

## Developing a Collaborative Culture

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Collaboration implies mutual interdependence as well as mutual respect. Each of the participants must bring something of value to the collaborative table. Muronaga and Harada (1999) assert that successful collaboration is based on a shared vision, common goals, and a climate of trust and mutual respect. Small (in press) states, "To be motivated to collaborate, all participants must first see some personal value in collaboration and believe that they have the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful collaborative partners." These are prerequisites to establishing a collaborative culture.

Collaborative instructional and curriculum planning is one of the most important roles of the twenty-first century school library media specialist. Effective collaborations between library media specialists and teachers, according to *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning*, "helps to create a vibrant and engaged community of learners, strengthens the whole school program as well as the library media program, and develops support for the school library media program throughout the whole school" (AASL and AECT 1998, 51). Yet, there is evidence that these types of librarian-teacher partnerships are not as common as we might like (Haycock, 1999). Haycock asserts that the amount of actual involvement of library media specialists in collaboration with classroom teachers does not match expectations.

Let's step back for a moment and consider the following questions that, when answered, may help us to understand how to remedy this mismatch of actions and expectations.

- How can we foster collaborative behaviors?
- What factors seem to facilitate collaboration?
- What strategies are library media specialists using to create a collaborative culture in their schools?

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Information and Technology houses a wealth of excellent resources on librarian-teacher collaboration. This article draws from that literature to describe some of the recent research on collaboration and some of the suggested guiding principles for fostering successful collaboration. It also presents several ideas for effective collaboration solicited directly from practitioners. Since this article does not provide an exhaustive review of the resources and ideas available, I encourage you, the reader, to seek out additional information within and outside the ERIC Clearinghouse and to share your ideas and successful collaborative experiences with your colleagues. The ERIC Clearinghouse on Information and Technology (ERIC/IT) at Syracuse University launched the first full-text database in the national ERIC system. Users can now search ERIC/IT ([www.ericit.org](http://www.ericit.org)) for more than one thousand of the latest research reports, conference papers, opinion papers, selected articles and other documents in the

fields of library science and educational technology, and, with a simple click of the mouse, download the complete document into their computers.

## Research on Collaboration

Russell (2000) states that collaboration, in addition to leadership and technology, supports authentic student learning which, he contends, is the “goal of the successful, student-centered library media program.” Manzo (2000) cites the research of Lance which found that test scores increase as library media specialists spend more time collaborating with and providing training to teachers, contributing input into curricula, and managing the school’s information technology.

Getz (1996) contends that school size and teachers’ awareness of librarians and knowledge about what they do, among other factors, affected the likelihood of cooperative work. DeGroff (1997), through a 161-item survey to elementary educators across the U.S., finds that collaboration often manifests itself in more casual rather than systematic ways, which may, itself, also be related to school size. That is, smaller schools may provide more opportunities for less departmentalization and more interactions among educators.

Haycock (1998) notes that flexible scheduling and administrator expectations affected collaboration. Kearney (2000) also stresses the importance of flexible scheduling to facilitate collaboration and recommends the creation of advisory groups and library advocates as one successful strategy for accomplishing this. Callison (1999) finds that library media specialists who have flexible schedules have more time for collaboration.

Hartzell (1997) asserts that one of the major reasons that collaboration with library media specialists is not typically practiced by teachers is that during their teacher training programs they were not exposed to the value-added benefits of cooperative curriculum and instructional planning. Logan (2000) suggests that library media specialists should find ways to teach future classroom teachers about the collaborative possibilities during their student teaching experiences.

A number of informative articles that use a case study approach to describe successful collaboration efforts in a specific school or school district may also be found in ERIC. For example, Abilock and Lusignan (1998) describe the collaborative development of a science-based computer simulation on global warming for a group of sixth graders, Bishop and Larimer (1999) describe how one school district used a collaborative approach to literacy development for students at all levels. Farwell (1998) profiles collaborative projects developed at Miami-Dade elementary schools.

## Principles and Strategies for Successful Collaboration

Various authors offer principles for effective collaboration. Callison (1999) suggests the importance of carefully defined roles for each collaborative partner, a comprehensive planning process; shared resources, risks, and control; and continuity over time. Following a two-year, field-based study examining how collaborative partnership roles are defined in an educational community, Jones (2000) formulates three principles for effective collaboration: (1) all partners must support and maintain the collaborative relationship, (2) an integrated curriculum must be developed, and (3) resource-based instruction is enhanced by technology-driven learning.

Awareness of the roles and expertise of library media specialists is also cited as an important factor in creating collaborative partnerships. Hartzell (1997) advocates a proactive approach by library media specialists in their relationships with teachers and suggests one strategy for accomplishing heightened awareness and visibility through greater participation in non-library educational professional organizations and conferences.

- Some practitioners were asked to share their strategies for establishing a collaborative culture in their schools. Their ideas are presented below.
- Begin by establishing a relationship with just one teacher and developing effective collaborative projects. Successful examples of librarian-teacher collaboration can become contagious, creating a demand for other such experiences throughout the school. Success breeds success.
- Be open and friendly with your teachers. Go seek them out because they aren't going to come looking for you. A proactive library media specialist is a critical prerequisite to successful collaboration.
- Volunteer to do staff development workshops on technology. This helps to establish your credibility as an instructor and your expertise in a valuable area for potential collaboration.
- Develop administrator support for flexible scheduling and collaborative planning. Administrator support can make a big difference in how hard or easy it is to create cooperative relationships with teachers.
- Sit in on team or grade-level meetings or other days when planning occurs.
- Study classroom and hallway bulletin boards; find out what is happening and think of ways you might collaborate.
- Get assigned to committees as an initial introduction to working with teachers.
- Submit articles to your district newsletter highlighting student activities related to collaboration projects. Offer to be in class the day the teacher assigns a research project to give a research pep talk.

All of these strategies help to develop a collaborative mentality (Small, in press) in which *all* collaborative partners understand the importance and benefits of collaboration to themselves, each other, and their students.

*If you have proven strategies for fostering a collaborative culture in your school and would like to add them to this list, please email them to me at [drruth@syr.edu](mailto:drruth@syr.edu).*

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