The Education and Competencies of School Library Media Specialists: A Review of the Literature

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The role of school library media specialists and the competencies they need in order to succeed have changed and expanded over many years. This paper reviews research and other publications related to competencies and the preparation of school library media specialists. Although few research studies directly address competencies and educational programs for school library media specialists, several have implications for one or both. First, Information Power *(1988, 1998) and its relationship to competencies and preparation programs is discussed. Second, publications and documents that focus on competencies are reviewed. Third, research studies and conceptual papers with implications for competencies and preparation of school library media specialists are examined. Finally, conclusions and implications for research and the preparation of school library media specialists are offered.*

The recruitment and preparation of a new generation of school library media specialists has become acute as states and school districts face shortages likely to last for several years. Nearly twenty-five thousand new school library media specialists will be needed within the next ten

communication skills. Historical and conceptual essays, position papers, and reports of practice related to these topics have been published. Groups of library media professionals around the country have used national guidelines and standards for library media programs to guide them in the development of lists of competencies for school library media specialists in their states and school districts. These lists are often used to fashion job descriptions or evaluation instruments for school library media specialists.

Barron (1990) reviewed the literature on the education of school library media specialists for the first Treasure Mountain Research Retreat in 1989 (Woolls 1990). He found little empirical research on either the education of librarians in general or school library media specialists in particular. There remains a shortage of empirical research on the preparation of school library media specialists.

The focus of this review is on research, reports of practice, and essays published since 1988. This date was used in order to concentrate on research studies and other documents available since Barron's 1990 review. However, certain pertinent publications and documents published prior to 1989 are included.

ERIC, *Library Literature,* and *Dissertation Abstracts* were searched using combinations and truncations of the following terms: competency, training, preparation, library education, librarians, school library media specialists, technology. To locate dissertations that do not specifically address the education or preparation of the school library media specialist but might have implications for such, *Dissertation Abstracts* (1987–1999) was searched for library science (0399) combined with codes assigned to each of the following subjects: education-elementary, education-secondary, education-curriculum and instruction, education-administration, education-adult and continuing, education-teacher training. In addition, *School Library Media Annual* research reviews and other publications known to the author were examined. International publications were not included.

In his review of the research on library media programs and services from 1925 to 1995, Callison (1998, 112) points out that reviews of research may "identify strong relationships over time and among various studies," however, their limitations should be recognized. He warns that generalizations should not be presumed from the results of studies that employ various methods, are carried out in different settings, and target different subjects or participants. The same advice is pertinent to this paper as well.

Information Power

Information Power: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs (AASL and AECT 1988) includes a list of guidelines for initial preparation programs, certification requirements, and professional-

school library media specialists have also used constructs from

The Competent School Library Media Specialist

The School Library Manpower Project (1975), funded by the Knapp Shoe Company and administered by AASL, is the most comprehensive effort to identify the roles and job functions of school library media specialists and provide recommendations for school library preparation programs. One product of the project was publication of *Behavioral Requirements Analysis Checklist* (Case 1973) that lists approximately seven-hundred tasks to be performed by school library media specialists organized into seven major areas: human behavior, learning and learning environment, planning and evaluation, media, management, research, and professionalism. These job functions and task statements have been used to fashion the curriculum of school library preparation programs, articulate certification requirements for school librarians, develop performance assessment models, and design research projects that explore the competencies of school library media specialists.

A number of studies have examined competencies of school library media specialists as perceived by various audiences including school library media specialists themselves, classroom teachers, and school administrators. Others compare competencies emphasized in preparation programs and those perceived as most often needed in the world of practice.

Schon, Helmstadter, and Robinson (1991) found significant agreement between school principals and school library media specialists in Arizona on the competencies and skills school library media specialists should have. A random sample of principals and school library media specialists were asked to rank specific competencies in six areas: professional matters, library materials, management, human behavior, planning and evaluation, and learning. High on the list of both school library media specialists and principals were: a school library media program philosophy that supports education; encouragement of students in critical and independent use of library materials and equipment; leadership for the development and administration of the library media program; an atmosphere in which faculty, students, and library media center staff work harmoniously; and the development of a library media program that supports the educational objectives of the school program. Only 3.4% of principals and 6.5% of school library media specialists surveyed placed a high priority on the school library media specialist as a leader in both the educational and the local community. The authors conclude that this high level of agreement indicates that principals understand the goals of the library media program and agree with school library media specialists in regard to which functions of the program are most important.

Kahler (1990) developed an evaluation instrument for school library media specialists in Texas based on performance indicators gathered from appraisal forms used insixty-one school districts. Principals and school library media specialists ranked 101 indicators according to their measurability, importance, and how often they were performed. Among indicators that school library media specialists and principals eliminated were those related to planning, goal setting, and involvement in curriculum development. It is interesting to note that these are activities which current national guidelines (AASL and AECT 1998) and the professional literature identify as important. In fact, Kahler concludes that elimination of such indicators reveals a lack of vision on the part of respondents. Mosqueda (1999), on the other hand, found that principals and school library media specialists in sixty-seven National Blue Ribbon Schools in Florida supported the philosophy and guidelines for school library media programs as described in *Information Power*. The passage of almost ten years between these two studies was perhaps a

Factors that facilitate school library media specialist involvement in the school's instructional program have been identified in a number of studies. They include time for cooperative planning between classroom teachers and school library media specialists (Ervin 1989; Lumley 1994; Stoddard 1991), adequate staffing of school library media centers (Kinder 1995), personal characteristics of teachers or school library media specialists (Fedora 1993; Hughes 1998; Johnson 1993; Yetter 1994), and a school culture or organizational climate characteristic of effective schools (Bell and Totten 1992; Chapman 1990; Hughes 1998). Putnam (1996) found that while library media specialists may perceive their instructional role as an important one, a fixed-schedule program is a barrier to actual practice of that role in elementary schools. In findings consistent with these results, Bishop (1992) concluded that the school library media specialist's role in an elementary school's literature-based reading program was more important after a flexible library schedule was introduced. Fedora (1993) also found that a flexible library schedule had a positive impact on the sipecudiFfFF

succeeding in instructional and curricular roles (Ervin 1989; Mosequeda 1999). Yet, even researchers who found that the school library media specialists have integrated new standards into their practice, call for additional or improved preparation in the areas of teaching and curriculum development.

Interpersonal and Communication Skills

Results of several research studies highlight the importance of the school library media specialist's interpersonal and communication skills. In their study of the personality and communication behaviors of exemplary school library media specialists, Herrin, Pointon, and Russell (1985) found them to be confident, open to change, and effective communicators. Based on their finding that these model school library media specialists spent three

Respondents indicated that they used multiple types of continuing education providers for formal activities including the state department of education, colleges or universities, school districts, and professional organizations. Informal activities included membership in professional organizations, systematic professional reading, visits with other library media professionals, and networking. Factors found to influence participation in continuing-education activities, deterrents to participation in such activities, and strategies for lessening the impact of deterrents were also studied. The researchers concluded that attitudes concerning the importance of continuing education are strongly related to participation in those activities. For this reason, Latrobe and Havener suggest that library and information science preparation programs have a significant role in instilling their master's students with an appreciation for the importance of continuing education. They further point out that there is no one solution to format and delivery of continuing education offerings and that selecting appropriate modes of delivery can help alleviate deterrents to participation. It is imperative that library and information science preparation programs systematically monitor the continuing education environment to keep abreast of the needs of school library media specialists.

instructional and curricular roles, such as program planning and priority setting. Candidates also need to recognize the importance of developing skills for involving representatives from the school community in planning and policy-setting activities for the school library media program. Research studies that identify specific strategies used by successful school library media specialists and studies that explore the culture and climate of schools where school library media specialists are leaders in curriculum development and instruction will be valuable to both practitioners and library educators.

We know that exemplary school library media specialists have good interpersonal and communication skills. Specifically, what are the interpersonal and communication skills they possess? What kinds of interpersonal skills should be required of candidates entering preparation programs? Should library education programs screen candidates for these skills or for their potential to develop them? What kinds of interpersonal and communication skills can and should be taught? How can preparation programs assist students in developing or honing these skills? How are these skills best assessed? Answering these questions pose fundamental challenges for library educators.

National guidelines (AASL and AECT 1998, 52) declare that "steady and visionary leadership is widely evident in effective school library media programs" and research studies cited here confirm this. Because there are still many in the school community who do not have a clear understanding of the potential contribution of the library media program, school library media specialists must become proactive in articulating their roles. They must also be ready to explain how their programs are related to education reform initiatives and to the skills students will need to succeed in the twenty-first century. What are the characteristics of leadership that library preparation programs can develop and nurture in students? How can preparation programs and professional development activities support prospective and practicing school library media specialists in developing the leadership skills they will need in order to function as change agents in their schools? How can students be encouraged to seek opportunities to assume leadership roles when they enter the profession?

A commitment to lifelong learning and professional growth is crucially important. Candidates should leave their library education programs with the mindset that they have just begun their professional preparation and that it will never end. How do practicing school library media specialists maintain and update their competencies? It has long been acknowledged that a one-year preparation program may not be sufficient for information professionals, including school library media specialists. A few ALA-accredited programs have moved to a two-year curriculum, but time and economic constraints are serious roadblocks to such efforts in most places. This reality makes continuing education and professional development for school library media specialists an important activity from the very start of their careers. Where should practicing school library media specialists look for such opportunities? One of many lessons learned from the evaluation of the national Library Power program is that professional development must be sustained, schoolwide, and include teachers, school library media specialists, and administrators working together to change the culture of learning in their schools (Zweizig and Hopkins 1999). What kinds of professional-development activities are best offered to school library media specialists as a group and what kinds are best offered to groups that include school library media specialists, classroom teachers, and administrators?

Not addressed in the studies and publications cited here are important topics for research. These include distance education and alternative avenues to certification for prospective school library media specialists. Both of these topics are critical issues given the current shortage of school library media specialists faced by states and school districts across the country. What are the characteristics of effective distance-education programs? Is it possible for preparation programs to collaborate in distance-education endeavors? What provision can and should be made for alternative routes to certification for school library media specialists?

The current role of the school library media specialist has evolved over many years. The mix of professional and personal competencies needed by today's school library media specialist is indeed complex. Technology, teaching, collaboration, and leadership have become more prominent in national guidelines and in the professional literature. Results of research studies and reports of best practice that address this multifaceted set of competencies will benefit both practitioners and library educators.

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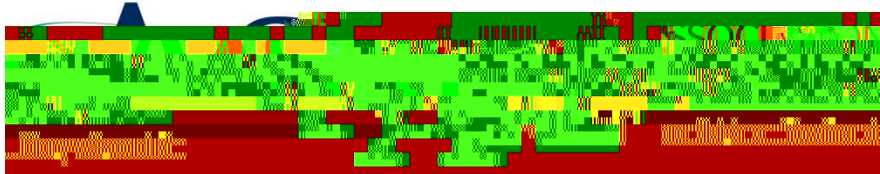
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