website and advocates for an integrative approach which applies research findings from one academic discipline to problems in seemingly unrelated disciplinary areas. Such a cross-disciplinary approach is especially of interest to teacher librarians who already negotiate theoretical and practical knowledge across library information science, technology, and educational disciplines, not to mention their broad reach across disciplinary knowledge that is foundational to meeting the needs of their patrons. A cross-disciplinary approach can offer teacher librarians promising practices and even solutions to social justice issues such as inequitable access to library resources and services for marginalized learners that is exacerbated in pandemic environments.

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This article explores the research stories of two cases, one told by an historian, the other by a scientist, that model strategies and methods they used that are transferable to the practice of teacher librarians facing the challenges of educating youth in the midst of a public health crisis.

Case 1: Lessons learned from an historical study of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic

Battenfield (2020) studied how schools responded to re-opening during the 1918 pandemic and presented three lessons learned that can inform school librarianship: Invest in school nurses; partner with other authorities; and tie education to other priorities.

Invest in school nurses. Battenfield's research spotlighted how school nurses played a transformative role when they were first placed in schools in the United States in 1902. Instead of sending sick students home, where they would receive no treatment, nurses cared for the children in school and provided health information to their families. A study showed that schools with nurses cut student absences in half, resulting in an increase in the number of cities that funded school nurses. By 1913 500 U.S. cities employed school-based medical professionals. In November 1918, New York City Health Commissioner Royal Copeland noted in a report, 'Epidemic Lessons Against next Time' that school nurses gave students

> ' … a degree of safety that would not have been possible otherwise' and '… gave us the opportunity to educate both the children and their parents to the demands of health.'

In 1919 S.M. Connor, a nurse in Neenah, Wisconsin, documented her work and presented it to her school board. She noted that while her 1,216 home visits, health talks, transportation of children to doctors, and provision of school-based examinations and follow-ups took place in the context of the influenza epidemic, they were not motivated by the pandemic, but by her professional judgement of how she could best serve the health needs of the youth in her school.

Can teacher librarians replicate the success of school nurses 101 years later? Teacher librarians have clearly outpaced mainstream education. Updated learning standards, digital resources and tools, and remote access to them, re-designed libraries as learning spaces, and innovative, evidence-based teaching methods strongly indicate that teacher librarians are innovators. Just as important, however, is the dissemination of these reforms beyond the school and library community. It is critical that stakeholders, parents, teachers, principals, departments of education, and legislators are aware of the teacher librarian's role, especially in the charged atmosphere of a public health crisis.

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Partner with other authorities. A study of schools in 43 cities during the 1918 pandemic identified, ' … planning that brings public health, education officials, and political leaders together' as key to successful responses to the pandemic. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Rochester, New York, U.S.A. school and health officials collaborated with organizations representing immigrant communities. In Los Angeles the mayor, health commissioner, police chief, and school superintendent worked together to monitor infection rates, provide teachers additional training, and create and deliver homework for 90,000 schoolchildren. While schools were closed in the city of St. Louis police cars served as ambulances and teachers worked in health agencies. Within a month of students' return to school on November 14th there was an upsurge of influenza and schools were closed again. These collaborations helped schools as they reopened. Political, health and education leaders planned a gradual reopening with high schools followed a month later by elementary schools. Because of these collaborations St. Louis reported the best outcome nationally with 358 deaths per 100,000.

Across the library profession conversations about promising practices tend to remain in silos so teacher librarians have few models, like those described above, to inspire their work with public health and political entities. As we have seen with COVID-19, it is also a challenge for public health to forge a political agenda. When teacher librarians have opportunities to interact with school nurses and other public health staff in their communities, they can find models in the research. For example, Oliver (2006) researched the role of politics in public health issues. He offered three criteria as he considered how public health issues get on the policy agenda.

- Perception regarding severity of the problem;
- Responsibility for the problem;
- Affected populations.

Our experience with COVID-19 includes instances relative to all three criteria. In the U.S. we have experienced varying perceptions of the pandemic and friction between the public health/science community and politicians. Low-income and minority populations have experienced disproportionate numbers of cases and deaths. Teacher librarians, with the critical support of their principals and communities, can play a role in grassroots attempts to support public health and science with regard to these three criteria by collaborating with public health staff and local government to disseminate information and support the campaigns needed to control community spread.

Tie education to other priorities. In 1916 the U.S. Bureau of Education proclaimed that the '... education of the schools is important, but life and health are more important.' As a result reformers of this Progressive Era established school lunch programs, built playgrounds, and promoted outdoor education. They attacked societal barriers to child health and welfare by enacting child labor laws, making school attendance compulsory, and improving the tenement

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housing. By the time the pandemic hit, President Woodrow Wilson had declared 1918 the 'Children's Year.' Schools stood ready to deliver not only lessons but also food and health care. When schools reopened children could learn in clean schools with outdoor spaces. Teacher librarians can be voices for these kinds of paradigm shifts that see a role for educators to be proactive advocates for community health.

Case 2. Learning from the past from systems engineering: How a coordinated response can help re-open schools during COVID-19

Boardley (2020) saw the connection between bringing the process of planning the use of space-age technology to Project Apollo that landed men on the Moon in 1969. When General Motors hired a NASA Administrator to bring space-age technology to car manufacturing, Boardley built his systems engineering process into the design of vehicles and now works on integrating statistical

and management sciences into future moon shots. He describes how the Apollo method could be applied to pandemic issues such as re-opening schools for U.S. children. Apollo engineering used six key steps of systems engineering to facilitate the management of such a task which include:

- Define requirements;
- Create the relevant committees and assign responsibilities;
- Create relevant subcommittees and assign responsibilities;
- Work the plan;
- Evaluate the solution against the subcommittee's requirements;
- Support rollout.

Here is what these steps look like when applied to schooling during a pandemic.

Define requirements. The first step in planning to return students to classrooms or to online learning is identifying stakeholders – including parents, students, teachers, neighbors and employers – to hear their concerns. Then, planners must itemize the key benefits that school provides in addition to education, such as: childcare for working parents, meals for hungry children, discipline and socialization.

Create the relevant committees and assign responsibilities. Coordinating a wide range of experts is critical to safely educating children in person. To do so, a small task force outlines an overarching approach breaking down the overall effort into its component parts, such as transportation to schools, school ventilation and sanitation, curriculum development and serving meals. The task force then creates a committee for each 'sub-problem,' such as an on-site education committee, testing and tracing, a remote education committee and a medical committee. To ensure that each individual group contributes to a successful overall solution, the task force develops committee requirements to guide and evaluate their efforts, while giving each committee as much flexibility as possible in leveraging its expertise.

Create the relevant subcommittees and assign responsibilities. Each committee outlines its approach to its sub-problem and creates subcommittees to provide more detail on different elements of the approach. For example, the on-site education committee might break off into smaller groups that address safety enforcement, classroom design and building ventilation. Each subcommittee is given 'subcommittee requirements' to guide its efforts. If necessary, work can be further specialized within sub-committees: The Space Shuttle program involved more than a dozen levels of responsibility.

Work the plan. As each subcommittee tackles its assignment, coordinators orchestrate their efforts to avert missteps and enhance synergies between other groups. For example, if the safety subcommittee concludes that some children will not keep masks on in class, the coordinator might create more aggressive requirements for those working on classroom design and ventilation.

Evaluate the solution against the subcommittee's requirements. Integrate proposals from every committee. Once all issues facing on-site education have been addressed, individual solutions – on masks, building ventilation, classroom design, testing and more – are evaluated as a whole before being approved as the committee's integrated, overall solution. The committee solution is then evaluated against the committee's requirements. Each of the committee solutions is then evaluated as a whole before becoming the task force's plan. The task force's plan is then evaluated against its requirements. Stakeholder representatives then evaluate whether the plan ensures that schools can, indeed, open safely.

Support rollout. Initially, these protocols are implemented at a small scale and then ramped up slowly as all are trained to understand their responsibilities: teachers, administrators and other staff, parents, students, employers, police, doctors, families and government authorities. Maintenance and adaptation is needed to deal with unforeseen events such as schools running out of masks or students and school staff getting sick. Once an effective vaccine is available and the pandemic dissipates, the plan can detail how some protocols can be safely dismantled.

Principals, school boards, and district leadership could benefit from these strategies. Teacher librarians have the capacity, preferably as members of these committees, to share this knowledge. The importance of this opportunity for librarians to bring research to practice cannot be overstated.

What are the Implications of Research Findings for Shaping the Role of Teacher Librarians in Reopening Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

As information specialists teacher librarians can find partnerships in the public health and political arenas as they interpret, package, and disseminate research findings and promising practices that can inform decision-making across their communities. Like school nurses, teacher librarians will be more effective when they are connecting, communicating, and collaborating with the local public health and political infrastructures. Like system engineers they will be more effective if they take a cross-disciplinary approach to structure their work across medical, public health, educational, social, economic, and political sectors.

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The individual efforts of teacher librarians to forge partnerships with public health staff and to build influence with politicians, however well-planned and executed, cannot in and of themselves effect lasting change if they are not part of a policy that is supported and communicated across the profession by library and educational associations. The library profession needs one voice that boldly re-defines a concept of 'advocacy' that is rooted in policy and is consistent across the profession. Presently, policy as defined by the American Library Association is narrowly focused

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on selection policy of library materials, i.e., the selection, weeding, and reconsideration of library resources. While this policy has merit it is a narrow interpretation of policy that does not meet the needs of librarianship to build influence and political clout by forming alliances in the arenas of public health and politics that are essential to the survival of not only teacher librarianship, but librarianship as a whole. This need is exacerbated by the crisis of a pandemic and driven by underlying public health and political issues such as inequitable access to information resources and services. Oliver (2006) counsels that without policy decision-makers form incremental policy that applies superficial change rather than comprehensive reform. Such a fragmented approach to public health and political issues leaves our society and our profession unprepared for the next crisis.

Oliver (2006) articulates the role of political analysis in his study of public health policy that can serve as a model for the library profession for two reasons. Firstly, librarianship addresses public health through its concern for intellectual, social, and emotional health of its patrons. The profession addresses these concerns through initiatives such as intellectual freedom, the integrity of information, basic human rights, and equitable access to information resources and services.

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While our profession holds these fundamental beliefs that drive our work, librarianship has not yet fully acknowledged its need for political analysis and policy that can help us view conflict and power as intrinsic elements of policy making and as determinants of governmental action and inaction. Oliver (2006) counsels that policy making rests on understanding the origin and goals of policies, anticipating and diagnosing problems in policy implementation and performance, and considering how programs could be evaluated and refined over time. Secondly, the library profession depends on securing public funding and the development of our sphere of influence, which can be strengthened or weakened by policy. Such policy goes beyond 'lobbying' to secure the legislative sponsorship of elected officials. Oliver (2006) acknowledges that the general direction of policy is not in our control because it depends on trends in the economy, social norms and political attitudes. There are opportunities, however for policy innovation when we are poised to take advantage by matching proposals with perceived problems and political forces of the moment.

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Oliver (2006) counsels that we need to be skilled policy entrepreneurs in seizing opportunities for innovation. Public health professionals and librarians need each other as partners to design effective policies and programs, especially, but not exclusively, in times of crisis. In the arena of politics, bounded rationality, fragmented political institutions, resistance from concentrated interests,

and fiscal restraints lead political leaders to adopt incremental policy or change rather than comprehensive reform.

So, in this time of crisis of public health that is ravaging populations, economies, and social norms also comes a time of opportunity for teacher librarians to join their colleagues in the profession and across the realms of public health and politics to work with their library associations to address policy as a matter of self-preservation.

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