

Let's Talk About Isolation as School Librarians

by Kate Larson

Building connections is hard. Here are some ideas for how to get started

The U.S. is home to around [56,000 public school librarians](#) across [roughly 98,000 public K-12 schools](#)¹ – which means that most of the time, librarians are holding down the fort alone or working across multiple schools. While classroom teachers get to plan in teams, most librarians create curriculum and manage their libraries solo. And while community members share an understanding of what classroom teachers are doing each day, librarians' work is widely underestimated and misunderstood.

"We are the only people in our building who are librarians," says Amy Drake, a teacher librarian in central Iowa. "And because lots of people use a library, both at school and in their normal lives, I think that it's very easy for them to assume they know what we're doing when they don't."

Among fellow school librarians, Drake says, tales of feeling alone or left out are astoundingly common. "We all have very different circumstances," she notes, "and yet ... we have similar isolation experiences." But despite its prevalence, the problem defies easy solutions. If school librarians are being asked to solve it themselves, it requires time and effort that are in short supply, as well as a receptive audience. What could it look like for librarians to take steps toward feeling more connected to their school communities?



Amy Drake

"Isolation is the just the nature of our job."

It's worth exploring why the position of school librarian is so isolating in the first place. Drake suggests that it's a complex tangle of circumstances and assumptions. For one, librarians are often inadvertently left out of conversations while covering multiple schools. "For those of us who travel between buildings, it is very, very easy for our professional development to be fragmented," she says. "It's very easy for us to have a surface-level understanding of what is going on in the building [...] And that can also lead to isolation because it's easier to overlook us when we aren't there."

The rigors and depth of the job — curating and organizing the collection, developing information system techniques, budgeting, and more— are also frequently misunderstood. "It doesn't look like we're doing anything that would require a master's degree," Drake says. "We don't get asked a lot of questions. We are not really included in conversations around classroom content." When teachers or administrators assume that the position exclusively entails reading to students and checking books in and out, resentment can build because "it looks like our job is super easy." During classroom teachers' PLC time, librarians are often teaching their students, Drake points out, making it difficult to collaborate with those teaching teams to offer support.



Exclusion of school librarians is often unintentional. Even when no one intends for librarians to be left out of the loop, isolation is the "natural consequences of our position," Drake says. For example, schoolwide professional development tends to focus on classroom content that isn't relevant to the library (e.g., online grade books). But being consistently left out can be demoralizing. And especially for librarians who have worked as classroom teachers, shifting from collaborating with a team to flying solo is jarring. "It's hard to cope with at first," she notes. "And then after a while you get really good at it. And you don't think, necessarily, 'I'm going to fix this.'"

How can school librarians start to combat isolation?

It can be tough to contend with a problem that has so many causes, many of which are not within an individual's control. It's not uncommon for school librarians to self-isolate, Drake says, because there's so much work to do and because pushing for inclusion takes a lot of energy. "Sometimes we just don't feel like we belong in the groups [of classroom teachers] and so we just choose not to insert ourselves," she explains. "We have to do the heavy lifting of putting ourselves in those conversations if we want to be."



throughout the school community of what librarians do. Drake says she sends a newsletter to her schools every other month to keep staff updated. The newsletter includes data (“here’s the number of books we’ve weeded this month”) as well as a behind-the-scenes glimpse into processes (“I’m working on genrefying the library, and here are the steps that it takes for me to get that done”). She also shares lesson plans with classroom teachers to keep them informed about what students are learning in the library, sends administrators photos of library activities to post on Facebook, and works with the PTA to promote the library to the school board.

It can help to identify allies within the school or district. Drake says that one of her school principals is an especially passionate advocate for libraries, so she intentionally shares a lot of information with them. But it can be tough to identify supporters with both interest and influence. “Sometimes your admin could be an ally, but [...] that requires a lot of communication,” she notes. “And sometimes principals just don’t have time for more emails and more texts.”

Finally, librarians can connect with each other for support, solidarity, and brainstorming. Facebook is already a popular gathering place, Drake notes, with several thriving librarian communities. And momentum is also growing on Instagram and TikTok, where Drake has built a following as [@the_snarky_librarian](#). “Lots of people are coming [to TikTok] to share ideas — good ideas!” she says, “And that community in the last few years has really grown.” While it’s a relief to connect with other school librarians who are experiencing similar things, it can also be an opportunity. “If we all have the same experiences,” she says, “we all can maybe work towards resolving those issues over time.”

A hidden silver lining?

Being isolated can be discouraging, but Drake points out that it can also create space for trying new things. “Having the option to be as visible as you want to be can sometimes be empowering,” she notes. Especially in a climate where school libraries have recently faced political scrutiny, it can be nice to have the ability to operate quietly without ruffling any feathers.

But despite this upside, isolation remains a significant problem for school librarians. During her 16 years working as a high school English language arts teacher, Drake says, collaboration was the order of the day. “Everything you do is with your team. You have constant conversations; you are always in the middle of working together; there’s always people,” she notes. “And then to leave that and to come into this job, [where] there isn’t anyone really to talk to, there isn’t anyone asking you questions, you don’t have anyone to toss ideas around with, and you are by yourself — that can be pretty hard.”

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Kate is a writer and researcher with a background in nonprofit communications. She has planned financial literacy workshops in Kenya, spent late nights writing grant applications, and distributed hands-on K-8 science resources to teachers across the U.S. She is particularly interested in the ways that language drives behavior change through education, awareness-building, and the power of an irresistible narrative.

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