

“One interested teacher at a time”: Australian Teacher Librarian Perspectives on Collaboration and Inquiry

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Abstract

While engaged in previous studies on Guided Inquiry in Australia, it became evident to researchers that an important piece missing in this research is the relationship of the teachers and school librarians in collaborating and delivering inquiry units to students. This study sought to fill this gap using an online questionnaire and interviews with volunteering school librarian respondents and their collaborating teachers. Preliminary findings reveal important elements to successful inquiry units, strategies to tackle inevitable challenges, and how to engage collaborators, “one interested teacher at a time” as one respondent notes.

Introduction

This project developed from previous studies investigating Guided Inquiry (GI) with secondary students from 2015 to the present (FitzGerald, 2015; FitzGerald & Garrison, 2016; Garrison & FitzGerald, 2016; Garrison & FitzGerald, 2017; Garrison, FitzGerald, & Sheerman, 2018). These studies sought to examine the students’ experience whilst across an inquiry unit and the seven stages of GI. But while working with the student participants, teachers, and school librarians on these GI studies, it became evident to researchers that an important piece missing to this research is the relationship of the teachers and school librarians (SLs) in the process of collaborating and delivering inquiry units.

Statement of the Problem

Understanding more about this collaborative relationship between teachers and SLs while engaged in planning, delivering, and assessing inquiry learning will support the use of GI and other inquiry learning approaches. Inquiry-based learning methods in general are currently a big emphasis of curricula worldwide from Australia to the United States (American Association of School Librarians, 2017; Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority, 2018; National Governors’ Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; Organisation for Economic

Co-operation and Development, 2014) as 21st Century skills have become a major focus of global syllabi and technology is embedded in learning (New Media Corporation, 2016).

Research Questions

In order to establish a foundational understanding of inquiry and collaboration in Australian schools, researchers completed a survey of current practices in the field. This project uses a phenomenological design to investigate the relationship of teachers and SLs whilst engaged in a collaborative inquiry project with their students. Research questions include:

- What types of inquiry-based learning methods are being used by Australian SLs?
- How is collaboration between SLs and teachers being implemented in inquiry units during the planning, delivery, and assessing stages?
- What are the elements of successful and unsuccessful collaborative inquiry units identified by SLs and teachers from the planning, delivery, and assessing stages?
- How do SLs and teachers describe and perceive their shared experiences engaging in an inquiry unit through the planning, delivery, and assessing stages?

Literature Review

A body of research investigating collaboration between teachers and SLs sets a strong foundation for the design of this study. This collaborative relationship has been studied by many school library researchers including Mardis (2017), Loertscher (2000), Montiel-Overall (2005, 2008, 2010), and Langford (2008, 2009). Montiel-Overall (2005) posited four models of collaboration, deriving from Loertscher's taxonomy (2000), ranging from coordination to cooperation to full collaboration. At its peak, collaboration between SLs and teachers is visible in an integrated information literacy program carried out across the whole curriculum. Common to all levels of collaboration are high levels of trust between members based on friendliness, congeniality, respect, and shared concern for student learning (Montiel-Overall, 2005). Montiel-Overall (2008) also identified the range of facilitating conditions for the highest level of collaboration to exist between teachers and teacher librarians. These are: school culture; attributes of collaborators; communication, management enablers, such as time to plan; and motivation to collaborate (Montiel-Overall, 2008, p. 149). A subsequent Australian study which used Montiel-Overall's schema for degrees of collaboration and enabling factors posited that it is the intrinsic interest felt by collaborating teachers and teacher librarians that is the key factor in successful high level collaboration (Williamson, Archibald & McGregor, 2017).

However, it has never been easy for SLs to achieve the full collaboration level described by Montiel-Overall (2005, 2016). As Mardis (2017) points out :

Despite the countless models and studies of collaboration between classroom teachers and school librarians, the consistent conclusion seems to be that the particular school context dictates the presence of any style of collaborative culture. School librarians have not often been able to establish collaborative relationships in environments where working together is not valued or supported. Indeed, for many school librarians, true collaboration is "more of a grail than a goal." (Montiel-Overall, 2005, p. 112, as cited in Mardis, 2017, p. xvii)

Mardis' international review of research (2017) on collaboration focuses on facilitators such as empowerment provided by the principal and teaching faculty; and devotes a whole section in her book to the pre-service preparation of SLs. A comment from Haycock (2017, p. 145) sums up changes needed in library schools: "If the implementation of change in schools is slow, it can be glacial in tertiary

institutions.” Haycock’s (2017) recommendations include choosing SL candidates because they have excellent teaching experience and demonstrate personal qualities such as leadership and that the subject material of SL training courses should highlight above all else, learning how to collaborate on instructional design, teaching and assessment and putting that into place in practicums (p. 250-251).

FitzGerald (2019) noted also the barriers to full collaboration in schools also including lack of time to collaborate, and a notion identified through interviewing a Swedish teacher librarian as *Förlägenheten* – which translates to something similar to embarrassment - on the part of teachers reluctant to collaborate with SLs (p. 54). This reluctance may arise from teachers being hesitant to show that they do not know the intricacies of information seeking and use. This may be due in part to teachers’ focus on *content* while SLs focus more on helping students develop *skills* to engage with content and information.

Collaboration at the highest level between teachers and teacher librarians remains the critical factor in the successful integration of information literacy into the curriculum. It takes time to develop and a way of starting it is to work with “one interested teacher at a time” as the title of this paper suggests. But it needs more than that - empowerment from the leadership of the school, and the interaction of all the factors identified by Montiel-Overall, (2005, 2008, 2010). It is also interesting to contemplate the intrinsic interest of the topic being collaborated on, as a motivating factor in collaboration.

Methodology

A phenomenological design was chosen as the foundation for this study as researchers are seeking to investigate the lived experience of teachers and school librarians while collaborating on an inquiry unit (Creswell, 2009). This methodological approach is non-directive and leaves the questioning open so that themes emerge naturally throughout the data collection process (Patton, 2002). This project consists of two phases: 1) an online questionnaire for SLs; and 2) interviews with Australian SLs and the teachers who have collaborated on an inquiry unit with them. The questionnaire was used to gauge the current climate of collaboration in inquiry units in Australia and also as a way to invite participants to the second phase of the study. The online questionnaire was disseminated via various Australian professional organisations for SLs like the Australian School Library Association, listservs like OZTL_Net, and email lists for each state and territory in Australia. Survey questions included basic demographic information about respondents’ schools and experience in education as well as what types of inquiry approaches they use/prefer, level of collaboration in their units, and elements of successful collaborative inquiry units. A final question on this survey asked for volunteers to participate in interviews for the second phase by giving their email. These SLs must have participated in a collaborative unit in the past year and preference was also given to SLs who had presented at a conference or published about the inquiry and/or collaboration experience. Thus, we were looking for experienced SLs who were proactive in developing and sharing their professional learning. After collecting the results, we emailed the interested SLs with the study information, consent forms, and also asked them to share this invitation with their collaborating teachers.

Given the inclusion of both quantitative and qualitative questions on the online questionnaire, two methods of analysis were utilised. Researchers used basic descriptive statistics to analyse the quantitative data on the survey. To analyse the qualitative data, an inductive content analysis allowed patterns to emerge from the data naturally rather than the application of predetermined categories (Patton, 2002). The following findings discussion addresses issues arising from the online questionnaire and preliminary findings from the interviews.

Findings

Phase One Online Questionnaire

The online questionnaire was disseminated from June to July 2018. There were 110 responses to the online survey with respondents from all states and territories of Australia and almost half of those from the two most populated states, New South Wales (28.6%) and Victoria (21%). Respondents mostly identify as SLs (84.5%), although in Australia, the term “Teacher Librarian” is used. More demographic information about our respondents are included in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Information about SL Respondents

	Items	Number & Percentage of Respondents
Level of school where they teach	Primary (K-6)	28 (25.5%)
	Secondary (7-12)	50 (45.5%)
	Primary & Secondary	32 (29.1%)
Type of school where they teach	Government	57 (53.3%)
	Independent (Private)	40 (37.4%)
	Other	10 (9.2%)
Years working in education	0-1 years	0 (0%)
	2-4 years	2 (1.9%)
	5-10 years	11 (10.2%)
	10+ years	95 (88%)
Years in current position	0-1 year	11 (10%)
	2-4 years	28 (25.5%)

	5-10 years	41 (37.3%)
	10+ years	30 (27.3%)

As shown in Table 1, the respondents represent an experienced group of educators and SLs with many years in education and their current position. Very few novice teachers responded to the survey.

In regards to the inquiry-based questions, findings indicate almost all respondents (96.3%) have used an inquiry-based approach in their teaching. A variety of inquiry methods are being used as shown in Table 2 including Big6 and Super3, Guided Inquiry Design, Project-based Learning, and some methods specifically designed by the different state departments of education including New South Wales. As shown in the far right column, the method used was not always the preferred method of the SL. This issue of preference was clarified in a following question as often being based on approaches implemented schoolwide or teachers and students having more experience with one approach over another.

Table 2. Inquiry-Based Methods Used and Preferred by SL Respondents

Inquiry Methods	Used	Preferred
Big6 & Super3	25 (22.7%)	6 (5.6%)
Guided Inquiry Design	51 (46.4%)	27 (25.2%)
NSW Information Search Process	24 (21.8%)	11 (10.3%)
Project-based Learning	43 (39.1%)	24 (22.4%)
Kath Murdoch's Model	6 (5.4%)	4 (3.6%)
Others or None	14 (12.6%)	34 (30.9%)

The data in Figure 1 include the average number of inquiry units respondents are delivering each school year and is generally high with 90% of SL respondents doing one or more units a year, and over one third engaging in six or more units.

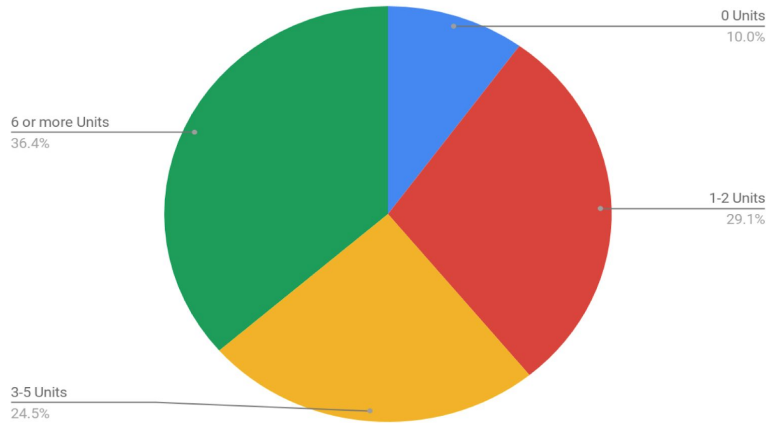


Figure 1. How many inquiry units do you deliver per school year?

While almost three-quarters of these units were noted as including collaboration, the data in Figure 2 show varying levels of collaboration ranging from:

1. No Collaboration (e.g., There is no collaboration between teachers and SL.);
2. Collaboration Sometimes (e.g., The teachers and SL collaborate on a drop-in basis with inquiry tasks.);
3. Collaboration Often (e.g., The teachers and SL cooperate throughout the course of the unit); and
4. Full Collaboration (e.g., The teachers and SL form learning teams throughout the course of the unit.).

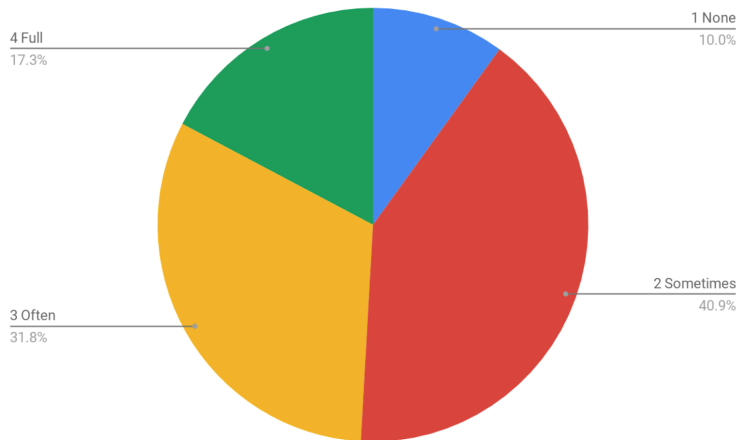


Figure 2. On a Scale of 1 to 4, how would you generally describe the level of collaboration you have had in planning and delivering the inquiry units?

In addition to these questions, the open-ended questions on the survey elicited rich data from the voices of the SL respondents revealing best practices, personal struggles, and challenges with planning, delivering, and assessing a collaborative inquiry unit. Barriers to open collaboration include time to collaborate, lack of understanding of the role of the SL in inquiry learning, lack of understanding of the role of the teacher in inquiry learning, and finally, the cultures of accountability and testing which are features of schools worldwide. These factors are presented as positives and negatives in this discussion.

Negative Factors

New teachers, new schools. Some of our respondents noted struggles with new teachers especially we are very worried about covering the content and time poor. Our respondent observed that new teachers are tending to be “very conservative and their lessons are teacher-centred.” Further, without the experience or prior knowledge of what a SL can do and how an inquiry unit can also cover the content, teachers may be unwilling to dedicate their time to collaboration. Another respondent noted, “Sometimes you will get a great team to work with and the planning, delivering and assessing will work well and then a new team of teachers come in and they decide not to work with the Teacher Librarians.” This factor supports the issue that teachers need to be made aware of collaborative opportunities with the SL while at university. In addition to starting with new teachers, our SL respondents noted that starting in a new school can mean starting all over again to build up “credibility and rapport with.. different faculties, in order for them to feel comfortable enough to approach you for collaboration in a unit of learning.”

Time and workload commitments. It is no surprise that time and workloads were noted as being a negative factor to collaboration. Some of the SLs we interview are not in the library full time and have other responsibilities including teaching complete subjects of their own. One respondent was not able to collaborate this year: “In previous years I have worked with 2 other teachers to plan, deliver and assess units. This change is due to losing part of my timetable to [teaching] Digital Technology this year.”

Further, they noted that teachers in secondary schools are especially time poor, and do not have the time to collaborate in the design and delivery of inquiry tasks. In primary schools, it is not much different as one respondent notes, “I am required to give teachers release from face-to-face teaching, it is not a collaborative teaching role.” This issue with schedule is echoed in schools across Australia and the US and is a big impediment to collaborative planning time. Leveraging time in smarter ways by building interdisciplinary inquiry units working across subjects and thus addressing multiple areas of the curriculum at the same time is one way to conquer the issue of time. Research on successful collaborations between teachers and teacher librarians from Montiel-Overall (2008) identifies time as a challenge but also notes the value of collaboration as overcoming this issue.

Positive Factors

Communication. Of core importance to any relationship, our respondents noted communication as being crucial to the collaboration and that it be continuing throughout the life of the unit. One SL respondent said:

Talking together! Finding regular time to communicate and talk through the planning. However, this communication needs to be on-going, as the inquiry continues. It can't just happen at the beginning - it has to continue, to refine and deepen. I always feel like I'm hassling teachers!

The last sentence of this comment also addresses a challenge some of the respondents noted in the process; it is a fine balance to achieve. Further, the fluid and evolving nature of inquiry learning as the unit progresses means communication is crucial throughout the process as this respondent commented, “staff need to touch base with each other to make sure that they are all still on the same page” throughout the unit.

Gaining momentum. Our SLs respondents identified a few ways they have engaged in successful collaborative inquiry units with their teachers. One respondent noted that seeking permission to attend faculty planning meetings was useful in getting a “foot in the door” with otherwise unresponsive teachers. Also, working through Heads of Department to identify teachers to work with on inquiry units was useful to a respondent that was a SL new to a school. Another respondent suggested starting small to build a network and rapport with teachers; “this can take a number of years.” But “working with one interested teacher at a time” as the title of this paper notes, has helped this SL get there.

Empowering teachers to understand inquiry learning. This issue was the impetus for the present study because in previous studies focusing on the students as participants, we found foundational problems in the creation and delivery of the inquiry unit with the teachers and SL collaboration. This was echoed in our findings from our SL respondents who noted, “The challenge is helping teachers understand what inquiry learning actually is. They often think any research project is inquiry by default.” This goes with another SL respondent’s thoughts that “Both [teacher librarian] and [teacher] have the same understanding of what an inquiry unit entails.” Teachers and SLs benefit from attending the same professional development sessions so they are on the same page with inquiry learning. As inquiry learning is now a key part of the Australian curriculum, it is even more important that these shared understandings are embedded into preservice teacher education.

Phase 2 Interviews with Teachers and SLs

Further analysis of Phase 2 interviews will enrich the picture of collaboration between teachers and SL on inquiry units. However, despite almost a quarter of our questionnaire SL respondents (26) indicating an initial interest in participating in the interviews, only five SLs responded to the interview request and have been interviewed with only three of their teachers participating as well. We altered our recruitment method for this phase by advertising this phase of the study to conference participants in two Australian SL conferences attended earlier this year and got just one more SL interviewed from that. Despite having some interesting and relevant data from our first six participants, this lack of participation has put phase 2 on hold as we try to get more participants and stronger connections to the data.

Implications and Conclusions

As inquiry learning is growing in importance in national and international standards and curricula, it is important to understand best practices in how SLs are implementing inquiry in their teaching and how they use it to collaborate with teachers, even if it is just “one interested teacher at a time” as an interview respondent noted in the paper’s title. It is clear that the level of collaboration achievable by teams of teachers and SLs is central to the successful implementation of inquiry learning in schools, but there are still many barriers hindering collaboration that need to be addressed. As noted by previous researchers and scholars in our field, teacher and school librarian university programs are a way we can teach preservice educators the importance and value of collaboration before they get into schools (Haycock, 2017). Longitudinal research of preservice teachers’ understandings and practice with school librarians shows positive findings in successful collaborations (Moreillon, 2008). Setting this foundation early is crucial to embedding it into the image of what a school librarian does and how teachers can utilise their school librarian to support instruction. Also, as other school library researchers have indicated (Church, 2010), getting the support of principals and the administration is critical to this process so university programs educating those groups should be targeted and the value of the school library integrated into

their curricula. If we are able to address these issues at the roots level, collaboration and inquiry learning will be in a stronger position to flourish in schools and grow independent, resilient learners.

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