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Assignment 1: Library Administrator Interview Paper

I. Introduction

For perhaps only the third time in my life, I have had the pleasurable experience of interviewing someone about their job. As I sat down to meet with Mrs. K and discuss the questions that I had provided her ahead of time, we were comfortable in our conversation which lasted close to an hour, and found out more about what it means to be an elementary school librarian.

So often, when asked the question, “What is it that you do as an elementary school librarian?” I think we have a preconceived notion of what the job entails, and most times this is a false preconception. What we think of as someone reading books and shushing patrons, actually includes so much more. My job in this interview was to get to the bottom of what an elementary school librarian does, not what we the public thinks she does. And Mrs. K was more than happy to oblige.

Mrs. K is a seasoned teacher and librarian. She will be able to retire from the elementary school she presently works at (and has been working at for almost 14 years) in another three years. She has experience teaching grades 1 through 4 in both the private and public school settings. While she says that she misses the classroom at times, nothing except retirement could take her away from the media center. When I asked her why she wanted to become a librarian, she said she wanted to do something different and that she loves books so this seemed like the perfect fit for her.

We were not able to meet during the regular school day, and only on a Monday or Wednesday afternoon due to her Battle of the Book Team practices on the other days (she is very competitive and wants to keep her winning streak alive). So we meet after school in her office. Throughout the interview, there are teachers that come in in need of help either with pulling materials, checking in materials, returning COWs (computers on wheels), and questions from the art teacher she mentors.

As I stated earlier, this is an elementary school with grade levels from kindergarten through fifth grade. It was just granted the status of Title I at the beginning of the school year, and this has added to the already overflowing list of job expectations and duties fulfilled by Mrs. K. The media center is in the center of the school and can be accessed from either side of the building. It is in an appropriate spot I feel as this seems to be the hub of the school for both students and teachers alike.

The media center is arranged in a way that is based on the Accelerated Reader program. One side of the library has a nonfiction section for AR levels 2.9 and below while the other side of the library has its nonfiction section with AR levels of 3.0 and above. The fiction books are also on this side of the library and along a side wall. Also in this area are the paperback books and a separate bookshelf for the Spanish Immersion program. Back over by the lower AR nonfiction books are the everybody books and another small bookcase with magazines and periodicals. The reference books are at the opposite door by the computers. There are three computers that students can use to access Destiny, the school's online catalog, or to take AR tests on.

Also located within the walls of the media center are Mrs. K's office, a teacher book room, an audio visual room, and a tiny room that holds the speech and EC teachers and their

students that they pull. Because the room is so small or someone might be using it, the media center itself has also become a sort of classroom for these special teachers and their students.

Overall, Mrs. K is not entirely happy with the layout of the media center. She likes that there are plenty of student tables, small round ones for the little kids and larger rectangular tables for the older kids, but she wishes there was more room in the media center or a way to move some of the bookcases so she can make room for a makerspace. Currently, the media center is lacking any kind of a makerspace, something Mrs. K hopes to soon remedy.

Mrs. K believes that the student should come first and that we as educators, are here to help them achieve their goals. She also believes that the school can be viewed as a company with the principal acting as the CEO and the vice principal as their aide. When I asked Mrs. K where she felt she fit in to this organization she said, “I don’t know exactly. I mean it feels like I’m often on my own island to do my job without much support, but I do get called in a lot to help them whenever they need help. That seems to happen a lot come to think about it. So I guess that would make me part of the support team.” This was an eye opener for me as to the way Mrs. K felt unsupported but it was good to see that while she felt lost or on her own at times, it was refreshing to see she didn’t take this out on the students.

II. Administrator Tasks

As I stated before, Mrs. K really has an overloaded plate when it comes to what she does and what is expected of her in the media center. From the normal teaching duties, which include teaching all classes (there are 31 homerooms) on an odd-even week schedule for forty minutes per class period, Mrs. K also has other daily tasks that start with car duty in the mornings, followed by open circulation when students can check in and check out books. There is also an

open circulation period in the afternoon as well. Mrs. K also coordinates the Accelerated Reader program for the entire school and she works with the teachers on ways to facilitate it in the classroom. Also mentioned earlier was her being the coach of the school's BOB Team; she doesn't have an assistant coach so she has to come up with all of the questions and Kahoots exercises by herself.

Other daily tasks for Mrs. K include shelving books, circulation duties, updating and being in charge of the school's website. Ordering, processing, repairing, and replacing books is another part of her job that takes up a good part of her daily duties. She is seen as the IT go to person for the school and frequently gets called on throughout the day to replace computer keyboards, fix Smart Boards, and update computers. She is in charge of the school's inventory and she is the one tasked with the responsibility of accounting for the huge inventory.

Mrs. K is a mentor to three first and second year teachers that come to her throughout the day, before school, and even after school. She has an open door and they are always welcome to come to her. This is a great policy to have and I think it helps put these new teachers at ease knowing they have someone to turn to whenever they need it. Mrs. K also collaborates with the other teachers in the school, often trying to tie in her lessons with that of the classroom teachers. Promoting a love of reading is yet another duty but Mrs. K says this is often a tough one, especially in the age of technology where so many kids would rather play a video game than read a book. There are book fairs two times per year that Mrs. K also uses to help her promote this love of reading by purchasing some of the more popular books from the book fair, as well as making little book trailers to coincide with viewing the DVD she gets from Scholastic.

Mrs. K had never heard of the 1/3 Rule so I explained it to her. The 1/3 Rule states that the manager or in her case, her, should spend equal amounts of time (33%) on three distinct areas:

business operations, internal customers, and external customers. Breaking each area down further, I explained to her that business operations include meetings, planning, budgets, and policies. The Internal Customer area includes the media center and all that use it. The External Customer area includes the area outside of the media center, including the rest of the school and the community beyond. After listening to my explanation of the 1/3 Rule Mrs. K stated that while this all sounded well and good, she didn't think this could be applied to what she did daily in the media center. She further explained that she felt she definitely spent more time on the internal customer area of the 1/3 Rule (she guessed 75%), and hardly any time on the external customer area of the rule (she guessed maybe 10%). She stated she did focus part of her time on the business operations but certainly not 1/3, more like 15%. She felt that the teaching and planning aspects of the job took up most of her time, but upon further examination, we were able to see that Mrs. K spends more time on the other areas than she had originally thought. For instance, she is part of the SIT (School Improvement Team) and this takes up a good deal of time. She also is involved with outside activities like Reading Rocks. Mrs. K is also the person the new principal seems to go to when she has questions about the school's technology and supplies. Just these tasks alone showed Mrs. K and myself that she did in fact spend more time in the other areas than she had originally thought.

When asked about her definition of management and leadership, Mrs. K responded with the following, "I feel that leadership is the actions taken and required to lead a group successfully. Management is the way that you lead." She further explained that although someone might be seen as the person in charge, they aren't always the good leader that the group may need to be successful. I then asked her if she felt she were a good manager of the media center. She took a few moments pause and seemed to really think about her answer. She is not a very boastful

person and I think this question put her in an awkward position of speaking the truth while not seeming to brag. “Well I think I’m a good manager of the media center. I don’t know what everyone else thinks though,” she said with a laugh. “But really, I think I am a pretty good manager overall because I focus on the kids’ needs and try to get everyone else to do the same, whether it’s the parents, the administration, and the other teachers. I do take pride in my job and I want others to see how hard I work at keeping this ship afloat. Some days are harder than others but the ship hasn’t sunk yet.”

III. Answers to My Top Five Questions

Before I asked Mrs. K my top five questions, I rewrote some of them so they would apply to her library in the elementary school, and not just libraries in general. The first question posed to her was, “What are the managerial tasks she performs in the library?” She gave me a great response, although I think she was being a bit facetious: “Anything and everything.” She then expounded on her reply and gave me a more detailed explanation. “I manage the students when they come in, whether its during a class or open circulation times or whenever they come during the day. I’m in charge of spending the funds the library receives through book fair and Reading Rocks appropriately. I have to stay on top of ordering and processing new books to keep the collection relevant. I have to set up lessons according to the state standards and teach my lessons accordingly. I have to make sure that the technology we have is in functioning order. There are probably a ton of other things I’m forgetting but that’s all I can think of right now.”

So I moved on to my next question: Who should be involved in the budgeting process? Again, she gave a silly reply, “No one. Then I know the money is being spent wisely.” Then she changed her answer and said, “Well I know the principal has to approve what I order and the bookkeeper has to make sure we have the funds available, but I think the teachers and students

could be more involved. I put out a sheet of paper every nine weeks with the headline ‘What New Books Should I Get for the Library?’ but I only ever get four or five responses. Its amazing in a school this size (they are currently just over 700 students) that those are the numbers I get. I think if I could somehow come up with another way to reach out to teachers and ask for books they want instead of them coming to me at the last minute before a lesson, this would be great. I just haven’t come up with one yet that works.”

My third question, ‘How could I include teachers more in the library?’ gets a more serious response from her. “Yes, I have often asked myself that very question. It seems like teachers just drop their students off and pick them up after 40 minutes. I wish they would want to collaborate more. I’m sure I could be a great help to them, especially the new teachers, and we have a lot of them this year.”

‘Do certain layouts of the library have an effect on the way the students choose the books they do?’ also gets met with a serious answer. “I think so. I know I have tried to come up with ways to rearrange the library but its hard with some of these bookcases and I only have a limited space to work with. I’ve been doing smaller things like putting some series together even when they different authors. This helps the kids find the books easier and helps them see which books are next in the series. I’ve also put all of the Spanish Immersion books together so that they don’t have to look for Spanish books among the English ones. Another thing I do is to bring a certain colored book out and put all those books with that color on the display areas. Like putting red books out for Valentine’s Day and green out for St. Patrick’s Day. You wouldn’t believe how many books get checked out that really didn’t even get noticed before by the kids.”

For my last question, I think Mrs. K struggled with it a bit as she has already on numerous occasions stated she wished she were more tech savvy and up with the age of technology more

than she is. ‘What are some other ways, besides the school website, that I could reach out to parents, teachers, students, and others?’ “Hmm. I really don’t know if we are allowed anything other than the school website, and I know that even that is closely monitored and has to go by county rules. I wish we could use something like Facebook because I know a lot of these parents are on it. And we have a huge military population that would benefit from it too, when parents are deployed. I think Facebook would be great because we could get the word out about events, new books, even ask for book donations. I don’t think any of that’s allowed on the website, except maybe the events. Even then, I’m limited to the number of characters. I even think some of those new social media sites like Snapchat, is it, could be useful too for us. But I really don’t think the county allows that. I’ll have to ask Mrs. P the next time I go to Web Lab.” This leaves Mrs. K thinking and with a new task on her already overflowing plate.

I ended my direct questioning with a final one of what she sees as her most frequently occurring problem. Again, I got a remark I should have seen coming: too much to do and too little time to get it all done. She was serious about this too. She explains that on some days with the way the schedule is set up she can get a little more of the “back office” work done without having to stay after school to work on it. She admits that she doesn’t even try anymore to do her lesson plans at school; she needs more time than the few minutes here or there allow her. She also says that there are days when she feels lucky to get enough time to gulp down a soda and a yogurt for lunch she’s so busy. This makes me sad because I know she is the type of person who puts others first and never says no to anyone’s requests. If I’ve learned anything, it’s that you need to sometimes say no, as hard as it may be, or even say not right now. You can’t be expected to do everything and when you make yourself expect that you’re going to burn out and fizzle.

IV. Opportunities for Improvement

Mrs. K loves her job and while she is only three years away from retirement she is not one of those people who have decided to take it easy and coast these last few years. If anything, with the new principal at the school, she seems to have taken on even more. So when I asked her about the ideal qualities she sees in an administrator, she replies with saying something about the old principal. Mrs. K said that while she wasn't 100% happy with the old principal she did feel that she had her back and truly understood what her job entails. She states that this knowing about the people you are leading is one of the most important traits a good administrator can have. They need to be in touch with the people working with them, Mrs. K states. Being involved in the school and letting people see you are involved is another area she sees as a trait of a good administrator. When you are out and about among the people, they will see and know you are there with them.

An area that Mrs. K really wants to improve upon is creating a makerspace in her library. She thinks this will be a welcome and sought after place for the students and maybe even teachers. She has been researching ways to incorporate makerspaces in elementary school libraries and has even put forth a plan to the administration. Technology has been down, she tells me, to see if her plan could be put into place, as she would have to move the computers to a new location that would require electrical outlets that aren't there. She seems very excited about this new plan of hers. I am hoping she is successful with it.

Admitting that Mrs. K takes on too much at times, I am shocked she states this to me and tells me not to follow suit. She states that I need to allot my time efficiently and remember to leave time and be flexible for emergencies. "They always happen and there's nothing you can do about them, but being flexible will help you cope with them," Mrs. K says. Yes, this is good advice I will take with me and apply not only to the library but also to my life in general as well.

IV. Compare and Contrast our Readings to Your Administrator

In Ken Blanchard's book, *Raving Fans*, he tells the reader about three secrets all businesses should follow, no matter what kind of business they are. The first secret is to decide what you want, the second secret is to find out what your customers want, and the third secret is to deliver customer service with a plus one attitude meaning that you go above and beyond what the norm is. While Mrs. K was somewhat familiar with the author, she stated she had never read any of his books.

Perhaps before this interview even took place, I could see from the way that Mrs. K runs her operation in the library that she is a raving fan. She constantly delivers plus one to the students and teachers. One example I have is when there is a student who has come in with a book they have damaged or lost, she waives the replacement fee, knowing their socioeconomic background. She knows that she will have to replace the book but she also knows that this student won't be able to pay for it. Mrs. K also did away with late fees schoolwide. She also will add books into a pile of books she pulls for a teacher, when she sees ones that they might be interested in, even before they ask. She holds new books aside for students who have been asking for them. These are just some of her plus one examples.

Mrs. K fulfills the first two secrets when she inventories her collection that she starts in January. She also notes popular books among the students and orders them as soon as she receives funds to do so. She decides what she wants according to the needs of the library as well as the wants of the people that use it. She follows the second secret by simply being aware of which books are popular and get checked out more frequently than others. She also uses the request paper that I mentioned previously and she is trying to come up with a better way to get this out to the entire school.

As for the 12 questions posed in *First Break All the Rules* by Buckingham and Coffman, I think there is a mix of some that Mrs. K can answer yes to and some that she cannot. For instance, the question about having the materials and equipment she needs to do her work right is one that she answered no to. She wishes she could have a Smart Board and Elmo that work all of the time. She wishes she had the materials she needs for a makerspace. Another one she answered no to was the question about receiving recognition or praise for doing a great job in the last seven days. She is sad when she says that it would mean so much to her if she got that recognition, but hardly ever does. She states that she can say yes in the past about having a best friend at work, but since they have moved, not right at the moment. Another question she could answer yes to was the one about her co-workers committed to quality work and the principal talking to her about her progress (this was after an observation). She doesn't feel like her opinions count with everybody but with some people she does. She also feels that the PDs offer her opportunities to learn and then grow. So all in all, I think this was a mix of yes and no answers to the twelve questions.

V. Conclusions and Recommendations

The interview ended, but it really didn't seem like a formal interview at all. It seemed more like questions were asked and answered during a conversation that was at times serious and other times jovial. There were a lot of things I learned both about the job of being an elementary school librarian and the person you should be in order to be successful at it. There is a great deal of work involved in running and managing a library at any level, but perhaps even more so at the elementary level because of the age group involved. You have to have more patience than I could have imagined, even myself having been in a second grade classroom. You have to be strong and firm but also kindhearted and understanding. There are tasks and job duties clearly

spelled out while others have to be learned and taken on as the school year progresses. Its not an easy job but its probably one of the most rewarding ones I will ever have.

As I stated previously, I think in the case of Mrs. K, her greatest area of improvement is taking on too much and trying to make/ keep everyone happy. That's an impossible task that can quickly overwhelm you and wear you out. Perhaps a better way of dealing with requests from administrators, teachers, students, parents, etc. is to prioritize and state that while you would love to help them out, this is not a good time and then suggest a better time or have a discussion as to what it is they are looking for you to do. For example, if the administrator gives you a morning duty but you have to open the library for open circulation, perhaps you could ask the administrator if there is another person to perform that duty or could you find someone else yourself to fill that spot. Its hard to admit that we can't do everything and be everything to everyone all the time, but we need to tell ourselves that we can't. If we don't, we run the risk of taking on too much and spreading ourselves this. Then we run the risk of not making anyone happy and burning ourselves out in the process.

Mrs. K always seems to be in a good mood, as I noted with the joking answers she gave to some of my questions. She never lets herself show how sad she might be or the disappointment she might be feeling. I really don't think she is appreciated enough at the school, but she doesn't let it show that this might bother her. She always has a smile on her face and greets each student with it. She also knows the name of every student in that school (again, there are over 700 students here) and that is a feat in itself, let alone another example of her plus one customer service ethic. She is pleasant to the students and teachers alike and never lets anyone know when she is having a bad day. This is something I will take with me wherever I wind up working. Yes, its hard at times, but its not necessary to share that with your patrons.

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