The School Library Media Specialist and Early Literacy Programs

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Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning suggests that the role of the school library media program in the school’s literacy efforts is “to encourage and engage students in reading, viewing, and listening for understanding and enjoyment.”1 The American Association of School Librarians’ position statements offer more specific examples of elements integral to effective reading programs and what students need in order to become life-long readers.2 But current thinking holds that literacy is far more than just reading. According to early childhood educator Owocki:

Developing literacy is about more than learning to read and write; it is also about developing the sociocultural discourses needed to effectively use language in a variety of situations. In our society, language, both written and oral, serves numerous functions: we use it to accomplish the tasks of daily living, do our jobs, satisfy our curiosity, gain and share information, make connections with others, regulate behaviors, imagine, remember, and bring pleasure to our lives. Making use of these functions requires more than knowing how to read and write; it also requires a broader set of sociocultural understandings.3

The basis of literate practices is the construction of meaning. Meaning making—making sense of reading, writing, and oral language—is a complex and multidimensional practice that takes place within social and cultural contexts—the home and family, the community, the school and classroom.4 For this reason early childhood educators must “find common ground between developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive literacy teaching”; in essence, valuing and building on the literacy experiences that children of all backgrounds bring to school.5 Paratore addresses the importance of understanding the research on the role of parents in children’s literacy learning:

When we widen the lens and look beyond mainstream literacies . . . across different families, cultures, and different contexts, researchers have observed a rich tradition of literacy behaviors and other funds of knowledge that, although different from mainstream literacies, if understood, acknowledged, and appropriately built upon by teachers, might lead linguistically and culturally different children to more successful school experiences than many of them now have.6

Educators must reach out to and approach parents as partners—especially those from minorities and lower socio-economic groups—rather than viewing their children’s lack of school-like language as a literacy deficit. This broader view of early childhood literacy is important for school library media specialists (SLMSs) to embrace as they contemplate their own roles and the potential influence of their programs on the literacy goals of their school communities.
SLMSs are literacy leaders in their schools. They can have a positive impact by providing an inviting and interactive environment, access to a wide variety of resources, and activities and engagements (experiences for supporting children’s literacy growth) that reinforce and extend teachers’ classroom practices. Let’s consider the implications of each of these.

**Environment**

Creating and sustaining an environment conducive to literacy development is a natural priority for SLMSs. Chambers describes this reading environment as a combination of “set” and “setting.” By “setting,” Chambers means physical surroundings and how they affect what one does or does not do. “Set” is a complex “mix of mental and emotional attitudes we bring to the things we do.”8 Atteniveness to both the physical appearance of the school library media center and to interactions children have with one another and with us and our staff is critical.

Beyond the right height for book shelves and furniture, the library media center can accommodate “literacy-related play centers” described by Owocki in *Literacy through Play.*9 Responding to the significant body of research that shows that retelling and dramatizing stories contributes to a child’s development of language and literacy concepts, such centers might include print materials for reading and writing as well as puppets, costumes, and props to encourage dramatic play and storytelling.10 Dramatized retelling leads children to use language found in books—and more complex language structures—with the result that they achieve higher levels of comprehension. While some preschoolers come to school with a rich background of such experiences, others may need adult mediators in the early years to model activities and introduce the books and stories that provide a wellspring for their play.

Some SLMSs report great success with writing and publishing centers in which children create and publish stories in various genres that become part of the library’s collection of student work. Other students and parents can go to the library media center to read or check out these publications.

Both in the classroom and library media center, the social and cultural context (Chambers’s “set”) influences meaning-making. Owocki refers to this as a “social/situational context . . . [that] is shaped by a broad range of factors including the goals, stances, expectations, and pressures that surround a reading event.”11 Readers bring a set of previous experiences, present moods, and relationships with others to the meaning-making process. This “set” also includes ways that “children are encultured into the most common and evident forms of literacy in their homes and communities even before they begin school. The accumulated ways of knowing and funds of knowledge of family members . . . are intricately woven into their daily lives.”12 When we work to help children from diverse backgrounds become successful readers and writers, we must understand how to use those forms of literacy to help them learn new ones.

Further, learning to read is viewed as a rite of passage. Young children are eager to start school because they know they will learn to read, and most are confident and enthusiastic about their abilities. A few children can read when they start school, and all children have engaged in a variety of literacy-related activities and experiences. Most young children strive to please adults. Since adult expectations and pressures influence the kind of readers children become, it is important for SLMSs to be alert to subtle messages they send as they interact with young children. What subtle and not-so-subtle messages are we communicating when we tell children that a particular book is too hard for them or not on their level? What will children conclude about reading when our questions require them to recall only details and facts? Or when we ask them to demonstrate their comprehension by taking tests that ask for recall? Instead, we should strive to help children understand that reading is not just remembering details or pronouncing words correctly but, instead, is a thoughtful, reflective process relevant to their lives. A simple, genuine conversation about something interesting or sad or clever in a book sends an entirely different message; we read because it stimulates curiosity or emotion or humor and because it provides insight and wisdom about our lives.

Some preschool children will have experiences visiting libraries with family members or with child care providers; others may not. Thus, a welcome and assurance of security in the library media center is an essential first step, followed by careful monitoring to assure that their enthusiasm for reading and learning to read is sustained. In an environment of trust and acceptance, children confidently take risks and explore, laying the groundwork for their perceptions about libraries for years to come.

Goodman emphasizes the social aspects of literacy, including the contexts for facilitating learning to read.13 Indeed, visits to the library media center are social experiences, and the library media center should be one of those significance contexts for learning to read.

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Affective factors cannot be overemphasized. They underscore the fact that both learning to read and the process of teaching children to read are complex, multidimensional, and individual.

**Access to Resources**

Access to a wide range of books at the appropriate level of complexity and on subjects that are of interest is basic to teaching children to read and write.14 Therefore, by evaluating, selecting, and providing access to a variety of materials (one of the traditional jobs of librarians) SLMSs make a major contribution to the school’s literacy program. Audio recordings of songs and poetry and big books (which can be seen by an entire group...
Reliance on leveling is not a substitute for knowing individual children and knowing hundreds of books of all genres, on many topics, and on various levels of difficulty.

numerous opportunities every day to help children learn to thoughtfully select books—to find those just-right books. But, what is just right?

Some educators depend on leveled books to direct children to books that they are capable of reading. (And, there are plenty of commercial programs available to make this possible.) While easily decodable texts can develop fluency, one cannot minimize a child’s interests or preferences as motivational factors. After all, unless children see books as appealing, they may lose interest in or develop negative attitudes toward reading. “When children want to read, their attitude toward reading improves. A positive attitude toward reading usually results in more reading, and this, in turn, helps students develop fluency.”14 Dewey described the importance of a children’s personal and social interests in determining engagement (an interaction between students and what they study), which is essential to learning.15 In her analysis of Dewey’s educational philosophy, Noddings explains that “when students are forced to plod through material with which they are not really engaged . . . they lose interest in the material and confidence in themselves. They settle for giving answers and getting approval from their teachers. They give up the all-important belief that education has something to do with the construction of personal making.”16

In that delicate balance between gaining practice in reading and honoring individual preferences, the SLMS can guide children in making wise selections. In her book Reading with Meaning, Miller recommends giving children choices but also providing a selection of mini-lessons that focus on text features, size of print, and readability.17 Even further, she advises us to teach students to consider whether they have sufficient background knowledge, reading experience, and motivation to read a particular book. Our goal, over time, is that children learn to choose a variety of texts at different levels of difficulty.

SLMSs can educate parents to help their children in finding those just-right books. Routman includes three appendixes in her book Reading Essentials that explain the concept and offer advice for teachers, parents, and children.18 The one specifically directed to parents explains that just-right books means that a child:

- Shows interest in the book.
- Can read and figure out almost all the words.
- Understands what he or she is reading (can tell you what the story is about or what he or she is learning).
- Can read fairly smoothly. If your child is stumbles over many words, she or he will not be able to focus on reading for understanding.19

Leveling Books

While leveling books to guide students to appropriate choices has become a common practice in schools across the country, it should be approached with caution. There is no one way to level books; publishers employ many different systems. Calkins argues that we should trust ourselves and our knowledge of individual children rather than accept levels as absolutes:

Determining a book’s level is approximate, messy work and it is tricky because every reader in the world is different and will find particular texts easy and particular ones difficult for reasons that are hers and hers alone. . . . The reasons readers experience difficulty are far more numerous, complicated and human than any overarching system can accommodate.20

Teachers may find leveling schemes useful when selecting books to teach specific strategies during guided reading. However, if we rely solely on leveling schemes when recommending books for independent reading, children will not learn to use their own strategies and judgment for choosing their reading material.

In one sobering report from a teacher in a multi-age classroom, Pierce found that her students tended to describe themselves as readers based on the level of the books they could read.21 She worried that children’s focus on stepping through a series of leveled books could result in “ignoring, and possible devaluing, other ways of defining or describing them as readers.”19 Could we be doing children a disservice if we organize the library collection or label library materials using such schemes?

Informational Texts

Several studies have revealed that expository or informational text is relatively scarce in primary grade classrooms. According to Duke, Bennett-Armistead, and Roberts, there are three unsupported beliefs frequently offered as reasons but for which there is no support from research. These beliefs state that young children: (1) cannot handle informational text; (2) do not like informational text, or at least prefer other formats of text; and (3) should first learn to read and then (at about fourth grade) read to learn.22

In an issue of Educational Leadership devoted to reading research, Duke offers four strategies for increasing children’s comprehension of informational text: (1) increase children’s access; (2) increase its use in instructional activities; (3) teach children how to read it; and (4) use it for authentic purposes.23 Certainly SLMSs can work with teachers to implement all of these strategies. Instructing children in how to read and how to use informational text for authentic purposes
A growing body of research on the effectiveness of student literature discussions provides mounting evidence that scores on standardized tests improve and students’ engagement in and enjoyment of reading increases

incorporate the use of informational texts into the curriculum and to engage children in expository writing activities. 

Classroom Collections/ Library Collections

The allocation of funds to classroom collections at the expense of funds for library media resources is problematic. Classroom teachers will always want to have a sufficient and ready supply of books in their classrooms. The best possible scenario for equal access to a school or district’s total resources is to direct monies to the school library media budget so that all teachers and students have the opportunity to use everything the school owns. Teachers could check out a classroom collection to support students’ independent reading and refresh it as children finish books, as their reading abilities and interests develop, and as units of study shift to new topics. It is doubtful that teachers will give up classroom collections (nor should they), but one has only to look at how quickly titles go out of print and at the publishing gap between quality nonfiction hardback and paperback titles to recognize that the school library has more depth and breadth than any classroom library. In many cases SLMSs can resolve the issue by changing restrictive policies that prevent large numbers of library books to be taken to classrooms for extended checkout periods and by working diligently to see that children (and teachers) have access to and are welcome in the library media center at all times before, during, and after the school day.

In addition to providing books for classroom collections, the SLMS can work with teachers to choose books, assemble materials, and design activities for literacy-related centers within their classrooms. New teachers in particular will welcome the opportunity to partner with the SLMS, who is familiar with resources available in the school and beyond. Often classroom teachers do not know the standard selection tools and finding aids that can lead them to myriad resources on a wide variety of topics. This can be especially important for ensuring that both library and classroom collections are stocked with fiction and information books that reflect diverse cultures as well as appropriate bilingual books and large print books, depending on the requirements of the school community.

Summer Reading

Children from low-income families have less access to books both at school and home than do their peers from more advantaged homes. This is exacerbated during the summer, when most school libraries are closed. Results of research reveal that summer reading loss contributes to an achievement gap between children from economically advanced and economically disadvantaged homes. 

McGill-Franzen and Allington suggest that SLMSs can enhance summer access to books for children from low-income homes when they:

- allow children to check out library books for the summer;
- open the school library one night a week during the summer;
- hold a book fair supported by local businesses or grants so that children can choose one or more books for summer reading; and
- create an honor library at the entrance to the school from which children can select books and return them.

Activities and Engagements

Reading Aloud

While it may seem unnecessary to mention reading aloud, since most SLMSs already include it in their programs, Avery and Ray remind us that reading out loud to children is teaching; how one reads to children and the talk that surrounds these events have an important impact on how children grow as readers and writers. In addition to providing cognitive benefits, reading aloud to a class of children contributes to their development as a learning community. The common experience of sharing powerful texts and subsequent engagement, reflection, and discussion permeate children’s interactions with one another and with adults who are part of their learning communities.

Many different individuals will read to children in the early years of elementary school—classroom teachers, SLMSs, school administrators, guidance counselors, volunteers, and older children; each will have a unique style for doing so. Hints for effective read-alouds are available in many publications and include the following advice:

- choose books that you like and make sure you have read them in advance;
- read from a variety of genres;
- use expression in your voice;
- take your time—give children a chance to digest and respond;
- invite children to make comments and connections; and
- avoid recall questions—ask open-ended questions.

SLMS read-alouds can ignite interest in a new author. Combined with short booktalks, they stimulate appreciation of new genres. Skills
such as identifying parts of books and locating books in the library can be reinforced during read-aloud sessions. For example, during a read-aloud session, the SLMS might engage children in comprehension strategies, such as predicting what will happen next, inferring meaning, and making personal connections or connections between texts. When done well, “reading aloud becomes a critically important means of teaching background knowledge, vocabulary, comprehension strategies, and knowledge of written language so crucial to becoming skilled and willing readers during the primary years and beyond.”

**One-on-One Reading**

It is well documented that children who have been read to and who have developed reading-like behavior have an advantage in school-based literacy activities. Children who have not had such experiences as preschoolers can benefit from opportunities to read with adults or other children. This pairing with a volunteer, an older child, or even a classmate can help the emergent reader discover what it means to be a competent reader. The SLMS can coach helpers to interact with emergent readers successfully, suggest appropriate books, and offer space in the library media center to carry out these activities.

**Guided Reading, Book Clubs, and Literature Circles**

Guided reading and literature circle-type discussions are complementary elements of comprehensive literacy programs. Language arts educator and author Short notes that because both are small-group activities, some people assume that they are basically the same, except that literature circles are used with fluent readers. On the contrary, she contends that the two are quite different. In guided reading activities, the teacher takes charge, chooses a book with a specific purpose in mind, and provides explicit instruction to a small group of children for using a particular strategy related to the reading process.

In literature circles or Socratic seminars, children practice critical thinking and talking in response to literary works. They make meaningful connections to their lives, thinking and constructing meaning rather than using the text to practice a particular reading strategy. Short underscores the difference between these two: “the books that you typically use in a literature circle have many layers of meaning and a complexity of thinking that makes them not work well for guided reading. You can’t focus in on the strategy because the complexity of the thinking is so involved.”

Literature circles, book discussion groups, reading clubs, or book clubs are activities that are used with students of all ages. Like Oprah’s Book Club, the One Book communitywide reading projects initiated by the Washington Center for the Book, and the many adult reading groups that have sprung up around the country, book groups give children a taste of the gratification that “real” readers find in discussion.
evidence that scores on standardized tests improve and students’ engagement in and enjoyment of reading increases.  

A number of ways to organize and carry out literature circles and book clubs with children have been described in professional books and journal articles.  
In some models, children read books on their own; in other models, books are read aloud to children. Adults may or may not play direct roles. Management of groups and procedures vary. But essential elements include providing children with: (1) choice; (2) time to read; and (3) opportunities to pursue their own questions, connections, and responses.

Although we may think of these kinds of activities as ones most appropriate for children in the intermediate grades and up, teachers have used them successfully with young children in the primary grades. In the second edition of his book Literature Circles, Daniel describes models for using literature circles in kindergarten through second grade and discusses possible adaptations for working with this age group.  
Avery describes how her first-grade students grow from talking about their decoding strategies and simply retelling stories to making extensions and connections.  
She explains the role of the teacher (or other facilitator) in nudging children to share such responses. With the help and support of capable adults, children who have experience with sharing opinions, thoughts, and feelings might move on to more in-depth critique related to social and cultural issues as part of literature circle discussions.

Being involved in teachers’ efforts to use this form of literary engagement in their classrooms is a logical way for SLMSs to participate in literacy activities in their schools. In schools where these activities are not part of the literacy or literature program, the SLMSs might introduce classroom teachers to literature circles or book clubs by organizing lunchtime or after-school group sessions.

**Conclusion**

Most SLMSs in elementary schools were first attracted to their job because of a love for books and reading. With so much national attention (and funding) being devoted to reading, and with so much interest in integrating the use of children’s books across the curriculum, SLMSs have ample opportunities for partnering with teachers and parents to provide rich literacy experiences for children. With their knowledge of their school communities, standards, and curriculum, and armed with the research on literacy learning, SLMSs are well-positioned to play an integral role in their schools’ early literacy initiatives.

**References and Notes**


8. Ibid., 10.


Ibid., 360.


Owoczi, "Comprension." 

