Conversations, Collaborations, and Celebrations

How the School Library Media Specialist Can Shape Early Literacy Instruction

Bonnie Mackey and Maureen White
Mackey@cl.uh.edu and white@cl.uh.edu

Literacy is the goal of all stakeholders in a school. Administrators, teachers, school library media specialists (SLMSs), and support staff value student achievement in both reading and writing. The purpose of this article is: (1) to briefly describe each of the components of a balanced early literacy program; (2) to suggest ways that the SLMS can collaborate with early literacy teachers to implement and enhance each component; and (3) to provide a background and ideas for promoting literacy for other grades.

Ken Haycock asserts that common language is a major stumbling block to collaboration.1 In our teaching experience at the elementary level, we found terminology (like scaffolding, phonemes, and graphemes) daunting and collaboration problematic. Small argues that library educators must work with “education faculty colleagues to help students develop the spirit of collaboration during their professional preparation programs.”2 This collaborative article between an early childhood specialist and an SLMS is a model of practicing what we preach. We hope that our work will help SLMSs and early literacy teachers learn to negotiate a common language and provide a building block that promotes collaborative planning, teaching, and evaluating as advocated by Information Power.3

Arguably, the most important concept that preliterate children must understand is that print carries meaning.4 Ross Todd states it this way, “...it makes a real difference to student learning, that it contributes in tangible and significant ways to the development of human understanding, meaning making and constructing knowledge.”

Reading is ubiquitous. We live, work, and play in a world that is saturated with print, words, books, and ideas. Learning to read, then, is a necessity. Moving beyond the Reading Wars of the last few years, a consensus of scholars and reading educators currently advocate a balanced literacy program for beginning reading instruction.5 Balanced literacy enables teachers to support and scaffold instruction. The following elements are part of most balanced literacy programs: literacy centers; guided reading; shared reading; read-alouds; independent reading; interactive writing; independent writing; and alphabetics (phonemic awareness and phonics).
Collaboration Tips for Balanced Literacy Components

Literacy centers allow young readers to show independent completion of a strategy that has been taught. When students can complete selected literacy center tasks, they demonstrate that they can apply strategies on their own. “Centers are about giving students multiple opportunities to practice strategies and skills in different types of reading materials on an independent reading level.” Wordless picture books, magazines, audio books, and even games can be included.

How can the SLMS support literacy centers?

- Display literacy centers in the library, so that teachers can observe the librarian modeling use of literacy centers with their students.
- Select appropriate nonfiction or fiction books suitable for centers.
- Order desired books for the school library that can be rotated from center to center.

Guided reading is a process in which the teacher “supports each reader’s development of effective strategies for processing novel texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty,” according to Fountas and Pinnell. They have identified before, during, and after reading activities that promote the gradual development of literacy strategies.

How can the SLMS support guided reading?

- Employ previewing strategies, such as a picture walk, prediction questions, and an anticipation guide, that can arouse student interest and align easily with storytime goals; continue using before, during, and after reading strategies during storytime. By using a story map or writing an alternative ending on large chart paper, the SLMS reinforces these reading strategies and echoes classroom’s practices.
- Build a sense of teaming. As the classroom teacher and the SLMS select books at the appropriate interest and instructional levels, they are building collaboration around reading. These conversations about leveled books and student interests strengthen the bond between classroom teachers and the SLMS.
- Consider housing leveled books within the school library.

Shared reading employs an oversized book or multiple copies of the same book that children can see. Initially the adult reads most of the book but, as the student’s abilities increase, more and more of the reading responsibility is shifted to the student. The teacher or parent provides pronunciation for unknown words and unclear meanings, while modeling the pleasure of reading aloud.

How can the SLMS support shared reading?

- Use selection expertise to help teachers choose exciting and enjoyable books.
- Employ choral reading and echo reading so that tentative early readers gain confidence in reading aloud among peers.
- Model shared reading during library storytime.

Read-alouds promote oral language, increase vocabulary, develop a sense of story, and, most importantly, create a community of readers. During a read-aloud, the teacher selects an example of children’s literature and models an objective while students listen. For example, while reading aloud the beloved Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do You See? by Bill Martin Jr. the objective may be sequencing.

Who is better trained and experienced to conduct effective and lively read-alouds with the children than the SLMS? If sequencing is the skill being taught by the classroom teacher, the SLMS can enhance this skill by choosing books for read-alouds that demonstrate the skill.

How can the SLMS support read-alouds?

- Use selection expertise to select other books for the classroom teacher.
- Model read-alouds during library storytimes as teachers observe.

Independent reading and the creation of lifelong readers is a goal of teachers and SLMSs. Several schoolwide programs that promote independent reading are dependent on the school library for their success. For example, most states have a reading promotion program, such as the Texas Bluebonnet Award. These programs often depend on the SLMSs, who order and promote the books as well as arrange for the voting and submission of the votes to the state library organization.

The close connection between reading promotion and SLMSs was a conclusion of the International Reading Association. They reported that credentialed SLMSs both guide and inspire students towards a love of reading and a quest for knowledge.

How can the SLMS support independent reading?

- Organize book clubs for students, families, and teachers (book clubs select and read books in common and discuss at a selected time, such as at lunch, after school, at night).
- Order books and other resources that children will want to read.
- Advocate for schoolwide times for independent reading, such as DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) and SSR (Sustained Silent Reading).
- Display large charts in various school locations, such as the cafeteria, with such questions as, “Who is your favorite author?” and “What is your favorite book?” Lifelong reading can be promoted by the SLMS in all areas of the school.

Interactive writing is writing that is composed by the teacher and students. It is usually written on large chart paper. As students assume a more active role in the construction of the words, sharing of the pen becomes more and more frequent. Boo-boo tape is used to cover mistakes. Students are exposed to the teacher’s own
thinking about her writing, and mistakes are viewed as an integral part of the writing process.

How can the SLMS support interactive writing?

- Implement interactive writing procedures as an after-reading strategy. For example, use sentence starters, such as, “I see ________” after the reading of Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See.
- Display these interactive writing selections in the school library media center and school hallways.
- Share the pen with students while creating short poems, letters, and stories as personal responses to books during library storytimes. Model left to right directionality and correct spacing of letters and words on large chart paper.

Independent writing is taking a piece of writing through the stages of the writing process and preparing it to be published, or shared, with a larger audience. These venues for sharing and promoting independent writing provide wonderfully rich opportunities for collaborations between teachers and the SLMS.

How can the SLMS support independent writing?

- Provide an author's chair within the school library. Students sit in the special chair as they read their own stories. Author's chairs may have a theme, such as palaces (and crowns adorn the authors’ heads).
- Bind collections of student (and teacher) writings. Most schools have bookbinding machines. Books can be organized according to grade level, classroom, or genre. Schoolwide committees could determine awards for best poem and so on.
- Celebrate local authors, including works of teachers and parents, by displaying their writings at an author signing in the library media center. Recognition of local talents will inspire young students to continue their independent writing.

Alphabets (phonemic awareness and phonics) concerns the structure of words rather than the construction of meaning. In order for a beginning reader to read, he or she must understand that written words are composed of graphemes that correspond to speech sounds (phonemes). This correspondence is called the alphabetic principle. Examples of phonemic awareness activities include blending, manipulating, and segmenting phonemes. These activities can be done with the eyes closed because they do not involve the written letters. Phonics instruction, on the other hand, is the teaching approach that connects the sounds of the letters with the visual representations of the letters.

How can the SLMS support alphabets instruction?

- Incorporate phonemic awareness activities within their read-alouds to a class of students. For example, Down By the Bay by Raffi serves as an excellent example to teach onsets and rhymes (sometimes referred to as “rimes” among early literacy educators).14 The onset of a syllable is its initial consonant(s). In the words “sip” and “slip,” the onsets are “s” and “sl” and the rhyme/rime is “ip”.
- Develop a word wall for the library. In Cunningham’s Phonics They Use, she talks of the value of having children add words and create a word wall.15 A word wall is a large collection of words that appear frequently or relate to thematic units and
content area study. It’s now very common for elementary classrooms to have one or more word walls.

Think of how enticing a word wall would look in the library! The SLMS could encourage students to add their own words to the library word wall. Depending on the purpose of the library word wall, the words could relate to literary terms. Or the library word wall could be devoted to a particular author of the month, with words found in books by the chosen author. According to Cunningham, “if you watched the children doing the daily word-wall practice, you might assume that they are all learning the same thing—how to spell words. But what they are doing externally may not reveal what they are processing internally.”

Conversations Lead to Collaborations

Literacy learning is no longer the exclusive domain of classroom teachers. All stakeholders (principal, teachers, SLMSs, support staff, and so on) have a vested interest in enhancing the literacy achievement of all students housed in their schools. Whole-school literacy initiatives sustain this movement towards collaboration.” Programs such as DEAR or SSR are often used, as are slogans to promote schoolwide reading initiatives, such as “Readers Are Leaders,” “Read to Succeed,” and “Reading Is Cool.” A key to literacy collaboration is conversation. Setting aside time at faculty meetings for the SLMS to collaborate, and then celebrate!

Collaborations Lead to Celebrations

The varied and interlocking components of a balanced literacy program provide the perfect keys for collaboration between SLMSs and classroom teachers. The emphasis upon quality children’s literature to be used during read-alouds, shared reading, and independent reading times warrants the expertise of the SLMS. By modeling excellent literacy centers and reading strategies, the SLMS reinforces classroom instruction. Several studies demonstrate a link between increased student achievement and the role of the SLMS.” It is time to recognize and reward school library media professionals for their influence and passion as they shape the beginning literacy instruction and instill a love of reading in our young children. Let’s converse, collaborate, and then celebrate!

References and Notes

6. International Reading Association, Using Multiple Methods of Beginning Reading Instruction (Newark, Del.: International Reading Association, 1999); Morrow, Literacy Development in the Early Years.
7. In their “Glossary of Education Terms and Acronyms,” the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory defines scaffolding as “An instructional technique in which the teacher breaks a complex task into smaller tasks, models the desired learning strategy or task, provides support as students learn to do the task, and then gradually shifts responsibility to the students. In this manner, a teacher enables students to accomplish as much of a task as possible without adult assistance.” Available at <www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/misc/glossary.htm>. Accessed 16 July 2004.
8. Sharon Pitcher and Bonnie Mackey, Collaborating for Real Literacy: Librarian, Teacher and Principal (Worthington, Ohio: Linworth, 2004).
9. Ibid., 34.
11. Ibid., 21.
16. Ibid., 76.
17. Pitcher and Mackey, Collaborating for Real Literacy.
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