

Principles of Effective Professional Development for School Library Leaders: The Survey Says....

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the professional development activities of practicing school librarians. To be prepared to teach thinking skills, school librarians work to enhance their own skills and competences. School librarians seek professional growth through ongoing exposure to learning communities, webinars, presentations, traditional district wide meetings and membership in professional organizations. This paper will provide an analysis of survey responses and interviews from 72 school library media specialists regarding their professional development experiences. Elements for successful workshops and other professional development opportunities are discussed with recommendations for professional development from a variety of resources.

Introduction

In defining a strong library/media program one factor seems to contribute more to student success than any other and that is the presence of a highly trained – highly educated librarian. The impact librarians may have on student academic achievement is well documented (Neuman, 2011; Harvey, 2010; Lamb, 2011). Studies have proven that media specialists can have a positive impact on student achievement (Hopkins & Zweizig 1999; Lance, Welborn, & Hamilton-Pennell, 1993; Loertscher, & Todd, 2003). Based upon these reports, both practicing librarians and policy makers have seen the need to integrate the school library position fully into the instructional practice. Therefore, efforts to improve and enhance the instructional skills, competencies and interactions of librarians, have become a target of educational reform (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Desimone, 2011; Kuhlthau, Maniotes, & Caspari, 2007).

Effective professional development for school librarians is critical to the process of ensuring quality instruction in supporting teachers and facilitating student learning (Peacock, 2001; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Emerging technologies in addition to changing educational reforms and mandates demand that librarians pursue ongoing professional growth over the course of their careers. In response to these demands to fulfill the mission of professional growth, and as suggested by the American Association for School Librarians (AASL, 2009), professionals seek a range of face-to-face and online environments from which to gain knowledge from the greater learning community and each other in order to be better prepared in the school library profession. School librarians, like classroom teachers find multiple opportunities for pursuit of growth, and varied avenues to increase knowledge and skills, therefore it is critical to determine what an effective professional development activity requires. Using the results of an online survey, this study looks at a comparison of the positive and negative elements of professional development as reported by school librarians.

Need for Study

The value of professional development is widely accepted by educators in every field of study. The American Library Association (2009) specifically proposed that professional development opportunities are essential and valuable for school librarians. Opportunities for professional development are always expanding with the increasing availability of webinars, virtual conferences, as well as the multitude of traditional face-to-face conferences. In view of the ever expanding opportunities for professional development, attention to the validity and quality of the experience offered is needed (Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, Cronen, & Garet, 2008).

Empirical research suggests there are core factors that may influence the impact of professional development school librarians. Researchers for this study were interested in what practicing school librarians would report as factors that make professional development effective. We posed the following questions for the study: (1) what are the various experiences, formats, and modes of delivery for professional development, and (2) how has professional development impacted the teaching role of the school librarian? To answer these questions researchers designed and conducted a web administered survey.

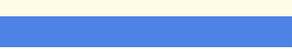
Methodology

Based upon a review of the empirical research suggesting factors for effective professional development, a survey was designed to gather self-reported information on the professional development activities of school librarians. The survey was formatted and disseminated using a web-based survey instrument, Qualtrics. To emphasize reasons for the study, introductory information was sent electronically to the selected population along with the survey links. The survey featured twenty-two questions designed to reflect current empirical research in professional development for the school librarian. A Likert-type scale was utilized to obtain quantitative data, allowing for self-reporting with individuals addressing each question. Open-ended questions allowed respondents to provide more detailed and individualized information. Upon culmination of the survey, research software the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), was employed, in conjunction with Qualtrics, to facilitate a detailed analysis of the reported data.

Participants

Participants were drawn from the population of practicing school librarians. Contact information used to disseminate the survey to participants was available through local, state, and national school librarian listservs and databases. The listservs included contact information for current students and alumni in a Master of Library Science program at a large southeastern university. In addition, the survey was sent to LM-Net and AECT division of School Media and Technology. Demographic information required was collected with the survey. There were seventy-three completed surveys in the database reflecting responses from librarians in rural, urban, or mixed schools. Librarians identified schools as 43% rural, 24 % urban, and 33% mixed school systems. School enrollment varied broadly from a low of 236 students to a high of 2700 students. Of those completing the survey, 20% were national board certified. Participant experiences included a range of practicing librarians from the inexperienced to the experienced, with 63% having served 5 years or less in their professional careers. Table 1 shows the range of experience of respondents.

Table 1
Professional Experience Range of Respondents

#	Answer		Response	%
1	1 to 5 years		45	63%
2	6 to 10 years		9	13%
3	11 or more years		18	25%
	Total		72	100%

Review of the Survey

“Professional Development Experiences for the School Media Specialist”, an instrument designed by researchers, measured data as reflected by current empirical studies. Seven critical themes had emerged through a review of the empirical studies concerning school librarian professional development. Themes used for development of survey questions included: (a) formats or design for professional development, (b) job-embedded experiences, (c) environments supporting diverse preferences of learning, (d) opportunities for practice of skills and collaboration with colleagues, (e) systematic design and evaluation of workshop presentations, (f) impact on teaching and learning, (g) correlation with school wide missions and goals, and (h) engagement in professional groups. For purposes of this paper each of the themes will be discussed in terms of the current literature and survey findings.

Current Research in Professional Development and Survey Findings

Professional Development Format

The first theme, looking at forms or designs for professional development, was crafted to determine a librarian's preference for workshop design. The traditional workshop format available to librarians today has broadened from individually or group scheduled workshops, ½-1 day staff development sessions, conferences, and instructional classes, to include broader communities of practice engaged in ongoing professional development often using Web 2.0 tools. For this survey, participants were specifically queried as to whether their experiences were provided through traditional school wide channels or through individual interactions with colleagues and/or administrators. According to Valenza (2010) & Warlick (2010), school librarians are increasingly taking advantage of twenty-first century formats such as webinars, wikis, and blogging, among other evolving formats. The responses of librarians in this survey population as to the type of format, whether scheduled workshops or on-going initiatives in the learning communities, was significant to researchers in understanding the choices school librarians are making for their own professional growth. The format reported by 69% of school librarian respondents to be most often provided, was through school-wide workshops, however, 33% indicated they had completed on-line modules specifically for the professional development of school librarians. These findings reflect a growing interest by librarians in taking advantage of non-traditional sources for their continued growth.

While the format of presentation for the respondents in this survey reflected the more traditional method for professional development, 52 % of respondents did report that they had also taken part in efforts to grow professionally through personal interactions with colleagues and administrators. These opportunities for professional growth might include dialog with other educators during staff meetings and informal dialog and conversations in the media center, classrooms, or even hallways.

Contrary to findings in the literature, (Valenza, 2010; Warlick, 2010) librarians in this sample do not appear to be taking full advantage of twenty-first century formats such as webinars, wikis, and blogging, among other evolving formats, and instead are continuing to utilize school-wide workshops, although as reported there is a clear trend towards emerging formats. For those who are planning professional development opportunities for school librarians, increased emphasis on expanded formats could serve to accelerate this trend.

Job Embedded Feedback

Professional development is considered to be more effective when seamlessly linked to instruction and curriculum needs, assessment or standards (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). When the learning is linked to the actual teaching/working reality, as in teachers being able to immediately use what is taught in their work, lasting results are more likely. Survey respondents confirmed current literature related to job-embedded activities. Several responses to the open-ended questions confirm the importance of job embedded activities within the design of professional development experiences. For example job embedded experiences are:

...ones that are the most effective are those that I can return to my library and immediately put into practice...

While one-shot skills presentations are less meaningful. For example:

When I attend something that I cannot use in a short time after the workshop, its effectiveness diminishes.

This aligns with research which suggests when professional development is focused on current instructional needs and permits direct, involved hands-on interaction librarians and teachers experience an enhanced sense of success and understanding (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2011).

Overall, practicing school librarians were able to positively link the instruction they received with the teaching in which they were involved. Further the professional development in which they were involved challenged librarians to try new things as reported by 86% of respondents, reinforcing the idea that their learning activities as professionals provided opportunities to assess their own teaching and make needed changes.

According to analysis of the data, there was a clearly reported positive relationship between school librarians who experience job embedded professional development with opportunities to try new things in their work environment ($r = .383$ $p < .001$, one tailed). Further, based on the correlation analysis there was a negative relationship between "trying new things" and receiving professional development that was not seamlessly linked to instruction and curriculum needs, assessment or standards. ($r = -.246$, $p < .002$, one tailed).

Based on this correlation, school librarians who participated in “one-shot” workshops, which were not clearly linked to instruction, curriculum or assessment, were not as motivated to try new skills as those who reported receiving job-embedded professional development experiences.

Further, librarians who are able to work with teachers and other librarians, engaged in their work and reflecting upon their own successes or failures realize greater professional learning (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). This relates to survey responses suggesting informal interaction with others as a format for professional development. One survey respondent supported Darling, et al. (2009) earlier research regarding the concept of reflecting on what works and what does not work in their instructions expressing:

The most effective workshops are those that allow time for the participants to network and share ideas that have worked in their classroom or library. It is hard to miss the passion that a teacher or librarian shows when they are sharing something or an idea that was a success in their library or classroom.

Evidence supports the literature (Thessin & Starr, 2011) suggesting that teachers who can share strategies in an interactive learning community directly linking the professional development to the challenges they are facing experience more effective learning experiences.

Regarding the actual presence of job-embedded feedback in professional development for librarians in this survey, results demonstrated that 32% of librarians considered “absolutely” the experiences of their professional development to be job-embedded in their day-to-day professional duties. Fifty-one (51%) percent reported that their professional development was “occasionally” embedded in day-to-day duties. Twenty-one (21%) of those surveyed reported that they could immediately put into practice what they had learned in a professional development activity and 76% reported that they could also sometimes put the information to use immediately. These findings point to a clear need for increased attention to authentic professional development tied to job embedded activities.

Environments Supporting Diverse Preferences of Learning

The importance of involving teacher learners in the process of developing and designing learning opportunities cannot be overstated (Thessin & Starr, 2011). When teachers perceive they have little input in the educational environment and planning of their own learning, criticisms and disinterest are likely to occur, as reported by one disenchanted respondent in the current survey who shared:

Most workshops are redundant in nature, with the resulting information taught conflicting with the rigidity of county mandated schedules and teaching to the test. They teach at these workshops that we should do a, b and c, but then it is impossible to implement because everyone on the grade level has to be teaching the same thing at the same time. Teaching to the individual child is preached but then made impossible to put into practice.

Based on responses to open-ended questions from these survey results it can be reported that librarians know what their student needs are as well as their own needs. Input from the librarian is needed when integrating any school or faculty improvement initiatives. Responses indicated that to encourage “buy-in” by those whom program planners hope to serve, professional development planners include librarians in determining activities supporting the diverse and specific needs of their participants.

Opportunities for Practice of Skills and Collaboration with Colleagues

Building a common focus and a concerted effort to meet school needs depends upon strong collaborative relationships with colleagues (Harada, 2002; Thessin & Starr, 2011). When teachers and administrators work together to address student needs by engaging in a continuous process of instructional improvement, teaching and learning are strengthened (Lamb, 2011; Thessin & Starr, 2011). It is most helpful when educators from the same interest group or focus are able to participate continuously as a professional interactive learning community (Desimone, 2011).

Strongly supporting the literature in this respect, one respondent reported, “I went with a group of kindergarten teachers and we designed a module that we later used at school on celebrations around the world.” This response demonstrates how an experience with a professional learning community offered a rich, ongoing boost to the curriculum as a result of an opportunity to put skills into practice while collaborating with colleagues with a common focus. When teachers, as a group, are able to establish learning goals, purposes, and accountability through ongoing work as a unit, instructional processes are strengthened (Thessin & Starr, 2011). Formal and informal learning communities enhance the overall educational process incorporating the strengths of many building upon similar objectives.

Systematic Design and Evaluation of Presentations

A major concern in designing teacher learning activities is whether or not teachers will be able to work successfully through the learning process achieving the objectives needed to develop enhanced skills for use in their school programs (King, 2000). Involving participants in the planning and design, linked to instruction and curriculum, will naturally entail more active communication and interaction on the part of the participant (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Further, designers of professional development must link skills development to evaluation to be able to determine the impact of the process on the life of the school. Evaluation may be in the form of observation, peer appraisal or other assessment (Peacock, 2001) which looks at the results of staff development on school success. The most effective workshops according to a respondent “required work on the part of participants and are always a shot in the arm. focused on the media specialist’s role in reading, writing and the life of the school.” Integral to the process is to determine the teacher’s learning through a process of evaluation linked to the design of the program or activity.

Results from this survey also indicated the importance of linking skills development to evaluation following professional development through observation, peer appraisal, tests or work samples. Evaluation by peer or administrator observation was reported at 75%. Closely following that was standardized testing results for evaluation by 66%. Action research projects were reported at only 14%.

Impact on Teaching and Learning

Paul Cobb (1994) proposed that “learning should be viewed as both a process of active individual construction and a process of enculturation into the . . . practices of wider society” (p. 13). Cobb (1991) implied that ideally, the continued training in which educators participate would be evident in their classrooms. It is important that librarians see an impact of their learning on their individual teaching in the classroom and thereby on the greater learning community (Desimone, 2011). Attention to curriculum and instructional habits is critical to the process and ultimate success of the training (Kuhlthau, et al., 2007). Studies have demonstrated that learning activities which are focused mainly on teaching behaviors demonstrate smaller impact on student learning than programs whose content is more clearly focused on actual teaching as connected to curriculum or student learning styles (Kennedy, 1998).

Teachers in this survey were asked to report whether or not they felt their students’ achievement was impacted by professional development. A positive 38% of librarians surveyed reported that they felt that student achievement was impacted as a result of their training practices. Additionally 61% reported that “sometimes” professional development impacted student achievement. This supports current literature (Hopkins & Zweig 1999; Lance, Welborn, & Hamilton-Pennell, 1993; Loertscher, & Todd, 2003) that a qualified librarian has a significant impact on student teaching. The findings of this survey indicate that librarians, strengthened by proactive, willing professional development and collaborating with other instructional staff can have a significant impact on student achievement.

School wide missions and goals

Professional development that goes to the core of the school, reflecting missions and goals supported by school leadership is likely to have a more ingrained effect on the planning, teaching, and habits of librarians who participate (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). King (2000) suggested that for professional development activities to be considered highly rated, a focus upon critical integration of concepts reflecting school mission and vision were needed. To support librarians, an objective for advanced training may include gaining knowledge in how to support school wide missions and demonstrate expertise and understanding when working with the faculty and other stakeholders. Unfortunately in this survey only 29% of participants reported that professional development in their school reflected the school’s vision and goals. These findings indicate little evidence that librarians were exposed to or participated in dialogue discussing school mission or vision. Librarians in this study supported those in an earlier study (King, 2000), emphasizing that too much time was spent on the latest catchy phrase and not enough on what was pertinent to the teacher. Librarians and other educators want to focus on the issues that mold and impact their individual settings, not so much the national buzzwords of the day. One of the stronger statements supporting including school wide missions in designing professional development as shared by a respondent in this survey was

The most effective workshops I have ever attended have been ones that are relevant to what I do or to what my school's goals are. These workshops give research based information and allow time to modify the techniques or strategies to my particular setting.

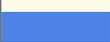
Results indicated that professional development integrated into school improvement plans and missions was valued by librarians seeking to enhance their skills.

Engagement in Professional Groups

It is common for librarians to seek professional support from the groups and organizations that they are members of or are familiar with. This is reasonable as those organizations seek to specifically identify topics of interest to their constituents. Professional support groups and organizations have long played a role in facilitating, endorsing and in some cases certifying, continuing professional development programs (Richard & Genoni, 2008). Further, the collaborative and collegial membership in professional organizations may provide librarians opportunity to impact on the types of training being shared whether in the form of conferences, short courses, seminars, training programs, mentoring, publications or grant opportunities. The librarians in this survey reported broad involvement in a number of organizations including: American Library Association (ALA), International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), North Carolina Technology in Education Society (NCTIES), Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education (SITE), Treasure Mountain, Association for Education Communication Technology (AECT), NC Dept of Public Instruction (NCDPI), LearnNC, North Carolina Center for Advancement of Teaching (NCCAT) and National Boards of Professional Teaching (NBPT). One responded reported that “I attended NCCAT Connections through Johnston County Schools. This was a yearlong workshop that ILT 1's and ILT 2's attended to help promote skills for classroom management, assessment, creative lesson plans and teaching students of poverty.” Another shared “NCTIES, it is not only fun, but I always learn something valuable to take back to my school” while NCSLMA provided the “most effective workshops such as Big 6 and how to convert to a flexible schedule” for another. According to the literature (Richard & Genoni, 2008), professional organizations have demonstrated strong support for continued growth of school librarians with specific librarian focused topics. The findings of this survey supported current literature in that respect. Table 2 shows the professional organizations most reported by respondents.

Table 2

Professional Group Engagement of Respondents

	Professional Organization		Response	%
1	American Association of School Librarians (AASL)		29	50%
2	American Library Association (ALA)		16	28%
3	International Society for Technology in Education (National Education Computing Conference)		7	12%
4	NC School Library Media Association(NCSLMA)		35	60%
5	NC Technology in Education Society (NCTIES)		14	24%

6	Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education (SITE)		4	7%
7	Treasure Mountain		5	9%
8	Association for Education Communication Technology (AECT)		9	16%
9	NC Dept of Public Instruction (NCDPI)		38	66%
10	LearnNC		20	34%

Elements for Successful Professional Development

Implications of the analysis of data collected through the survey “Professional Development Experiences for the School Media Specialist point to a combination of strategies for those planning or seeking professional development. To ensure clarity and effectiveness and to design workshops that can be meaningful, attention to each of the areas examined within the survey is critical. The themes identified in this study suggest that librarians want opportunities for relevant training that can transform their practice.

Multiple models and formats for continued learning exist and are continuing to evolve. Whatever format is used, relevancy of content is particularly important for effective professional development. Librarians also clearly want personal interaction with colleagues and ongoing initiatives that feature job-embedded activities. Most helpful are the systematically designed professional development models that consider school wide missions and vision.

Conclusions and Recommendations

School librarians deserve and need quality staff development not just to satisfy AASL’s standard for life-long-learning, but for the greater purpose of being able to directly impact upon the learning of countless students. There is little doubt that the success of students depends on the effectiveness and qualifications of teachers and school librarians. School librarians who have been well prepared and who have kept up with evolving mandates, formats, and technology are more likely to have a positive impact on student learning. If professional development is to have a positive, lasting impact, it must represent more than the latest buzzword or discussion forum. Librarians, who are called to promote and support education for all stakeholders, must lead the way in continuous learning efforts that support and transform student learning.

This study revealed that librarians in this sample do not appear, currently, to be taking full advantage of twenty-first century formats such as webinars, wikis, and blogging, among other evolving formats, and instead are continuing to utilize more traditional school-wide workshops. However there is a clear trend towards increasing use of emerging formats. Planners of professional development opportunities for school librarians might find it helpful to more closely examine expanded formats and the involvement of school librarians in those formats. Further, as respondents reported increasing interests in professional growth through personal interactions with colleagues and administrators, future study of specific examples of the interactions with colleagues and administrators is an area in which future qualitative study may prove beneficial.

The best way to ensure the quality of effective ongoing learning initiatives for educators is to provide professional development that is of high quality, is systematically designed, fully embedded in the teachings of librarians, and infused with interaction among colleagues. It is also critical that skill level or experience, grade level, and subject matter all be considered when planning programs. Optimum learning for teachers should include opportunities that vary with the curriculums, pedagogies, technologies and characteristics of the educators and their fields of study. Teacher learning with objectives to continuously improve student learning must first consider the needs of the individual teacher. It is, therefore, important to bring the teacher or librarian into the equation when planning learning activities in order to know how to meet specific needs or preferences and to determine what is relevant for the group. Support for the unique needs of the educator is vital to the success of the professional

development. Sharing in the initial planning for staff learning, enhances a teacher or librarians understanding, acceptance, and support of the process.

Evaluation should be a part of the planning process allowing for feedback from those participating. Sustained involvement with the concepts or strategies covered in this article offer a foundation for maximum growth and development. Districts and professional organization that support librarians with rich, effective learning experiences enable librarians to support students with similarly enhanced educational experiences, thereby transforming both learning and lives.

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