

Title of Proposed Research

Inequity in Library Staffing and the Impact on School Library Programming.

Abstract

The American Association of School Libraries (AASL) has compiled various research studies that show having a qualified school librarian in place at a school translates into higher reading scores for students on standardized assessments. Beyond test scores, qualified librarians can develop collections that support both independent reading and curriculum needs. Librarians serve as resource experts to help teachers and students with academic and research needs. Librarians also provide valuable instruction on reference materials and reading advisory to students. Current staffing in school libraries across the nation is not equitable. Even within the same school district, school libraries may have different levels of staffing from the number of staff to the education level and certification of those staff.

For example, in Polk County, Florida, less than 15% of schools have a school librarian with a master’s degree in library science and 40% are staffed with certified library media specialists who have a bachelor’s degree and state certification. The remaining 45% are staffed with paraprofessionals whose education level ranges from a high school diploma to a bachelor’s degree.

Project Start Date

Project Completion Date

Amount Requested

Proposal Submission Date

Principal Investigators’ Names & Affiliations

XXXX, XXXX, XXXX, & Lisa Seymour, University of South Florida School of Information

I. Needs Assessment

This study is needed to determine how differences in staffing affect the library programming of school libraries. We want to understand what the differences are in library programming in schools staffed with state-certified and librarians with a master's degree in library science versus those staffed with clerks, aides, or educators without certification in educational media. This study will determine the educational impact on students in schools with less qualified staff. Since a higher percentage of low-income schools have less qualified staff, those students are not receiving the educational benefit of a quality library program. This study intends to show that students, particularly low-income students, are receiving an inequitable education based on the staffing in their library media centers.

II. Significance

We reached out to school library supervisors around the state of Florida and have found that most of the unstaffed libraries or those libraries not staffed by an educator with an Educational Media certification are in Title I schools. For Fiscal Year 2023 in Palm Beach County, 13% of schools have a media specialist with a master's degree in Educational Media or Library Science and 62% of media centers are staffed with an educator who have either a bachelor's or a master's degree and state certification. However, 15% of media centers are staffed by an educator who is not certified in educational media and 10% of media centers are vacant or staffed by a paraprofessional (Library Media Services, 2022). The libraries with staff who are not certified in educational media and those libraries that are vacant or staffed by a

paraprofessional are in the areas of the highest poverty in Palm Beach County. This translates to 35 out of 170 schools in Palm Beach County not being staffed by a certified library media specialist - and alarmingly, twenty-four of these are Title I schools. Previous studies have identified the positive effect of having a certified school media specialist has on a school's success.

Many studies have identified that when a school library has a qualified school librarian reading levels and achievement levels increase (Lance & Kachel, 2018). In Scholastic's report, *School Libraries Work!* the report identified that "when school librarian staffing is reduced, achievement in ELA (English Language Arts) suffers" (Scholastic Library Publishing, 2016). This study is significant because based on our preliminary research, there has not been a Florida-focused study on the effect of inequitable staffing of school libraries in low-income areas and the effect it has on the educational success of these students.

III. Literature Review

Research into the everyday experience of school libraries and librarians has focused on creating methods to measure their work, quantify and illuminate their impact, and understand what approach and techniques practically work best. Fewer studies have tried to measure the equity, quality – including experience and accreditation – and motivation of librarians. Beginning in the mid to late 1990s through the 2010s, a long series of state-specific studies were conducted to measure the significance of school libraries and librarians through student achievement outcomes – such as test scores, especially standardized reading scores. These Library Impact Reports (Library

Research Service, 2003) were instrumental in providing the current status of school libraries, showcasing their material positive effect, and like with the Florida report by Baumbach et al. (2003), often included pragmatic ideas for improving services. Due to the changing nature of school libraries and the wide scope of these studies, the picture is not entirely detailed enough to understand the nuances of today's school librarians and the varied experiences from library to library.

The studies from the last few years have tried to address specific trends and reach beyond the school library doors. One of the more worrisome trends, as summarized and explored by Ahlfeld (2019), is the decline of certified school librarians across the nation. Different researchers have tried to understand the issue from a variety of perspectives. After the recession of 2008 when school librarian positions began declining, Ewbank (2011) conducted a case study of one school district's decision-making in retaining some certified librarians. Merga (2019) brings an international perspective from Australia where the problem of employment and retainment of school librarians faces similar challenges. In one of her numerous articles, Merga (2019) investigated the morale of school librarians and through interviews found that not only did school librarians feel they were undervalued by administrators but also felt their jobs were seen as expendable, facing the nearly constant threat of their job being outsourced to someone not qualified. While ample research exists to support school libraries, those carrying out the success of the school library are not as equally acknowledged in the daily experience of librarians. Kimmel et al. (2019) tried to address this disparity by creating yet another metric and comparison for distinguishing school librarians' particular importance. They set out to understand school librarians' quality and

certification on student learning outcomes by using the framing and metrics of teacher evaluation research in hopes of setting the stage for other studies. While these recent studies have added insightful depth to the challenges facing school librarians, there is a need to look carefully at what kinds of access and resources are utilized, how they are distributed, and where library support staff play a role in this new landscape.

In the first part of a three-part major research project funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), Lance and Kachel (2021) have already made profound progress in updating the national, state, and district level statistics to produce an accurate portrayal of school libraries in the U.S. Using ten years of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data, Lance and Kachel (2021) multidimensionally analyze the profession. Their research connects the AASL industry standards to the realities of what school librarians and library support staff experience, recognizing that these guidelines are unobtainable, lofty goals for most schools today – particularly regarding the principle that every school should have a full-time, state-certified librarian. Because they chose three levels of analysis – national, state, and district – they were able to distinguish certain characteristics and demographics that account for the wide range of school library experiences and quality. Not only did Part 1 of this project support the observed trend of certified librarians being replaced by part-time library support staff, Lance and Kachel (2021) also found that districts with the highest rates of Free and Reduced Lunches and the districts with the most English Language Learners saw the lowest rate of librarians. This is just one of many alarming statistical realities that were raised in the project and provide ample ground to further investigate.

Due to the nature of the data the Lance and Kachel (2021) study uses, there are limitations in the definition of librarians with no elaboration of experience or education beyond state-certification and no school-level data to compare elementary, middle, and high school distributions. From a national view, Florida school libraries often fell in the middle range – for example, ranking number 25 for the rate of full-time librarians per school (SLIDE, 2022). Therefore, the study did not use Florida as an example to elaborate on its problems. Our study builds on the wealth of information Lance and Kachel have published to better understand the tangible experiences of and connections between the different school levels, schools in lower socioeconomic districts, schools with majority non-white student populations, and the consequences of having fewer full-time certified librarians.

IV. Research Goal & Questions

Building from the precedental research cited in our literature review, our study aims to evaluate these connections with a focus on central Florida schools. Going into this research project, we know that lower-income schools are lacking in certified school librarians on staff. Although these schools may suffer from inadequate programming and budgetary gaps in other areas, our study focuses on the direct connection between the education level or certification of the library staff and the effectiveness of the library's programming. Approaching this study from the perspectives of the school administrators and library staff, we will examine this relationship and evaluate the school's use of the library and programming efforts, rather than looking at the collection or library's materials. We will compare the results of our study between schools from

areas with different income levels and make conclusions on the need for certified librarians on staff.

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Group Member Contributions

Everyone - Brainstormed ideas for research and focus; attended virtual group meetings.

Lisa Seymour - I wrote the needs assessment and significance sections of the paper. In addition, I scheduled the group meetings via Google Meet so we could solidify our ideas. I contributed a few items to the references section.

XXXXX - Conducted background research into academic articles, wrote literature reviews, edited drafts, and formatted references into APA style guide.

XXXXX - Worked on the research goal and created research questions.

XXXXX - Conducted research related to the study topic. Worked on research questions and goals.