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The Role of the Principal in the Evaluation of the School's Library Media Specialist

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As many library media specialists in the United States know, administrators' evaluation of their work seldom covers the many facets of work in today's school media center. Many factors combine to compromise the utility of the evaluation of library media specialists by the school administrator. Paramount among these factors are: (a) increased demands on the school principal as the instrument of accountability; (b) the tendency to use an evaluation model designed for teachers, not library media specialists; and (c) the dramatic changes that have occurred in the work of the library media specialist. This author analyzes briefly each of these influences and makes recommendations about altering the evaluation of the school's library media specialist to provide a more effective means of helping achieve information literacy, one of the 21st century's goals in the education of American children.

Introduction

It is no secret to many library media specialists that the processes used to evaluate their performance as employees often have little relationship to the work they actually do (Taylor & Bryant, 1996; Young, 1995; Tucker & Strong, 1994). Unfortunately, many administrators remain unaware of this and, as a result, the value of library media specialist performance appraisals often is severely diminished. The problem this represents is important both to library media specialists and to principals.

Evaluations are supposed to have utility. That is, evaluations should yield information that helps bring about needed change or that validates what is being done as appropriate and worthy. Inaccurate evaluations are unfair to the librarian and misleading to the principal. In the long run, the cost can be high. We know that the principal is an important figure in the development of quality library media programs (Oberg, 1997; Oberg, Hay, & Henri, 2001; Wilson & Lyders, 2001), but his or her ability to make appropriate personnel, resource, scheduling, and support decisions is impaired if the library media specialist's evaluation does not provide a realistic picture and assessment of his or her role and contribution.

Library media specialists have noted and addressed this evaluative discrepancy. Lamb (1989) pointed out the importance of using evaluation methods tailored to the work of the library media specialist as opposed to the work of the classroom teacher. In response to this mismatch between evaluation process and the nature of the work, a number of improvements have been proposed. Lamb proposed evaluation forms including a form that

could be used by students using the library. Mann (1992) also focused on the development of evaluation forms and instruments. More recently, Belcastro (1998) developed a performance appraisal system for library media specialists. Her system included such factors as: (a) identifying expectations for service; (b) tying performance to broadly defined goals of library service; (c) translating these broad goals into standards of performance; and (d) applying these standards objectively in the performance appraisal. Belcastro added the dimensions of any fair and equitable employee appraisal system to the list of reforms educators recommended.

These works and others like them, however, appeared in publications targeted to library media specialists. They were not read by school administrators, and the evaluation of library media personnel remains unchanged in many school districts. There continues to be a mismatch between the work performed and the work evaluated (Taylor & Bryant, 1996). Had school libraries remained primarily as depositories of print material, this flaw in personnel evaluation process might perhaps be overlooked as an injustice to the library media specialist, but not potentially damaging to the educational mission of the school. However, the revolutionary technological changes affecting libraries and their services to users require a closer alignment of the evaluation with what libraries and library media specialists are doing if the educational mission of schools is to be well served.

Three factors continue to stand in the way of the greater utility of the evaluation of the school's library media specialist: (a) increased demands on the school principal as the instrument of accountability; (b) the tendency to use an evaluation model designed for teachers, not library media specialists or media specialists; and (c) the dramatic changes that have occurred in the work of the library media specialist.

Growing Intensity of the Principalship

Ironically, one significant factor has nothing to do with the librarian and everything to do with the school administrator. Lashway (2000) noted how school leaders have been thrust into "uncharted, uncomfortable territory" charged with developing organizational capacity and accepting responsibility for heightened accountability. There is no doubt that the school principalship, usually charged with carrying out the evaluation of all personnel, has become a position laden with responsibility. In some school districts, operating procedures require the principal to carry out a certain number of classroom evaluations each year. The sheer volume of the mandated classroom observations combined with all the other duties of the building administrator can overload an office.

Many states report an increasing shortage of those seeking to fill vacant administrative positions in schools. McCreight (2001) reports data that close to 50% of the school districts in the United States have difficulty attracting applicants. Those who study the nature of the principalship have concluded that three general factors lie behind the declining interest in this leadership

position. Increased time commitments, the growing influence of outside groups, and an explosion in bureaucratic paperwork have all inhibited educators from seeking the principalship (Moore, 1999). These factors and others make it difficult for those charged with evaluating library media specialists to respond creatively to program and personnel evaluation needs in the dramatically changing world of the school library media person.

The Continuing Tendency to Use a Teacher Model for Evaluation

A second factor that perpetuates the mismatch between the library media specialist's work and evaluation can be understood as the usual response to inertia. Almost as uniform as a law of physics, school organizational systems tend to do what they have done before. Thus the path of least resistance for the evaluation of library media specialists is to do what has been done in the past. Taylor and Bryant (1996) gathered data that indicated library media specialists were not evaluated on what they do. Little evidence has emerged since then to suggest that this situation has changed. What does this mean in the daily life of the school?

Librarians tend to think of their job as having four main roles: (a) teacher, (b) information specialist, (c) manager, and (d) instructional partner (American Association of School Librarians and Association for Educational Communications and Technology, 1988, 1998; Taylor & Bryant, 1996). But administrators do not see library media specialists that way. Their emphasis is much more on the first two roles (Dorrell & Lawson, 1995; Turner & Zsiray, 1990). If reports are accurate, one activity that library media specialists are evaluated on has to do with classroom presentations. When teachers bring their classes to the library, or when librarians visit a teacher's classroom, and provide students with instruction on how to use the library, what they do is visible. Of all the services library media specialists deliver, this most resembles what the classroom teacher does—and it is to this that principals seem to pay the most attention. Library media specialists are most often evaluated in a teaching role.

The teaching role is important, and nothing here is meant to downplay its significance in both student service and library media specialist performance. The difficulty is that in too many places, principals perceive it as the overwhelmingly dominant role for library media specialists. By concentrating so much on this single aspect of librarianship, principals miss the value library media specialists bring to instruction in general through their collaboration with teachers (Lance & Loertscher, 2001; Smith, 2001).

Because the new school library media center holds the promise for transforming how students and teachers interact with information and knowledge, the fact that administrators find it difficult to move their evaluative practices away from the traditional evaluation practices results in serious lost opportunities. Evaluative procedures aimed at building and integrating new library media services do not take place. As a consequence, neither the

library media specialist nor the administrator approaches the restructuring of the library or the role of the library media specialist with strategic thinking. The practice of evaluating the library media specialist as if he or she were a classroom teacher does more harm than good to the entire school enterprise.

The New Order in School Library Work

Although it is true that most library media specialists do frequently teach students how to use the library, they spend more time in the other three roles. The information specialist role is particularly demanding. Many report that they spend much time helping individual students in search of information, but in a way, this is increasingly different from what it was in the past. Library media specialists are now called on to transform their media centers into information centers that rely less on their own print collection and more on vendor-provided materials and electronic databases. Familiarity with various sources of information, knowing how to access that information, and being conversant with how efficiently to search an overwhelming amount of material give the library media specialist an essential role in student learning. The old practices of evaluation will miss this component of the librarian's work.

One of the dramatic scenes that many who work in large research libraries remember centers on the time when all the staff members assembled in the card catalogue area and were armed with large plastic garbage containers. Their task was to remove the cards containing the citations of the library's holdings from the hundreds of wooden file drawers and throw them away. This job took a number of days in many places. On a smaller scale, this scene has been repeated thousands of times in school libraries across the country. In even the smallest schools, the storage, referencing, and accessing of the information contained in libraries is moving at a rapid pace into the digital world.

Many library media specialists struggle to keep pace with technological change. Internet access has opened a digital world for students, full of information and full of challenging issues in terms of monitoring use. Providing adequate hardware to operate new generations of software for an increasingly skilled student population at different grade levels is a new and important part of the work.

This does not mean that one cannot still go to a library and wander about looking for a book. It does mean that library media specialists now are charged with maintaining an information system that contains a huge amount of information that can be easily searched electronically. To do this, the school's library media specialist has had to become knowledgeable about using commercially provided electronic databases and their services. Information management is a significant challenge and, in many ways, requires the library media specialist to be as much a manager as a teacher. This is an important part of the job that no evaluating principal should overlook.

Needed Changes in Principal Evaluation of Library Media Specialists

Evaluation practices that are symbolic in nature do sometimes serve the purpose of providing an answer to the question: Did you evaluate your library media specialist(s)? This is no longer adequate. School administrators cannot run the risk of failing to develop information literacy in their teachers, curriculum, and students. Too much is lost if the evaluation serves only ceremonial purposes.

Given the three general obstacles presented above, what kinds of changes need to take place in the evaluation of the library media specialist? Obviously, the evaluation needs to be matched with the work that the library media specialist does. Given that there are significant differences between elementary, middle, and high schools (Fullan with Stiegelbauer, 1991; McLaughlin, Talbert, & Bascia, 1990) and given that school cultures render each school—even at the same level—just a little different from every other school (Evans, 1997; Schein, 1992), the exact evaluation instrument probably should be developed by the librarian and the principal acting together. Some general guidelines can be defended, however.

Library media specialists should not be evaluated using a standard checklist invented for the classroom teacher. A number of improvements to the evaluation of these educators can and should be instituted. Almost all these improvements relate to the role of the library media center in supporting the development of what many now call information literacy. In 1989, the American Library Association's Presidential Committee on Information Literacy noted that the "information age is divorced from most teaching styles" (p. 12) and called for new approaches in schools that would foster interactive and self-initiated learning. Although progress toward this transformation of learning in the school has been slow, many educators now have a better understanding of information literacy as a necessary skill in the information age. An important challenge to the school curriculum in the 21st century is that it teach students "how to learn" (Doyle, 1994).

The library media specialist is the key player as the school enacts the 21st-century goal of developing teachers and students who are literate in information. In this role, library media specialists are leaders and managers and should be evaluated on their performance as such.

Whatever shape the evaluation instrument takes, if the principal is to be fully cognizant of what the library media specialist does and, most important, what the library media specialist needs in order to maximize his or her contribution to the school and its students, the following elements should be integrated into the principal's evaluation of the library media specialist.

First, library media specialists should be asked to develop annual plans for their media centers that are constructed in conjunction with the principal. These plans should be based on an analysis of the anticipated services that the media specialist will be asked to provide to teachers and students. These

plans should address how the library media specialist will assist teachers in attaining literacy with electronic information, with databases, with search activities, and with Internet resources. These plans might be workshops, tutoring, or inservice activities. Plans should also cover such basic ideas about how the library media specialist will disseminate information to teachers.

Second, library media specialists should be asked to construct plans for future development of the media center that look two or three years into the future. For example, the providers of the databases to which many libraries subscribe are continually changing their content in ways that require ever more power and memory from users' computers. In turn, these changes require a continual upgrading of hardware. The logical agent to forecast future needs is the library media specialist. Again, these plans should be developed in consultation with the principal.

Third, the principal, who knows what the library media specialist is hoping to accomplish, should evaluate that educator, in part, on progress made toward realizing those plans. This evaluation cannot be a checklist type of evaluation. The evaluation can serve accountability needs to the degree that the principal has a clear understanding of what is entailed in developing information literacy.

Finally, checklists work only when one knows the behaviors that are to be performed. They typically work only when the job performance being evaluated is easily described. The library media specialist navigates uncharted waters. Identifying specific behaviors in order to build some sort of evaluation checklist is not consonant with the work of building new approaches to developing information literacy: Too much is unknown; the development of information literacy is a rapidly changing arena. Indeed, if an aging checklist is being used to evaluate this rapidly changing part of the school, the existence of that practice and checklist should be evidence enough that something is terribly wrong with the evaluation of the library specialist.

The new media specialist in the information age is an administrator, a manager, a teacher, an information specialist, and an educator. The formal evaluation of the performance of such individuals needs to recognize and be attentive to a job that has become multifaceted and complex.

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