



Evidence Summary

The Actions of Teacher-Librarians Minimize or Reinforce Barriers to Adolescent Information Seeking

A Review of:

Meyers, Eric M., Lisa P. Nathan, and Matthew L. Saxton. "Barriers to Information Seeking in School Libraries: Conflicts in Perceptions and Practice." *Information Research* 12:2 (2007): paper 295.

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Abstract

Objective – To study high school teacher-librarians and whether their actions and reactions are aligned with their perception of the role they play in creating an information seeking and learning environment.

Design – Triangulation qualitative research undertaken over a 16 month period (Fall 2005 – 2007).

Setting – Six high school libraries in the Puget Sound region of the state of Washington, United States.

Subjects – Six teacher-librarians, each with a minimum of ten years experience and classroom teachers and students. This sample represented the range of school sizes, the rural, urban, and suburban mix, and the range of significant socioeconomic conditions (qualification for subsidized lunch and English as an additional language) in the region.

Methods – Four interviews of one to two hours were held with each teacher-librarian during school hours. Initial interviews were recorded by hand and a set question protocol was used (and included in the appendix). Questions were asked about their professional background and training; their job duties, day to day activities and priorities; their perceptions as to how others

(e.g., peers and administrators) support the library; the goals of their library's services; how students use the library; and their critical assessment of their role. Subsequent interviews were undertaken within two days of a classroom visit to the library and also followed a set protocol of questions (Appendix D). The second set of interviews was audio recorded and transcribed.

Two classroom teachers from each school were interviewed for 30 minutes and audio recorded using a set interview protocol (Appendix C) within two days of class participation in library instruction.

Library observations ranging from two to three hours each occurred during a minimum of seven randomized times at each library. These observation sessions typically included class instructional sessions of thirty to ninety minutes. The observation protocols are described in an appendix to the study.

Consistent note-taking, varying of observation times and days of week, use of triangulated methods, comparison of emergent themes with other studies, audio-taping interviews, inter-coder checks, analyzing data for observer effect, and a number of other approaches ensured validity.

Kuhlthau's theory of intermediation and Zone of Intervention was used as a theoretical framework to categorize the teacher-librarians' perceptions of their roles and their observed activities. Harris and Dewdney's principles of information seeking behaviour were used as an analytic framework to study the difference between the teacher-librarians' perceptions of their roles and their observed practices. These five roles are organizer of information; expert in locating material; identifier and instructor of general sources; advisor of search strategy; and mediator in the process of constructing meaning (Kuhlthau).

Main Results – The findings were framed in the six principles of information seeking (Harris & Dewdney) and were presented through use of narrative captured in both the observations and interviews.

Principle 1: Information needs arise from the help-seeker's situation.

The high school students in the library to complete assignments about which the teacher-librarians were not apprised; therefore the teacher-librarians were unable to assist the students in meeting information needs.

Principle 2: The decision to seek help or not seek help is affected by many factors.

Principle 3: People tend to seek information that is most accessible.

Issues of control were the greatest barrier to students' successful information seeking behaviour. In the environments observed, the greatest balance of power was within the control of the teachers, including when and if the students would have access to the library, and whether the teacher-librarian would be informed of the assignment. Within the library facility, the teacher-librarians demonstrated a high need for control and power over the students' activities and behaviour, and the students themselves had almost no power.

Principle 4: People tend to first seek help or information from interpersonal sources, especially from people like themselves.

Principle 5: Information seekers expect emotional support.

The interpersonal style of each teacher-librarian had an affect on the nature of the students' information seeking behaviour. The narratives demonstrated how the practices of staff, in particular, those actions that set expectations for student behaviour, had an affect on the actual information seeking activities undertaken by students.

Principle 6: People follow habitual patterns in seeking information.

The narrative used to recount the unsuccessful instruction and research session demonstrates that unless students are convinced of the reasons why they should change their approach, they will not change habitual patterns in seeking information. Students use familiar sources and their familiarity is with Google and Wikipedia. In order for them to understand why these sources alone are not adequate, the students would need to experience a situation that demonstrates this and would cause them to reconsider their habitual patterns.

Conclusion – Students were not exposed to teacher-librarian behaviours and roles that would enable the development of information literacy skills. The absence of collaboration between teachers and teacher-librarians was detrimental to the support of students in their assigned tasks. Students were not able to carry out information seeking practices with any autonomy and were given no meaningful reason or evidence as to why they should consider different practices. The failure to recognize that students have information habits that must be validated in order to assist them in changing or establishing new information seeking behaviours was problematic. The adolescents' need for affective support was negated and had consequences that affected their information seeking experience.

These teacher-librarians perceive that they fulfill roles in support of information literacy learning, but their behaviours and actions contradict this perception. Teacher-librarians must be able to identify, analyze and change their behaviours and actions in order to better enable student achievement.

Commentary

The findings of this study will be of interest to teacher-librarians, teachers, and school administrators. It could create awareness about how failure to collaborate and mitigate the

barriers within the high school setting creates constraints for student development of information seeking skills.

This study should provide insight about the mediator role teacher-librarians can fulfill and the context necessary for it to be successful. In particular, the context of information use in everyday life is required in order for adolescents to consider why and how their information seeking can improve.

The study should also inform the pre- and in-service education of teacher-librarians to ensure that practices around rules and restrictions, and the validation of the importance and affect of interpersonal interactions enable positive roles as mediators and support student information seeking behaviours.

This research does not identify why the gap between perception and actual behaviours so consistently occurred, or what measures could be taken to address this significant ongoing concern. In addition, this study was undertaken in a region that was moving to a learning environment with a commitment to authentic learning. The policies, guidelines or formalized context of library services was not made evident and this raises some question about the transferability of these research findings.

The narrative anecdotes recounted in the findings do not provide any indication as to the frequency of such observed incidences. The sample provided is very small and without any context regarding the reliability of the result.

The authors acknowledged that a significant constraint of this research has been the absence of student perspectives. This will be resolved in the next stage of this study, which will utilize a survey instrument with the students.

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