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Strengths and Opportunities: School Librarians Serving Students with Special Needs in Central New York State

[Renee F. Hill](#), Assistant Professor, School of Information Studies, Syracuse University

Abstract

The programs and services offered at school libraries will be accessed by K-12 students with a range of physical and cognitive abilities. School librarians must be equipped to address the information-seeking needs of all patrons, including those with special needs. An electronic survey was conducted to collect data from 100 school librarians in Central New York State.

Franklin 2011) The expectation today is that school librarians will seek opportunities for teachers of instructional duties during break time in

During the 2007–2008 school year (the most recent year for which statistics are available), approximately 6.6 million students in America’s public schools had some type of disability (IES

2009a). Because of the large number of students with special needs,¹ school librarians must have an understanding of their unique education and information needs and be prepared to meet these



the unique needs of students with disabilities (Allen 2008). Alana M. Zambone and Jami L. Jones (2010) provided an outline of the various types of learning challenges that might be present in a school environment. Colleen Brind'Amour's (2010) survey of school librarians and special educators in Western New York State exposed gaps in perception about the level and quality of library experiences for students with special needs. In 2011 I shared perspectives from pre-service school librarians; these perspectives could be useful for shaping LIS curriculum in the area of preparing future practitioners for serving individuals with disabilities in K–12 environments (Franklin 2011).

The United States is not the only country where the relationship between school librarianship and special education has been examined. For example, in 1999 Janet Murray considered the effectiveness of training made available to Australian school librarians to prepare them to serve students with special needs. Vida Jouzatis (2004) contemplated best practices in Canadian school libraries for serving students with specific learning disabilities. Abdullah Abrizah and Ruslina Ahmad (2010) examined barriers to service provision to special education needs students

the questionnaire within ten to twelve minutes. To protect participants' confidentiality, no identifying information (such as IP address, personal contact information, or school district name) was collected. Demographic information collected pertained to such characteristics as respondents' work environment and years of service.

Study Limitations

A call for participation was issued during the last three weeks of the school year. The researcher believes this resulted in a low response rate. The responses represent a convenience sample of a very small section of school librarians in the specified school districts. Because of the low response rate, the results cannot be considered representative of the entire target population, nor can they be generalized to make predictions about other populations (such as other New York State school districts).

Findings

Demographic Data

Fifty school librarians accessed the electronic questionnaire; forty-three submitted responses that contained complete information (27 percent of the total possible participants). Eighteen respondents provided library service at elementary schools, seven at middle schools, twelve at high schools, and six respondents worked in other types of school settings. These settings include K–8 schools, schools serving students in grades 7 through 9, and schools that serve students in grades 8 and 9. Two respondents float between two or more schools in their district.

Respondents represented a broad range of experience. Nine school librarians had been providing service for five years or less; ten respondents had been school librarians for six to eleven years;

Table 1. Knowledge of Best Practices in Special Education

Knowledge Level	# of Respondents	% of Respondents
1 (no/little knowledge)	0	0
2	6	13.9
3 (average knowledge)	22	51.2
4	11	25.6
5 (high knowledge)	4	9.3
TOTAL	43	100

RQ 2: Resources Used to Learn of Best Practices for Serving Students with Special Needs

Research question two was posed as: What resources do school librarians use to become informed about best practices for serving students with special needs? One of the goals of this study was to learn more about print, electronic, and other resources that school librarians consult to become more knowledgeable about best practices. With respect to print and electronic resources, an open-ended question was included in the survey questionnaire that allowed school librarians to share the names of the publications and Web resources they regularly peruse. The respondents indicated being readers of a wide variety of professional literature. Respondents frequently listed *Booklist*, *School Library Journal*, *School Library Monthly* (formerly *School Library Media Activities Monthly*), and *Knowledge Quest* as publications read on a regular basis. Study participants also indicated visiting a number of library-related electronic resources including websites, blogs, and wikis. However, the range of these resources was so large that a concise itemization could not be produced.

Survey respondents were asked to make a distinction between how they *actually* receive information about best practices for serving students with special needs and how respondents would *prefer* to do so. One questionnaire item allowed respondents to select multiple options from a list of nine potential information sources to indicate all of the ways they receive information about best practices. A second item presented the same list of information sources but allowed for only one selection so that each respondent's preference could be recorded. The top five ways school librarians actually received information were from special education teachers (88 percent), other school librarians (30 percent), general education teachers (28 percent), professional literature (26 percent), and school-sponsored professional development (26 percent). The top five ways school librarians would prefer to receive best-practice information were similar. However, different from how they actually received best-practices information, the respondents reported that in addition to receiving information from special educators (59 percent), other school librarians (9 percent), or general educators (9 percent), they would also like to have information presented to them from professional development activities offered through their school district or BOCES (9 percent), or by attending professional conferences (7

Figure 1. Sources of information about general best practices for serving students with special needs and numbers of respondents using each source.

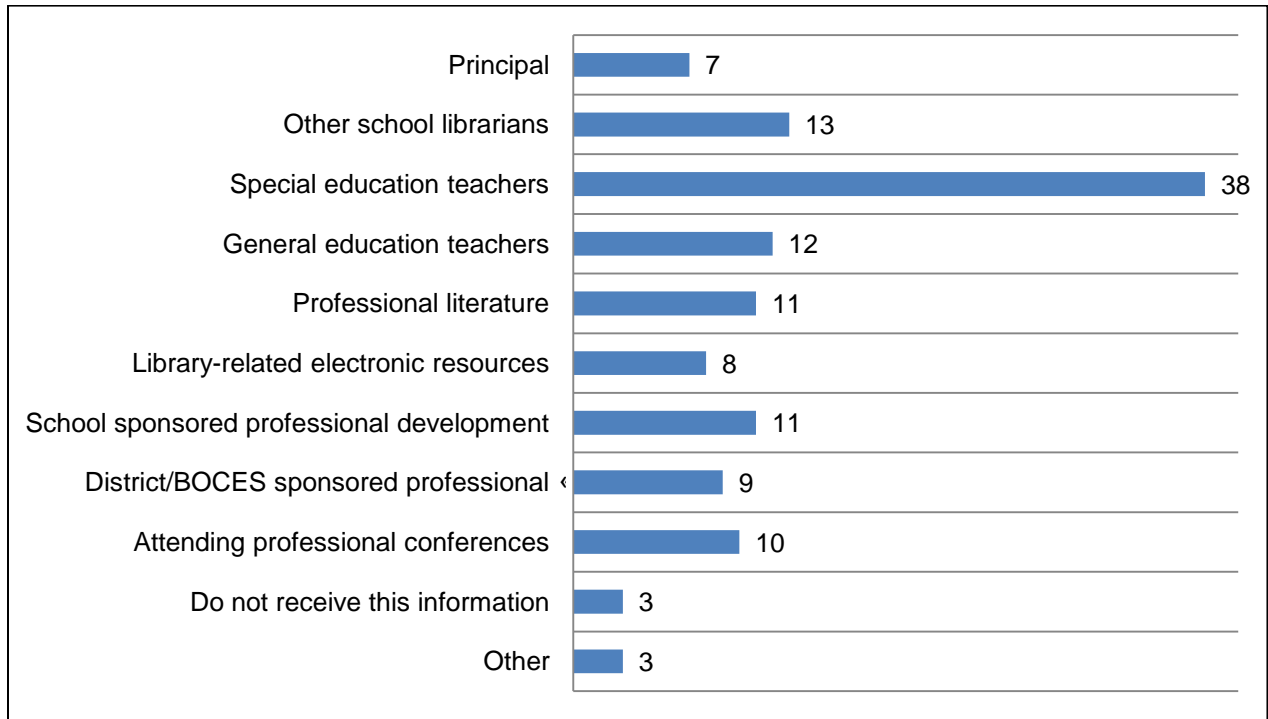
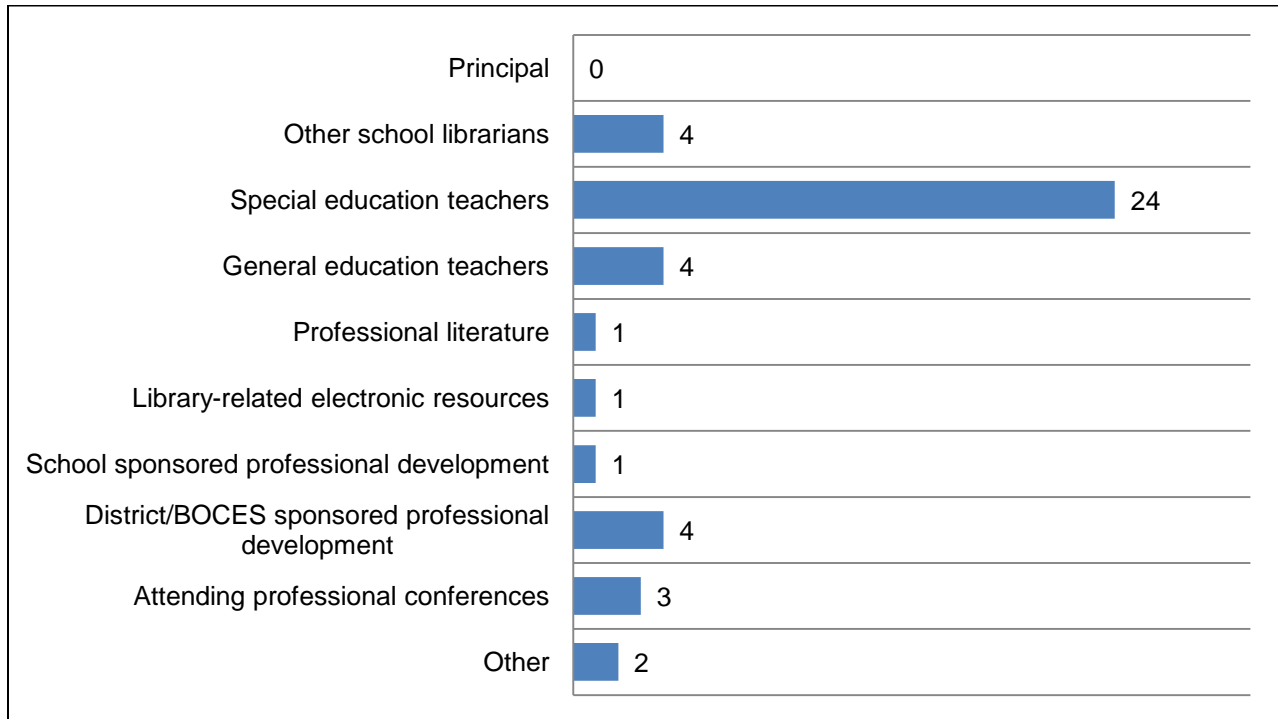
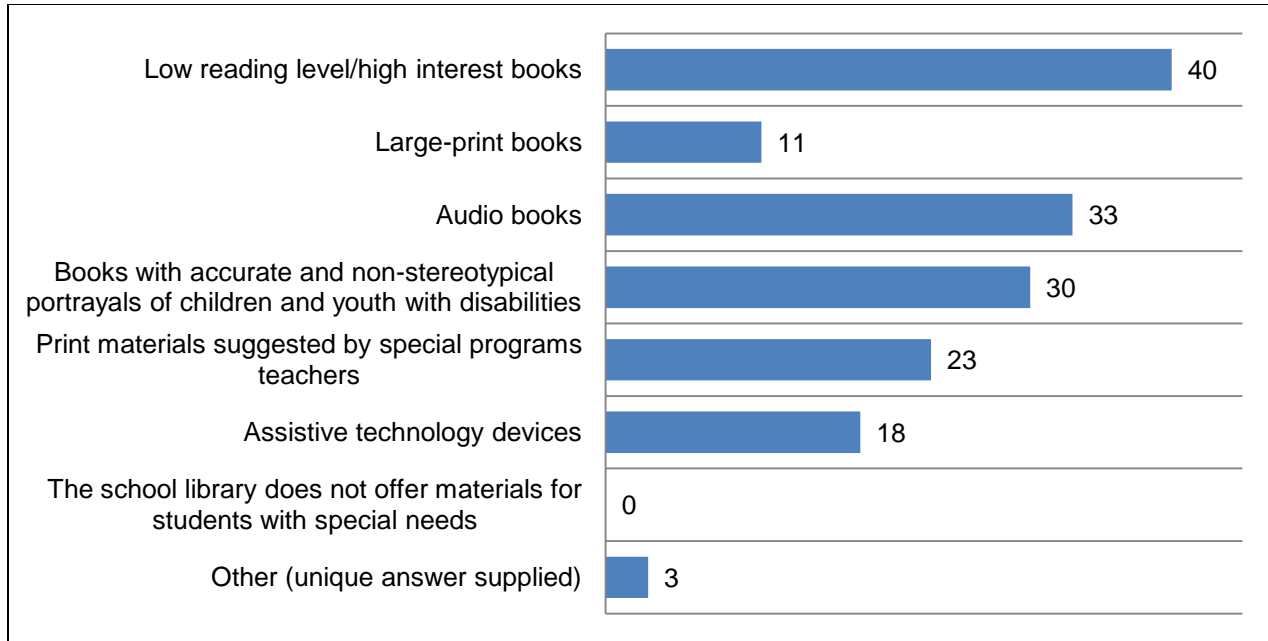


Figure 2. Preferred sources of information about general best practices for serving students with special needs and number of respondents preferring each source.



have information in their collections about specific disabilities; the same number of librarians also includes resources that address parenting and child-development concerns.

Figure 3. Library materials included in the collection for the benefit of students with special needs and the number of respondents reporting inclusion of each type of resource.



One item allowed respondents to select all of the accommodations and/or modifications they make in delivering instruction to students with special needs; respondents were also able to insert their own words to describe in-use instructional modifications that did not appear on the list in the survey instrument. The most frequently selected accommodation was repetition of instruction (n = 32 or 74 percent). Almost the same number of respondents (n = 31 or 72 percent) indicated that they adjust the pace of their instruction and use visual cues to assist students. Individualized instruction about how to use library facilities is provided to students with special needs by twenty-four librarians (56 percent). Twenty-three respondents (53 percent) pair students without disabilities with students who have special needs during library instruction activities. **Table 2** contains information about instructional delivery accommodations.

Table 2. Accommodations Made for Instructional Delivery (multiple selections possible).

Accommodation Type	# of Respondents	% of Respondents
Repetition of instruction	32	74
Adjust pacing of instruction	31	72
Use visual cues or reminders	31	72
Guided or individualized instruction on how to use library	24	56

issues about this population by reading articles and web-based documents that inform them about library and special education practices.

Almost all of the school librarians who participated in this study receive information about best practices and students enrolled in special education at their schools from sources such as general educators, special educators, professional development activities offered in their respective schools and districts, and attendance at professional conferences. However, a surprising finding was that only two respondents *actually* receive information about students with special needs at their schools from the children's parents and none *preferred* to get information from parents. Parents are not necessarily frequent users of school library materials, but they can be integral members of a school library program (LaBoon, Salerno, and Meraz 2010; Pipkin 2009). Parents of students with special needs are particularly useful resources because they can share valuable first-hand insight regarding solutions to accessibility challenges (Copeland 2011). School

Franklin, R. E. 2011. Before the Bell Rings: The Importance of Preparing Pre-Service School Librarians to Serve Students with Special Needs. *Knowledge Quest* 39 (3): 58–63.

Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. 2009a. Fast Facts: Students with Disabilities. *Digest of Education Statistics*.
<<http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=64>> (accessed July 22, 2012).

———. 2009b. Table 52: Number and Percentage of Children Served under Individuals with

