

Building a supportive school climate for the Essential School Library

By Carol A. Gordon

Snapshot

Dr Carol Gordon explores the meaningful use of school library resources and services and in particular the use of Constructivist teaching methods as opposed to an Essentialist approach. Gordon argues that a Constructivist approach positions the role of the school library, and the teacher librarian, as essential.

Teacher librarians are transitioning their iconic, print-based libraries to modern, digital spaces with great success. Their instructional role has grown substantially, driven by their expertise in information processing and knowledge construction. Despite how the profession has matured the school library remains apart from institutional mainstream teaching and learning that takes place in school classrooms. In addition, teacher librarians are often at the centre of controversy in dynamic social and political climates that challenge beliefs and values that are seminal to their profession. These foundational beliefs include fair and equitable access to information and instruction that raises awareness of misinformation and disinformation. Now, more than ever, teacher librarians are at the centre of social and political controversy that threatens the free flow of information and raises concerns about the viability of the school library concept that some view by some as disruptive to a traditional education. How do we prepare for challenges that position school libraries as a dispensable liability? How do we organize an offensive, rather than defensive strategy that supports the school library as essential to the education of our youth?

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Most often teacher librarians look inward to determine how they can deal with challenges and opportunities that affect school library practice in terms of priorities, policies, and procedures. At the same time school schedules and pedagogies that are classroom-centric often constrain the work of teacher librarians who want to provide equitable access to school library resources and services. While looking inward to solve issues created by traditional educational structures and practices teacher librarians often struggle to maintain a high profile within traditional schooling. They are the gatekeepers who teach critical digital literacies, including recognition of misinformation and disinformation and safe, responsible internet use that is crucial for the functionality of a democratic society. However, the school library concept is viewed by some as disruptive to conventional schooling. Is it possible to establish the school library as an essential component of a modern education within current educational structures?

Teacher librarians have made progress in developing collaborative strategies that align classrooms and teachers with the school library and teacher librarian. Kuhlthau & Maniotes (2010) offer an example of multi-disciplinary teams.

Secondary school students employ the full inquiry process in their daily studies to meet standards in subjects across the curriculum and to engage in all five types of learning. Life science investigations centre on real world scientific questions that are important to students. For instance, to meet the objective of learning about organisms in the environment and dangers of the global spread of disease, such as an influenza pandemic, the school librarian joins the science teacher and writing teacher to form the core team. An expert from the local hospital joins the extended team to share their experiences related to contagious disease. Students are guided in conversing, charting, and composing throughout the stages of the inquiry process. If needed, a technology expert may join the extended team. Students create presentations in Web 2.0 formats and discuss their findings on class wiki discussion threads and on blogs. Additional experts may be consulted online and brought in as speakers to add authenticity to the inquiry. The history teacher joins the team in a follow-up inquiry on the history of pandemics. In this team, each member takes on a primary area of focus and a secondary area. The staff has attended workshops on guided inquiry, and they understand the ISP to varying degrees. With the school librarian's help, they all focus on the ISP during this cycle of learning to understand the stages and help each other track learning about learning. This example also highlights the flexible team approach showing that with each inquiry a new team is formed based on the learning goals. As in this case, the history teacher creates a new team for a relevant and timely follow-up inquiry. In this way the entire school functions as a learning organism in which one learning event feeds another and expertise is maximized across the board.

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Interdisciplinary teams capitalise on the school library as the only place in the school where all academic disciplines are represented. It is where information processes and acquired knowledge are used to create solutions to problems embedded in a rainbow of academic disciplines. Teacher librarians who make this connection explicit can demonstrate the extent to which the school library supports all school curriculum, and all teachers and students. Collaborative strategies pave the way for teachers, principals, and teacher librarians to find common ground that satisfies students' need to build a strong knowledge base that enables higher order thinking.

A first step to universalising this level of collaboration is creating a consensus among teacher librarians, classroom teachers, and principals that informs the functions of the school library's facility, collection, staff, instruction, and budget. Next steps include getting consensus around the concept of the school library as a viable extension of the classroom. The classroom become an extension of the school library using digital technology, a powerful tool that can support collaborative teaching and deliver lessons to students anywhere and anytime. Most importantly, these strategies are supported by school curriculum across the academic disciplines that integrates information literacy standards with academic standards. Teacher librarians can play a critical role in curating their print and digital collections in collaboration with their teaching partners to align with their school's curriculum standards across the disciplines. Teacher librarians and classroom teachers work in teams to curate and deliver resources and lessons. This model also affords

teachers and teacher librarians the flexibility they need to deliver high quality, differentiated instruction. Such explicit connections can encourage, and can even mandate, the extensive use of school library resources and the expertise of teacher librarians. The integration of the school library in everyday instruction in all learning spaces in the school is critical in establishing school libraries as essential in the education of youth across all grade levels. This model also affords teachers and teacher librarians the flexibility they need to deliver high quality, differentiated instruction. The school library collection becomes the shared text in print and digital formats and the library, classrooms, hallways, gymnasiums, and auditoriums are showcases for learners' content creation. Online teaching can deliver school library resources and instruction in every corner of the school as information and instruction flow freely.

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A plausible outcome of this level of collaboration could be the universal use of guided inquiry, based on Kuhlthau's staged model of the information process, that structures the teaching of information literacies, as well as the teaching of content, to support the cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of learning. As a diagnostic tool the information search process, also known as guided inquiry, signals when learners need intervention to complete their information tasks. Shouldn't all educators be aware of this predictive tool that signals the learner's need for intervention and help?

This important groundwork enables teacher librarians to prepare their school communities for the high degree of collaboration and communication needed to adequately teach all learners about the digital world in equitable and meaningful ways. However, there is a pedagogical divide among educators that creates barriers to collaborative teaching. Principals and some teachers, for the most part and to varying degrees, embrace an Essentialist approach to educating youth. This view emphasises the teaching of content through memorisation measured by testing and favours the use of textbooks and teacher-centric classrooms. The philosophy of 'the greatest good for the greatest number' often drives administrative decisions. Essentialist beliefs can present barriers to collaborative teaching models that support a Constructivist approach that is conducive to resource-based inquiry learning. An Essentialist approach often supports policies and procedures that obstruct the work of teacher librarians who embrace a constructivist methodology that challenges students to construct their knowledge through inquiry. A Constructivist approach requires an understanding of how learners process information as they use primary and secondary sources, in a variety of formats, as they work through an information search process that identifies cognitive, social, emotional phenomena that point to the need for intervention and help.

Gordon & Cicchetti (2023) conducted survey research and found that these opposing views present barriers to the provision of equitable access and meaningful use of school library resources and services. The data strongly indicate that teacher librarians have difficulty in operationalising constructivist-based practices when they work with principals who demonstrate Essentialist approaches in their administrative decisions such as school scheduling that results

in library closing during school hours, insufficient funding for library materials and equipment, and hiring practices that disproportionately include younger, less experienced teacher librarians. Teacher librarians who participated in this study viewed these decisions as barriers to their delivery of equitable access and meaningful use of school library resources and services. The study also showed that teacher librarians demonstrated strong Constructivist beliefs that motivated them to enact enabling strategies that eliminated or mitigated barriers presented by Essentialist-based decision-making. The study raises an important question: Are Essentialist and Constructivist educational approaches mutually exclusive or can they co-exist for the benefit of the school library and the entire school community? A reasonable approach is to acknowledge that both approaches identify two dimensions of learning rather than opposing viewpoints. Some content is best learned through Essentialist methods such as memorisation and testing as the learner builds a knowledge base. A constructivist approach encourages learners to build on their existing knowledge to engage in critical thinking and problem solving that involve evaluating, interpreting, and creating.

Is it possible for school principals and administrators to support their constructivist school libraries? In a study that explored barriers and enablers of equitable access and meaningful use of school library resources and services Gordon & Ciccetti (2023) found that teacher librarians documented how their principals enabled or obstructed their use of Constructivist teaching methods. Those who worked with supportive principles presented strong evidence that their students were engaged in deep learning in the school library. The survey responses of teacher librarians demonstrated a successful collaborative teaching model as teachers and principals supported their teacher librarians to establish a collaborative school ethos.

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The integration of the school library facility and collection with curriculum and teaching has implications for transforming how teacher librarians view library staffing. Every library staff member is trained to support teaching and learning commensurate with their level of expertise. Staffing includes and include shared personnel, such as teacher aides, who work with students in the classroom as well as the school library. In addition, teachers can play an enhanced role in the selection and acquisition processes of learning materials and equipment. In this scenario the school library collection is viewed as part of the classroom as well as the library and is an integral component of the education process. These strategies are helpful in softening the essentialist-constructivist divide. They are cost-effective strategies that expand the availability of print and digital resources as shared resources. The school library as classroom is cost-effective when learning materials are shared digitally. The library's presence can be felt in every corner of the school. The school library website becomes the hub of digital resources, and the teacher librarian is viewed as not only the provider and administrator of these resources,

but also the information literacy instructor who models the teaching of information and digital literacies for administrators, teachers, and students through live and remote tutorial sessions. Students, teachers, and teacher aides are trained by the teacher librarian as they learn about information processes and the digital tools that support knowledge construction. Only when the school library becomes as essential as the school classroom can teacher librarians be viewed as essential.

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References

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Dr Carol A. Gordon is the Principal Consultant at Gordon & Associates Consulting. Dr Gordon was formerly Associate Professor, Library & Information Science at Rutgers – The State University of New Jersey, USA.