Special Education Training for Preservice School Librarians

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According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 12.9 percent of students enrolled in public schools in the United States in the 2011-2012 school year were served by federally-supported special education programs (National Center for Education Statistics 2013). School librarians, as educators who serve all students in a school, are required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (*Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004* 2004) to act as service providers ensuring that such students receive a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment possible. Professional organizations such as the American Association of School Librarians, the American Library Association, and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards emphasize the importance of serving these students in their professional guidelines (American Association of School Librarians 2009; American Library Association 2009; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards 2012). Given these legal and professional obligations to serve students with disabilities, how are library education programs preparing pre-service school librarian candidates to provide these services?

Literature Review

Legal Obligation to Serve Special Education Students

Public schools and, by extension, their school libraries operate within a complex legal framework; one component of this framework is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, federal legislation designed to “ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living” (*Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004* 2004). As a service provider within the public education program, the school librarian has a responsibility to ensure that these students’ unique needs are met within the school library program.

One tool for ensuring such needs are met is the Individualized Education Program (IEP), a written statement that includes a description of the child's current academic and functional level, goals for growth, measures of growth, an enumeration of services to be provided, an explanation of the extent to which the child might be removed from regular instruction and activities, and a description of any accommodations to be made to instruction and activities to assist students in achieving their goals (*Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004* 2004). This plan must be accessible to each teacher working with the child, including the school librarian, and the school librarian should be informed "of his or her specific responsibilities related to implementing the child's IEP and the specific accommodations, modifications, and supports that must be provided for the child in accordance with the IEP" (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs 2006, 3).

Professional Obligation to Serve Special Education Students

In addition to working within these legal requirements, school librarians must also meet expectations laid out in professional standards. In its guidelines document, *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs*, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) requires that school librarians "strive to instill a love of learning in all students and ensure equitable access to information" (American Association of School Librarians 2009, 7) and provide "flexible and equitable access to physical and virtual collections of resources that support the school curriculum and meet the diverse needs of all learners" (American Association of School Librarians 2009, 33). Its parent organization, the American Library Association (ALA), includes the following among its core competencies for graduates of librarian preparation programs:

4A. Information, communication, assistive, and related technologies as they affect the

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resources, service delivery, and uses of libraries and other information agencies.

4B. The application of information, communication, assistive, and related technology and tools consistent with professional ethics and prevailing service norms and applications. (American Library Association 2009, 3)

ALA also explicitly includes support of this population as a priority in its code of ethics:

We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests. (American Library Association 2008)

Finally, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, which offers an advanced teaching credential to educators who undergo a voluntary assessment of whether they have “developed and demonstrated the advanced knowledge, skills and practices required of an outstanding educator” (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards 2015), indicates in its library media standards that accomplished school librarians “work effectively with students of all ages and abilities” and “develop and modify instruction and programs to make learning possible for all students” (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards 2012, 18).

The Current Status of Preservice Library Education for Special Education Services

Given these legal and professional obligations, it is reasonable to expect school librarian preparation programs to include curricular components addressing the best way to meet the needs of users who receive special education services. The *ALA/AASL Standards for Initial Preparation of School Librarians* (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education 2010), which programs must meet to maintain accreditation from AASL and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), specifies that candidates graduating from such programs should be able to “support the learning of all students and other members of

the learning community, including those with diverse learning styles, physical and intellectual abilities and needs” (p. 1). It is not readily apparent, however, that these programs are requiring candidates to take coursework to help them meet this goal.

In a review of the top ten pre-service school library programs as identified by *U.S. News and World Report*, Small, Snyder, and Parker found that only one of the ten programs required students to take an entire class focusing on special education services (Small, Snyder, and Parker 2009). Other programs incorporated it into courses on a variety of subjects or simply mentioned it on their program website as a capacity students should plan to develop. In a similar review of thirteen programs listed in *U.S. News and World Report*, Subramaniam and colleagues (2013) found that only two of the programs had coursework dedicated to serving special education students..

The Demand for Additional Preservice Library Education in Special Education Services

In spite of these findings, we might hope that preservice programs are integrating special education content into their general coursework, and that school librarians would thus be confident in their ability to serve special education students. This does not appear to be the case. In a survey of school librarians in a large public school system in North Carolina, Allen found that ninety percent of participants graded themselves at a C or lower in their knowledge of best practices in special education (Allen and Hughes-Hassell 2010). Hill (2012) replicated Allen’s study in a pilot study with 43 respondents in New York. Approximately 65 percent of respondents indicated that they had low or average knowledge of best practices for working with special education students. Only four librarians, approximately nine percent, identified themselves as having high knowledge of these best practices. In a survey of 1,612 school

librarians in New York State, Small, Snyder, and Parker (2009) found that only “Forty-five respondents (3 percent) reported having special education training.” (p. 15)

School librarians consistently indicate that they feel preservice training in special education would be valuable. In Hill’s survey, “More than one survey respondent indicated that exposure to concepts related to serving students with special needs would have been a useful component of LIS Master’s program studies” (2012, p. 11). Perrault (2011) interviewed six pairs of librarians and special education teachers about collaboration; the librarians admitted that they had knowledge gaps and lacked confidence in their ability to serve special education students. They blamed a lack of preservice training for these deficiencies.

Preservice school librarians themselves recognize the value of special education training; in an informal survey of 20 preservice school librarians, Franklin (2011) found that almost all of the preservice school librarians were interested in learning more about serving this population, and all of them “thought that school programs should include (through a designated class or through assignments and readings within a class) information with the specific purpose of informing them about teaching students with special needs” (p. 60).

Subramaniam and colleagues’ findings (2013) in their study of school librarians working in schools devoted to serving only students with one specific disability support the notion that graduate school training can prepare school librarians for serving special education students. The librarians in the four schools studied had all acquired knowledge about federal guidelines for serving special education students. Three of the four librarians had received training as part of graduate coursework on special education; it is worth noting, however, that none of these librarians had an MLS degree. The one of the four librarians with the MLS degree was also the only one that had not received graduate school training in this area.

Professional Development Options for Special Education Services

School librarians don't receive much training in special education services in their graduate coursework; nevertheless, they have to serve these students. They learn best practices for doing so in a number of ways. Most often, they learn these best practices through collaboration with a special education professional such as a special education teacher or case worker (Allen and Hughes-Hassell 2010; Brind'Amour 2010; Hill 2012). Not only is this a common way for them to receive this information, it is also the method most school librarians prefer (Allen and Hughes-Hassell 2010; Hill 2012). School librarians also learn about best practices in special education via school-sponsored professional development (Allen and Hughes-Hassell 2010; Brind'Amour 2010; Hill 2012; Subramaniam, Oxley, and Kodama 2013). Finally, they supplement this learning with independent research (Brind'Amour 2010) using resources such as professional literature such as the January/February 2011 special issue of the American Association of School Librarians' professional journal, *Knowledge Quest* (Hill 2012), electronic resources including blogs, wikis, and listservs (Hill 2012; Subramaniam, Oxley, and Kodama 2013), and connections with other libraries (Subramaniam, Oxley, and Kodama 2013).

One professional development option that school librarians can pursue individually or in groups is training via Project ENABLE (Expanding Non-discriminatory Access By Librarians Everywhere). Created in response to the New York School Library Impact Study (Small, Shanahan, and Stasak 2010; Small, Snyder, and Parker 2009; Small and Snyder 2009), Project ENABLE provides "in-depth training to school librarians on ways to provide appropriate and effective library and information programs and services to students with disabilities" ("About Us" 2015). Originally conceived as a face-to-face training program (Myhill et al. 2012), Project

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ENABLE is now freely available online for school, public, and academic librarians. It provides self-paced professional development delivered through content, resources, games, and thinking exercises across five modules: Disability Awareness, Disability Law & Policy, Creating an Accessible Library, Planning Inclusive Programs and Instruction, Assistive Technology in Libraries.

Project ENABLE has successfully impacted school librarians' learning and planning processes for creating non-discriminatory, accessible school library programs, as demonstrated by both participant evaluations and improved scores on participants' self-assessments of knowledge about best practices for serving special education students (Myhill et al. 2012). The Project ENABLE website includes the capability for faculty members to track a class as its students work through the training. This program, originally designed for practicing school librarians, might provide one option for bringing special education training into preservice school library programs.

Conclusion

School librarians have both legal and professional obligations to meet the needs of students with disabilities. In spite of this, they consistently lack confidence in their ability to do so; preservice school library programs rarely provide them for this aspect of their professional roles. To mitigate this, they pursue other avenues of learning best practices for working with special education students. These include collaboration with special education professionals, reviewing professional literature, taking advantage of electronic learning resources, and participating in either school-based or online professional development such as Project ENABLE. Before recommendations can be made for how to improve preservice school library

program curricula with respect to special education, a thorough review of current course offerings and curricula is necessary.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this study is to examine the curricula of all AASL-recognized school librarian preparation programs and determine to what extent they are preparing school librarians to meet the needs of special education students.

Research Question

This study addresses the following question:

1. How well are school librarian preparation programs, either ALA-accredited or recognized by AASL and CAEP-accredited, satisfying their role of preparing graduate students to support members of the learning community with diverse learning styles, physical and intellectual abilities, and needs?

Methods

This study uses qualitative content analysis to examine program requirements, course titles, and course descriptions in school library education programs recognized by the American Association of School Librarians.

The American Association of School Librarians recognizes programs that meet the requirements of the ALA/AASL Standards for Initial Preparation of School Librarians (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education 2010). These programs fall into two categories: Master's degree programs accredited by the American Library Association, and Master's degree programs not accredited by ALA but accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (American Association of School Librarians 2015b). This study examines the entire population of such programs. The American Library Association provides a searchable directory

of all ALA-accredited programs (American Library Association 2015). Using the option to limit the search to a particular area of concentration, in this case, “School Librarianship,” results in a list of 49 school library education programs. The AASL website AASL list of AASL-CAEP programs (American Association of School Librarians 2015a) provides another list of 40 school library education programs. Some programs are on both lists. After eliminating duplicates, a total population of 82 programs remained.

The publicly-accessible websites of these 82 programs were analyzed via an iterative process. First, the researcher reviewed the requirements for school librarianship programs/specializations, noting any required or suggested courses related to the following keywords: special education, inclusive education, exceptional learners, special needs students, disabilities, and diversity. Next, the researcher identified whether these courses were located within the school library education program itself or within other programs or departments. Finally, the research located descriptions of these courses. This process involved browsing program websites, searching university course catalogs, and occasionally searching Google using the name of the university and the course number or title. Only results from the universities’ official websites were used. The researcher analyzed the course descriptions and titles for the same themes that were used to initially analyze courses, as well as identifying themes that emerged from analysis of the course descriptions.

Results

Of the 82 programs identified, twenty (24 percent) either require or recommend courses dedicated to special education topics. Thirteen (15 percent) are part of programs accredited by the American Library Association; the other seven (8 percent) have AASL-CAEP accreditation. One program requires such a course as a prerequisite for beginning the program; one suggests it

as an elective. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill requires all students seeking library media certification to take “at least one course that prepares them to work with diverse student populations” (“Preparatory Curriculum for School Library Media Coordinator Licensure” 2014). One of the options to fulfill this requirement is a course called “Foundations of Special Education.” Four programs (4 percent) require that all students in their school library education program take a special education course. The remaining sixteen programs (19 percent) only require students to take a special education course if they do not already have a teaching credential.

Across the twenty programs, there are 26 courses required or recommended. Most of the courses required or recommended are housed in education departments, schools, or colleges. Fourteen (53 percent) are located in education departments external to the school library education program. Eleven (42 percent) are located in education departments in which the library education program is also located. Only one course is offered exclusively in the school library education program, in the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University.

Analysis of course titles revealed that courses addressed two elements of special education: population and setting. Some courses only included one or the other in their title, while others included both. Terms referring to the population include “special education,” “exceptional learners,” “special needs,” “disabilities,” and “diverse.” “Exceptional learners” and “exceptionalities” were used most often; this term refers not only to students with disabilities, but also students who are placed in gifted and talented programs. It is possible for a student to fall into both of these categories. Terms referring to setting included “classroom,” “inclusion,” and “libraries.” Only two courses specifically addressed working with exceptional learners in the

library: “LIS 627 Special Needs Students in K-12 Libraries” at Long Island University and “IST 564 Library and Information Services to Students with Disabilities” at Syracuse University.

According to course descriptions, courses address a wide variety of topics related to special education. Several provide a general overview of the field. Many emphasize the history of and philosophy underlying special education as a field; some of these expect students to develop their own philosophical orientation to special education as they move through the course. Several course descriptions mention the characteristics and development of exceptional learners. Many address instructional strategies for use in inclusive education environments. These include differentiated instruction, accommodations and adaptations, and assistive technology. Several address traditional classroom concerns such as assessment and classroom management and how these must be adjusted to respond to exceptional learners’ needs. Five course descriptions specifically mention collaboration with other professionals in the school, a key component of providing special education services. Seven courses address the legal and ethical concerns involved with supporting exceptional learners. Five emphasized the importance of research-based practices. Two courses require students to complete fieldwork related to serving exceptional learners. The researcher was unable to obtain course descriptions for four of the twenty-six courses identified. For a complete list of themes identified and the number of courses addressing each, see Table 1. Many courses address more than one topic, so these thematic categories are not mutually exclusive.

Discussion

The data presented above suggest that most school librarians graduate from their preparation programs unprepared to meet the unique information needs of special education students. Of school library preparation programs identified by AASL, fewer than a quarter of

Table 1. Topics Addressed in Special Education Courses

Course Topic	# of Courses Offered
Overview	4
History	6
Philosophy	6
Characteristics/Development	10
Inclusion/Differentiation/Accommodation/Adaptation	7
Assistive Technology	1
Classroom Management	3
Assessment	5
Collaboration with Other Professionals	5
Legal and Ethical Concerns	7
Research-based Practice	5
Fieldwork	2

them require specific training in special education at all. Of those that do, three-quarters only require it for students who do not already have a teaching credential. This implies that program developers assume students with a teaching credential have already had this training. This is a dangerous assumption, as they may have received their special education training embedded in a child or adolescent development course or as a brief overview of potential accommodations in content-area or pedagogy courses.

Furthermore, only two of the courses recommended or required address the library as a unique setting. While an education course will certainly help school librarians understand the need for accommodations in their instructional practices, these courses are unlikely to address the environment of the school library. Concerns such as physical accessibility in the library space, the implementation of assistive technology, and the unique information needs of special education students (Hanson-Baldauf 2013) are unlikely to be covered in these courses.

With 12.9 percent of students identified as needing special education services (National Center for Education Statistics 2013), school librarians will inevitably be required to support special education students. As they find themselves in this circumstance, they may turn to practitioner literature or rely on their colleagues to fill this gap in their knowledge. These sources may provide an incomplete understanding of special education students' needs or fail to understand the features that make the library different from the classroom. Such school librarians may choose to register for Project ENABLE. This program will provide them with the knowledge and skills they require to meet their special education students' needs, but its self-paced, modular nature may mean that librarians are tempted to jump directly to the modules addressing their immediate problem. With each of the present options available for school librarians' professional development related to special education, there is a risk of school librarians building their understanding piecemeal and not understanding the philosophical or research-based underpinnings of special education best practice.

Project ENABLE does allow for students to enroll as a class and for faculty members to track their progress. The embedding of Project ENABLE into traditional school library education classes such as those related to curriculum development or library management presents one possibility for addressing the current gap in school library education. The development of courses focused on special education in library services, such as those at Long Island University and Syracuse University, is another. Faculty who develop school library education programs should consider these and other possibilities to ensure their programs' graduates are equipped to serve all of their students.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The present study is limited in that it relies only on information available on publicly accessible websites of school library education programs. Future research might examine course syllabi for both library science and education courses on the topic of special education and identify the themes present in those courses and the ways in which education and library courses differ. It is also limited in that it considers only courses required or recommended as part of a school library education program. This does not include core courses such as collection development, reference, library management, or organization of information, each of which may have instructional elements related to equity and accessibility embedded in them. It also does not include electives related to serving diverse populations in libraries more generally. Future research should explore both of these areas. Finally, future research might involve in-depth study of the courses at Long Island University and Syracuse University, to serve as models for program development at other universities.

Conclusion

School librarians have both legal and professional obligations to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The literature indicates that they are not receiving such training in preservice programs (Allen and Hughes-Hassell 2010; Small, Snyder, and Parker 2009), as do the results of this study. As Small and Snyder point out, “Preservice librarian preparation programs that do not incorporate adequate special education training may need to consider doing so in the future so that these library professionals are best prepared to provide appropriate services to all students” (Small and Snyder 2009, 39). This study demonstrates that there are many programs that need to incorporate special education training, and many others that might

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benefit from developing special education training that addresses the unique characteristics of the school library environment.

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