Learning Connections and the School Library Media Program:

"It takes a whole village to raise a child"

by *Judith F. Davie*

Adults serving children with diverse needs, different learning styles, and varied abilities must tap all possible resources to help these children make learning connections and build meaningful relationships in their emerging world. Many at-risk children do not make these connections unless significant adults in their daily lives collaborate through community and educational organizations. School library media specialists interact daily with these children, thus becoming individuals who facilitate the learning connections with other adults and organizations that serve children. These connected outreach programs must build on what is familiar to the child and on the language development possibilities inherent in making these connections.

The current educational reform movement, which stresses the educational value of collaboration beyond the local school, supports the establishment of broad-based learning connections in the community. Such learning connections have implications for all community agencies, libraries, and school library media programs.

Learning Connections and Educational Reform

Education reformers have pointed out that there is no work situation that does not demand collaborative work among individuals and agencies. School library media specialists and others in education can model collaboration as the way in which adults work. If adults in a variety of agencies can establish learning connections by planning, instructing, and working with children, then children will come to accept this model of collaboration as the norm. Parents and the larger community have long been viewed by educational reformers as largely untapped resources for the education of at-risk children. These resources must be tapped for survival in the 21st century.

For example, the Comer School Model,[1] based on twenty-five years of research by James Comer and his colleagues at the Yale Child Study Center, suggests a model for increased collaboration among parents, caregivers, community members, and the school program. Comer concluded that children's experiences in the home and community deeply affect their psychosocial development, which in turn shapes their academic achievement. The Comer model is designed to create a school environment where children

will feel comfortable, valued, and secure and will have personal and academic success. Stated another way, poor academic performance is not an isolated event, but represents a failure to bridge the social and cultural gaps among home, community, and school. As Marian Wright Edelman, director of the Children's Defense Fund, stresses, our society can do a much better job in nurturing children who are our future.[2]

Learning Connections and the Whole Village

In most communities numerous public and private agencies are interested in the education and development of children. Many national association and local community groups participate in activities and events that can strengthen the child's sense of connectedness. Events that celebrate the language process — poetry, storytelling, writing, theater, book talks, special weeks or months — can be part of this process of communities, libraries, and learning.

Important elements in sustaining learning connections are a strong base of community support, engagement of teachers in related curriculum work, and long-term commitment of resources. The school and the community cannot ignore the total life of the child and his/her family. Children bring the rest of their

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lives into the school setting. If the needs of the community, the family, and the individuals in those families are not being met, then the child has a more difficult time in learning and working with others.

The same principle holds for other social agencies. Agencies must have a focus broader than a particular problem situation – violence, drug abuse, illness — and take a holistic approach to serve all of the needs of the family and community. Obviously no agency can do this job alone. In cooperation with other agencies, the school must move toward a village concept of education: "It takes a whole village to raise a child."

Learning Connections and Library Agencies

Public libraries often have developed learning connections with the community, including daycare centers, juvenile justice programs, family literacy projects, extension services, adult centers, etc. Community college learning resource centers can be the learning connections for adult literacy, GED, and other non-credit, high interest course activities co-sponsored by various community agencies and businesses. The school library media specialist needs to strengthen learning connections with all other types of libraries in order to tap into existing networks. If the librarians in each of

these agencies view learning connections as a common goal, if they can work together to make those goals a reality, and if they can overcome institutional inertia, the total community will benefit from improved, coordinated library services, and children will be better served.

Connecting the school with the local public library and its branches is a crucial step. Many at-risk children do not have experience with the public library, its programs, or services. The first, and most important, step in this connection is opening up communication! If school library media specialists and public librarians who serve children and youth communicate in person, by phone, or by e-mail, great things can happen. Examples of these learning connections include:

— Library Card Sign-Up Times
When schools have PTA meetings or other parent/children gatherings, invite the nearest branch to have a representative at the school for library card sign-up. Promote this card sign-up in publicity sent to parents. In many schools parental involvement will build during a school year, so such sign-up events should be repeated during the year.
— Partnerships with Public Library Branches
Public library systems can "assign" specific schools to specific branches so that programs and services of

that particular branch are promoted automatically in the school and community. School library media programs also can promote book fairs, special events, summer reading programs, and celebrations through the assigned public library branch.
— School Field Trips
The school can arrange for field trips to the public library so that children can participate in its storyhours, book talks, and special celebrations.
— Summer Reading Programs
School library media programs can promote public library summer reading programs through bulletin boards, mailings to parents, and special events at the school that focus on the theme of the summer program. Where schools have summer (or year-round) programs, the summer reading program themes can be introduced into the instructional program and coordinated as a media focus, resulting in reading celebrations and awarding of certificates at the school sites.
— National Poetry Month
Many public and school librarians will have used the "Poetry Break" idea originated by Caroline Feller Bauer.[3] National Poetry Month (in April) offers an opportunity for all of these community agencies to connect and develop programs that highlight poetry reading, poetry writing, and poetry celebration. This year Andrew Carroll, executive director of the American Poetry and Literacy Project, is driving a truck from New York to San Francisco to distribute 100,000 free books of poetry across the country. The National Poetry Month Web site offers an opportunity for children and adults to "visit" poets in different sections of the country.[4] Local groups can encourage poets to donate poems, write a poem, or do a poetry book distribution.
— National Library Week
The American Library Association has sponsored National Library Week since 1958. In addition to providing theme posters and other materials and ideas for local library celebrations each April, ALA yearly publicizes National Library Week on television and radio, national wire services, and in consumer magazines with feature stories and public service announcements.[5] Local groups can coordinate NLW cel-

First graders love the books, if not the bugs!

ebrations focusing on children's services in a variety of agencies.

— National Children's Book Week

In the third week of November each year, the Children's Book Council sponsors National Children's Book Week. The theme for November 15-21, 1999, is "Plant a Seed ... Read!" The theme poster is by Eric Carle and special promotional materials are available from the CBC.[6] Local groups could sponsor author or illustrator visits (and share the cost), promote children's books through readings, and have a children's book parade.

— Read Across America

The National Education Association sponsors this event on Dr. Seuss's birthday each year. Last year, the Read Across America program had participation from a million teachers, parents, and community leaders who donned their *Cat in the Hat* hats and shared favorite stories with ten million children. The NEA Read Across America Web site suggests a number of ideas and activities.[7] Local groups can connect to sponsor local library, community center, and TV reading events where adults share their favorite stories with children.
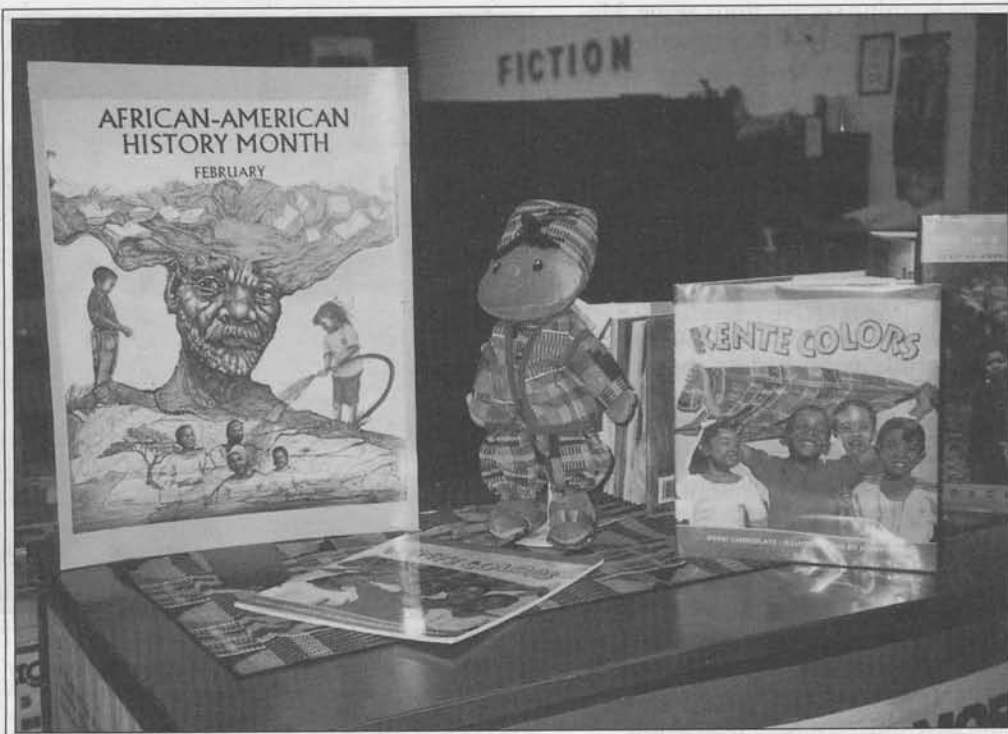
— Reading Is Fundamental (RIF)

Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) is a leading nonprofit children's literacy organization. RIF helps children want to read. Through a network of volunteer-run programs, RIF gets free books into kids' hands and makes reading fun through exciting

Book displays link children with celebrations.

reading-related activities.[8] Through local community and corporate sponsors, the RIF program can be started and sustained as one of the learning connections for children in any community.

Learning Connections: The School Library Media Program

As school library media specialists expand their programs to connect with the programs or services of other agencies, the school media programs change from programs within an isolated facility to programs that connect children to information resources in the community and anywhere in the world. The old-fashioned view of the school media center as a place with book and AV resources changes to a

view of that center as accessing information resources located in the community and distributed via computer networks. Teachers, students, parents, and community members access information in classrooms, in the media center, at home, and in community centers. All of these potential learning connections change the way the school media program supports instruction, how budgeting and planning are done, and how the school library media specialist cooperates with other agencies. The major role of the school library media specialist becomes one of working with other adults in a variety of settings so that children can make essential connections with the information resources that they need to develop as active, lifelong learners. Obviously, the school library media specialist does not

create learning connections alone. Media specialists can work with others in the community to bring about needed changes in the ways that all agencies offer information resource and language development services to children. All these agencies need to take active roles in devising connected programs, which will have positive impact on children as they grow and learn.

Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning, the national standards jointly published by the American Association of School Librarians and Association for Educational Communication and Technology, places major emphasis on these collaborative roles of the school library media specialist:

> Collaboration — working with others — is a key theme in building partnerships for learning. Library media specialists have long understood the importance of collaborating with the different members of the learning community. The literature of the field, both from research and from practice, documents the importance of collaborative planning and teaching ... [Collaboration] is basic as they work with teachers, administrators, parents, and other members of the learning community to plan, design, and implement programs that provide access to information that is required to meet students' and others' learning goals.[9]

Establishing effective learning connections in the larger community is critical because, as *Information Power* points out, "Today's student lives and learns in a world that has been radically altered by the ready availability of vast stores of information, in a variety of formats." The authors note that "students must become skillful consumers and producers of information in a range of sources and formats to thrive personally and economically in the communications age."[10]

Loertscher contrasts the traditional concept of library collections with the newer connection concept is this manner:

Traditional Library	New Connection
Print rich	Information rich in every format
Print and AV oriented	Multiple technologies
Centralized (one location)	Centralized and decentralized simultaneously
Rigidly scheduled	Flexibly scheduled
Single person staff	Professional and technical staff
A quiet, almost empty place	A busy, bustling learning laboratory[11]

Bea McAdoo-Shaw from Vance Chavis Lifelong Learning Library, Greensboro Public Library, at Hampton Year Round School in Greensboro.

Specific Suggestions for the School Library Media Program Connection

If the school assumes a goal of becoming an agency that collaborates with other agencies in providing human services, the program and services of the library media center also must change.

Service Hours

The school must make itself available when people have time to seek services. In cooperation with other agencies, a library media center schedule is developed that probably will involve evening and weekend hours. It is likely that the school will be open anyway because of the needs of other agencies who have service staff in the facility to serve the community. These changes will require rethinking staffing needs, as well as increased use of trained volunteers, clerical assistants, and student workers. School library media programs that collaborate with others will require additional staff.

Professional Collections

Library media center professional collections traditionally have served the information needs of teachers and ad-

ministrators. The full-service school professional collection will need to reflect the information needs of all of the professionals who are using the school as a base for their operations. Often these professional resources will be online through telecommunications or the Internet. As collections are modified to meet new demands, the funding structure for collection development needs to be changed so that everyone who benefits from the collection is involved in providing part of the collection development budget. The school library media specialist will need to build a community-family life collection as an integral part of the library media collection.

Since community members are utilizing the school as a service agency, the library media professional collection should reflect this change and provide resources that those people need. The interests, reading abilities, and format preferences of the community must be assessed as this collection development activity begins.

Media Advisory Committee

The media advisory committee will need to be expanded to include representatives of the participating agencies, community members, and the other libraries in the area. The traditional media advisory committee was made up of teachers and sometimes students as the primary users of the school library media center. This group should be expanded to reflect the information interests and needs of the total service population — professionals and community members. This change will

mean the involvement of other information agencies in the community.

Instructional Programs

Traditional library media programming targets students, teachers, and sometimes parents. To the school, the library media specialist now must add community groups and professionals serving them to that list. Often programs already underway will serve a wide variety of groups. Some examples of such programs include:

— Author, illustrator, or "expert" visits
Such visits usually are confined to meeting with classes, a luncheon, and an evening reception with the host group. Often experts in various aspects of child development, parenting, and instructional techniques are involved in local school staff development activities that are paid for by the school system. Parents, community members, and allied professionals also would be interested in meeting these authors, illustrators, or experts. The opportunity to get books autographed, ask questions of an expert, and be introduced to books and other materials would be valued by many people. These visits can be modified easily to involve the large social agency group in planning, funding, and promoting these visits; scheduling presentations so that the community can participate; and inviting local authors, illustrators, and experts to the presentations.

— Staff Development
Often staff development activities for teachers and staff are not oriented to specific curricular areas, but to the acquisition of specific skills – especially in the area of computer-related technologies, but also in the areas of specific reading-skill or mathematics-skill techniques. Such events are of interest to parents and the larger community. The school library media specialist should think about reviewing all staff development activities and schedules and asking the question, "Is this an activity that would interest others?" On too many occasions, libraries and schools engage in staff development as if there were no other groups that might be interested. Naturally, the shoe also fits the other foot. When other agencies are having staff development activities, the school should expect to be included.

— Reading Programs
A wide variety of reading encouragement and example programs are emerging as schools attempt to deal with the major reading deficits in our society. Most of these programs are individual and/or small group activities led by an adult. Involving parents, grandparents, and other community members in such activities not only serves to model good reading behavior and attitudes to the students, it also models the importance of these activities to the adults around the school. Incidently, it also may be a source for improving adult literacy in the larger community.

Summary on Connection

Library connections depend upon people who are willing to communicate across the lines of governing bureaucracies because they have the interests of children at heart. Once they find each other and begin talking, learning connections develop and children benefit.

References

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[2] Marian Wright Edelman, *Stand for Children; Address delivered June 1, 1996 at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D. C., as a part of Stand for Children Day* (New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 1998).

[3] Caroline Feller Bauer, *The Poetry Break: An Annotated Anthology with Ideas for Introducing Children to Poetry* New York: H. W. Wilson, 1995.

[4] National Poetry Month <http://www.poetry.books.com>.

[5] National Library Week <http://www.ala.org/celebrating>.

[6] National Children's Book Week <http:// www.cbcbooks. org/pubs/aboutbw.htm>. This site includes tips on how to celebrate, a page of products to browse, and information on the Children's Book Council.

[7] Read Across American <http://www.nea.org/readacross/index.html>.

[8] Reading is Fundamental <http://www.si.edu/rif>.

[9] American Association of School Librarians and Association for Educational Communication and Technology, *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning*. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1998), 50-51.

[10] Ibid., 1

[11] David V. Loertscher, *Reinvent Your School's Library in the Age of Technology: A Guide for Principals and Superintendents*. San Jose, CA.: Hi Willow Research and Publishing, 1998: 3.