

Collaboration Experiences Between School Librarians and Special Educators

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Introduction

Collaborations between school librarians and special educators are effective ways to provide optimal learning experiences and the most access to physical and non-physical resources for 21st-century students. Though both professions offer valuable skills and knowledge, special educators may not work with school librarians often (Canter, Voytecki, Zambone & Jones, 2011). However, the need for positive relationships between these groups has gained importance as special educator-librarian collaborations help students gain skills to become productive members of society. With increased standards or standardized tests and diminished resources, collaboration is needed to provide better learning environments for students (Montiel-Overall, 2006).

There are qualities of special educators and school librarians that make both valuable partners, and these collaborations support student learning in various ways. “Special education personnel address the academic needs of students with mild to severe disabilities ... [and] work with students in self-contained and mainstreamed classrooms” (Farmer, 2009). These educators understand students’ learning styles, and can offer advice to school librarians. Since libraries must provide access and resources to all students, special educators can help school librarians comply with the laws to provide required physical space, technologies and equipment to students with disabilities (Farmer, 2009). In return, school librarians provide access to print and/or electronic resources that support the curriculum and adaptive technologies or software for students to use (Canter, Voytecki, Zambone & Jones, 2011). A partnership between special educators and school librarians is important as the collaboration enhances the opportunity for students to become independent learners and critical thinkers.

Site Description

Center High School is located in a small village in central New York. Center High School has around 1,400 students in grades 10-12 (there are two separate schools that house grades 6/7 and 8/9), and there are nearly 100 teachers at school. Demographics of the student population include: in good standing to meet state standards and standardized New York state tests, more than 90 percent of students are Caucasian, less than 10 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch and students come from middle- to upper-middle class families.

The high school is a multi-level building, and it has undergone recent renovations in the past few years to improve space and access for students and teachers. Some teachers do share classrooms for lessons, but there is enough space to provide an optimal learning environment for students. The library is located on the main floor, which is above the ground floor. In the building, there are dozens of classrooms, a student bookstore/cafe, large auditorium, library learning commons and computer labs.

Interviewee Descriptions

Hannah Jones is a school librarian at Center High School. Hannah received her undergraduate degree in physical education at SUNY Albany and Cortland. Before receiving her degree in school media, Hannah was a physical-education teacher for a few years. While teaching physical-education classes, Hannah thought about switching careers. She realized she loved technology and literature, so she went back to Syracuse University to receive her MLIS (school-media specialization). “I like books, and I like computers,” Hannah said. “So, why not combine the two?” Though Hannah has only been the school librarian at Center High School for four years, she has turned the library into a learning commons. Her goals include: to make the

library a welcoming place for students to pursue recreational and educational activities and to introduce teachers and students to resources that will provide the best experience possible.

Anne Smith is a special educator at Center High School. Anne received her undergraduate degree in Education from the University of Buffalo, and her graduate degree in Special Education at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Before coming to central New York, Anne worked as a resources/special educator in Massachusetts school districts for about 10 years. Anne taught students in grades K-8, but now she teaches students ages 15-21 at Center High School. Most of Anne's lessons focus around an ELA course and a Life Skills class. Anne's goals are student-oriented; she wants to provide the best possible learning experience for the students in her classroom. She wants to help students recognize strengths and enhance areas that can be improved. Anne hopes to teach her students the necessary skills to be successful after graduation, whether her students enter the workforce or higher education.

Role of the School Librarian Perceptions

- School librarians know everything about technology and computers
- School librarians are welcoming and go above and beyond for teachers or students
- Some people do not know that school librarians must be certified to teach in NYS
- School librarians do not have as many lesson plans to prepare as content teachers

Role of the Special Educator Perceptions

- Special educators provide extra and specialized help content teachers may not be able to provide to students with disabilities
- Special educators do not collaborate often

- Special educators help prepare and provide experiences for students to succeed.
However, some teachers do not know a major goal is to teach students life skills
- Some teachers do not know that some special educators take students on fieldtrips to practice skills learned in the classroom

School Librarian Collaboration Experience

Hannah believes collaboration with other educators is a central part of a school librarian's job. The way students learn has changed, and librarians and content teachers must work together to support students. "We attempt to collaborate and co-teach on most projects," Hannah said. Recently, the learning commons acquired iPads, and one of Hannah's goals is to collaborate with teachers using this technology. She wants teachers to encourage students to check out iPads for research or class projects. Throughout the school year, most teachers collaborate with Hannah. Projects include learning Prezi instead of PowerPoint for final presentations, gathering appropriate databases and eJournals for research and teaching information-literacy skills, such as how to evaluate websites or cite resources to avoid plagiarism. When Hannah does collaborate with teachers, she might prepare lesson plans last-minute. "It's often on the fly, and there is not much time," Hannah said. After meeting with the teacher to gather to goals of the project, Hannah might only have a few periods or a single night to prepare her lesson to teach students. Sometimes, Hannah might have weeks to prepare a lesson, but she frequently prepares lessons in a few days. There are numerous departments that collaborate with Hannah. Two departments include English teachers and special educators. Seniors must complete a critical analysis research paper, and this is part of a graduation requirement. Students work on this project throughout the year, and the English team and Hannah discuss lessons to co-teach to help students complete the

paper successfully. This includes teaching information-literacy skills, providing appropriate databases for students to search through and how to cite in MLA style. Another group Hannah frequently collaborates with is special educators. Students in these classes often use the computer lab to learn technologies that will help them transition from school into the workforce or higher education. Hannah often collaborates with special educators for final projects; she has often teaches “the students how to use Microsoft Word or PowerPoint.” Overall, Hannah said she has had great collaboration experiences with teachers, and collaboration is her passion.

Special Educator Collaboration Experience

Anne believes collaboration and co-teaching are important parts of her job, and are effective ways to help students with disabilities. She likes to collaborate with teachers “where it makes sense” in students’ IEPs. Her students often partner with other students in science classes to work on labs or small projects, and the science teachers at Center are excellent co-teachers. Though Anne’s lessons focus on her ELA class and Life Skills course, she constantly finds support from teachers to collaborate on projects or assignments. Besides content teachers, Anne said she has had positive collaborations with the school librarian. Last year, students in the ELA class read aloud a book together. As a final report, students had to create a photo storybook of the novel. Anne collaborated with the school librarian to teach the students the technology. “If the students need to learn anything with technology, the library staff teaches it,” Anne said. “Technology is taught in the computer lab or library, and if there is something we need or ask for, the librarian and the staff are always willing to help.” The school librarian enjoys having Anne’s students come to the library to use iPads, work on projects in the computer lab or read magazines and/or books. Both Anne and the school librarian encourage students to use the

library for recreational or educational purposes. Also, Anne collaborates with the Center community to help students practice what is learned in the Life Skills course. In this class, students learn basic life skills such as how to count money, create and maintain a budget and interview and socialize with friends and strangers. The goal of this course is to help students gain necessary life skills to transition from high school to the workforce or higher education. Each Friday, students in the course go on fieldtrips to practice lessons taught that week. During the week, students role-play with each other and practice these skills outside the classroom. Anne and her students go to restaurants, stores or businesses in the community. Students in the course are required to work an outside job in the community for two class periods. “Some places our students work at are the elementary-school cafeterias, Innovation Studios and local grocery stores,” Anne said. Collaborations with these organizations and businesses help Anne’s students learn to become independent and successful learners. She only had positive things to say about the local community, and its support to her students.

Conclusion

Interviewing Center High School’s school librarian and special educator provided me with new ideas about collaboration. I was surprised how often the school librarian and special educator collaborated with content teachers, as well as each other. Both had positive experiences working with one another and other teachers at the high school. I learned that collaboration provides the opportunity to brainstorm ideas that are turned into lessons to enhance student learning. You take the strengths from each person to form a learning experience to benefit students. I also learned that experiences make relationships between collaborators stronger, both personally and professionally. With new education standards and increased expectations of 21st-

century learners, it is necessary and beneficial for teachers and school librarians to collaborate with one another to ensure students receive the best learning experience possible.

Interview Questions

The following questions were asked to both the school librarian and special educator:

- Where did you receive your undergrad and graduate degrees?
- Did you have any other training to help you prepare for your career and collaborations with others?
- What are your overall goals and aspirations for your job?
- How do community members of your school view your role?
- Who do you collaborate with the most?
- What have your collaboration experiences been like with others in the school?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

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