

Through the lens of new school librarians: The application of standards to delivering excellence to the profession

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Abstract

We examined the issues related to delivering service excellence through the lens of 39 graduating school librarians in written assignments for the final course of their certification program, as they focus on what is needed to apply standards to become an effective school library media specialist in the 21st century. Of the 16 issues identified, the concern over technology and their role as a technology specialist dominated the ranking. The results reinforce the ongoing need for education program coursework that continues to emphasize the role of technology in the 21st century school learning environment.

Introduction

Key professional directives for school library media specialists include leadership, collaboration, instructional partner, information specialist, technology specialist, teacher, program administrator, and advocate. These aspects of the school library profession are provided in standards (AASL & AECT, 1998; AASL, 2007) and the broadcast of these standards through professional associations, professional texts, and professional journals where articles highlight key responsibilities. But how does the new school librarian view his/her responsibilities? When faced with the myriad roles inherent in our profession, what do these new school librarians see as key issues for applying these standards to the profession?

In this paper we examine the issues through the lens of graduating school librarians in a certification program, as they focus on what is needed to apply standards to become an effective school library media specialist in the 21st century.

Background

The school library certification program at the University of North Texas is delivered online to students enrolled from Texas, other states in the United States, and countries around the world. Enrolment has grown to more than 500 students who enrol in nine courses for school library certification, and an additional four courses for a Masters of Science degree. The program seeks to prepare school librarians for their professional roles through coursework designed to challenge and stimulate. The program focuses on the development of personal and professional competencies that relate to the standards documented by the American Association

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of School Librarians (AASL) in the *Standards for the 21st Century Learner* (2007). These standards highlight the need for school librarians to be prepared to facilitate the development of learning skills through teaching, technology and leadership.

While research and exposure to standards forms the basis of the school library education program, it is worthwhile to examine the perceptions of the graduating professionals to consider how the educational focus matches perceived priorities as these graduates adopt the role of 21st century school librarians. Branch and de Groot (2009) found value in examining student reflections of the online graduate degree program following degree completion. While their research examined student reflections in relation to specific coursework, our research focuses on student perceptions of professional priorities as they consider the application of professional standards to their newly defined role, upon graduation. Consideration of these perceptions can influence the ongoing design and delivery of coursework intended to prepare students for leadership roles in 21st century school libraries.

Method

Data collection involved securing electronic copies of the written assessments of 39 graduating school library media specialists in the summer and fall semesters of 2009, from two assignments in their final course in the school library program of study. The first assignment asked the students to write a research paper discussing the top three trends or issues, from their perspective, facing school librarians today as they apply school library standards in their professional role as a school library media specialist. The second assignment asked them to track the postings on the worldwide school library media specialist listserv, LM_NET, and identify and discuss the top three issues of concern posted by contributing school librarians. This assignment was introduced in the fall semester of 2009. In the fall semester the students were offered a choice of research topics and only those who focused on the top three trends were included in this report.

Student identification was removed from each electronic copy of the assignments and the copies were coded according to the semester in which the assignment originated and the assignment type. For example, the assignments tracking the postings on the LM_NET listserv were coded LM01 through LM23 while the research papers were coded TRSUM01 through TRSUM16 and TRFAL01 through TRFAL14.

The range of issues and accompanying discussion of each issue were examined individually by three coders. A variety of issues emerged as categories during the individual examination and spreadsheets were compiled to sort the issues identified in each assignment. The unit of analysis (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 219) was the issue identified by the student as a heading in the assignment. Coding involved interpreting that heading through the context of the discussion that followed. The nuances within several categories were discussed among the coders and 100 percent agreement was reached on the final list of 16 issues. The content analysis software NVivo 8, from QSR International, was employed to enable an in depth analyses across the submissions and allow easy retrieval of cogent statements.

Results

The results of the analysis of student submissions provided a set of 16 issues or trends that were considered important or challenging to school librarians as they develop their professional role as a school library media specialist. The breadth of coverage of these issues ranged from the conceptual to the practical, as reported alphabetically in the following list:

1. Advocacy
2. Classification issues (organizing fiction by genre, with emphasis on graphic novels)
3. Collaboration with teachers and administrators
4. Copyright
5. Diversity of a multicultural literature collection
6. International Baccalaureate program
7. Inquiry-based learning
8. Intellectual freedom, including censorship and access to information
9. Information literacy, including issues of authoritative resources, ethics, and instruction
10. Funding or budget concerns

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11. Library management
12. Reading; recommendations for “high-interest” reading materials
13. Role of the library media specialist (LMS), including impact on student achievement
14. Scheduling (flexible or fixed)
15. Space usage in the library
16. Technology, including Web 2.0

The ranked list of issues identified in the assignments for summer and fall of 2009 are presented in Table 1, with the ranking determined by the total from all student sources.

Table 1. Ranked results from all sources.

Issue	Semester			Total (n = 53)
	Top Issues Summer 2009 (n = 16)	Top Issues Fall 2009 (n = 14)	Listserv analysis Fall 2009 (n = 23)	
	1. Technology (includes Web 2.0)	12	11	
2. Funding	8	8	3	19
3. Copyright	1	1	13	15
3. Information literacy	6	2	7	15
4. Role of the LMS	4	4	6	14
5. Advocacy	5	6	0	11
6. Collaboration	6	0	3	9
7. Intellectual freedom	5	3	0	8
8. Classification of resources	0	0	7	7
8. Reading	1	0	6	7
9. Multicultural literature	2	2	2	6
9. Scheduling	1	4	1	6
10. Space	0	2	3	5
11. Inquiry-based learning	0	2	0	2
12. Library management	1	0	1	2
13. International Baccalaureate program	0	1	0	1
Total	52	46	72	170

Since the assignments and the semesters vary, the results were also compiled on the basis of the individual assignments. Table 2 presents the ranked results of the top three issues, as identified by students in the summer 2009 written assignment. From the perceptions of the students in the summer 2009 semester, technology and funding remain the top two concerns while copyright, identified as the number three issue when all student responses were considered, is replaced by information literacy and drops to number eight.

Table 2. Ranked results from summer 2009 assignment of top 3 issues.

Issue	Top Issues Summer 2009 (n = 16)
1. Technology (includes Web 2.0)	12
2. Funding	8
3. Information literacy	6
4. Collaboration	6
5. Advocacy	5
5. Intellectual freedom	5
6. Role of the LMS	4
7. Multicultural literature	2
8. Copyright	1
8. Library management	1
8. Reading	1
8. Scheduling	1
Total	52

In the fall of 2009, the students were asked to complete the same written assignment as the students in the summer semester. The ranked results for the fall 2009 assignment are detailed in Table 3. In this semester's ranking, the issue of inquiry-based learning is noted as the only semester and student area of inclusion. Once again technology and funding remain as the top two issues, while advocacy becomes the third most important concern for these students.

Table 3. Ranked results from fall 2009 assignment of top 3 issues.

Issue	Top Issues Fall 2009 (n = 14)
1. Technology (includes Web 2.0)	11
2. Funding	8
3. Advocacy	6
4. Role of the LMS	4
4. Scheduling	4
5. Intellectual freedom	3
6. Information literacy	2
6. Inquiry-based learning	2
6. Multicultural literature	2
6. Space	2
7. Copyright	1
8. International Baccalaureate Program	1
Total	46

The additional assignment for the fall semester of 2009 was to track the postings by school librarians on the listserv LM_NET and identify the top three issues raised. The ranked results in Table 4 indicate the findings of the school library program students. Technology remains the top area of concern, while listserv participants rate funding with less emphasis. Copyright issues rank second only to technology in the postings on the listserv, according to the students in the fall 2009 semester.

Table 4. Ranked results from listserv analysis of top 3 issues.

Issue	Listserv analysis Fall 2009 (n = 23)
1. Technology (includes Web 2.0)	20
2. Copyright	13
3. Classification of resources	7
3. Information literacy	7
4. Reading	6
4. Role of the LMS	6
5. Collaboration	3
5. Funding	3
5. Space	3
6. Multicultural literature	2
7. Library Management	1
7. Scheduling	1
Total	72

The ranked results varied across the semesters and the assignments, with the exception of technology. Issues relating to technology ranked first in all cases. Funding was identified as a major concern by the students themselves, but was not observed to be as much of a priority on the listserv discussions. On the listserv, copyright issues were more dominant than the students identified for their attention. Issues relating to the classification of resources, with emphasis on graphic novels, were also of more concern to practitioners utilizing the listserv than graduating students who identified major issues for the application of standards in the profession. As several students noted, the issues on the listserv change from month to month and are more immediate in nature; they do not often reflect philosophical debates or challenges.

Discussion

While the students identified specific issues, there were also dominant themes woven through the assignments. The first underlying theme within all assignments was meeting the challenges of a rapidly changing learning environment. Regardless of the issues, the rapid rate of change was reflected in all areas. The sense of urgency identified by Valenza and Johnson (2009) was evident in the recognition of the leadership role inherent in the shifting dynamics of the school environment. Alongside this rate of change was the ‘need to investigate and determine educational uses and if these changes can enhance the learning experiences of the students’ (LM15).

Another dominant theme was the role of student learning. With every issue, someone reflected on the implications for student learning as part of an inquiry-based process, often in relation to the AASL (2007) *Standards for the 21st Century Learner*. So, while only two students identified inquiry-based learning as a key issue it was reflected within the context of other issues.

Meeting the needs of the students and teachers also emerged from the consideration of issues. These needs were considered of primary importance because “the goal of the library media specialist continues to be the overall student achievement” (TRSUM01). And as another student observed, “We must meet the students where they are. We cannot rely on paper and pencil, but must embrace how our students communicate and teach them to communicate well.” (LM05)

From the set of challenges identified by the students, consideration of several issues follows.

Technology

Technology concerns dominated both the listserv and the issues identified in the student research assignments. The dominance of this area is reflective of the Mardis and Dickinson (2009) finding that “preservice SLMSs pointed to mastery of technology and associated troubleshooting skills as an essential part of their preparation” (Conclusions). As one student states, “the advent of new technologies has made the job of librarians more relevant and essential than ever” (TRFAL01). The issues related to technology as identified by the students in this report included:

- Web 2.0 and how to become fluent with the technology and incorporate tools into the school curriculum.
- Expanding instructional skills to include Web 2.0 tools
- The need to be constantly up to date with new technology
- Familiarity with technologies and a comfort level with using them
- Need to research the kinds of technology that enhances the library
- As a means to create a more effective program to increase student achievement
- Improve access to emerging technology
- Awareness and familiarity with changing media formats and methods of delivery
- What technologies should be purchased and who should be allowed to circulate them
- The availability of technology to students: should they be allowed to check equipment out from the library
- A technology rich environment is conducive to learning
- Assisting teachers with tools to aid instruction
- What library services will suffer because money is spent on technology

Funding

With a worldwide economic climate that has impacted all areas of education, it was not surprising for budget and funding issues to receive a high status on the list of issues identified by the students for concern. According to one student “there are two factors that influence how school library programs are run – budgets and standards” (TRSUM02). Another student identified the importance of AASL, American Library Association (ALA), National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), and state standards for guiding library programs and the challenging impact of reduced funding: “The role of librarians should

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focus on upholding these standards to ensure student achievement. When librarians are given other roles such as fundraiser to make up for dwindling budgets, it takes away time to devote to helping students” (TRFAL06).

The impact of diminished state funding is also felt through “the difficult task of maintaining the integrity of their collections and services with a dwindling budget” (TRSUM03). Despite these challenges, school librarians recognize the challenge of developing quality collections representative of various cultures. The issue of a diverse and multicultural collection received modest attention in the ranking of issues.

The most dramatic effect of major budget cuts is the “loss in credentialed library media specialists” (TRSUM15). A direct result is that administrators “have resorted to school library staff that merely check books in and out, read aloud picture books, and shelve the books” (TRFAL09). This issue also relates to the identification of advocacy as a necessary strategy to demonstrate the value of the school librarian.

Information literacy

Acquiring and using the skills to access and evaluate resources within the school library setting was a recurring issue. What was missing from these discussions was the ways that the school librarian could engage students to further these goals. As TRSUM12 stated, “it is imperative that LMS teach students skills which will transfer to new formats, technologies, and media.” The goal was articulated by many students but the means to do so was not included.

Inquiry- based learning

Demonstrating the connection between the school library and student achievement was noted more by students in the fall semester than the summer semester. The impact of what can be called the “Todd effect” was noted in terms of the reflections made by students who attended a presentation by Ross Todd in the fall of 2009. His stirring call to action resonated with students and providing evidence of the connection between the school library and student achievement was identified as an important aspect of the role of the library media specialist. References were made to Kuhlthau’s information search process (ISP) and instilling students with the tools to find, analyse, and present information using 21st century technologies (Kuhlthau, 2008). The impact of research discussions in a live forum was significant.

Listserv

The purpose of the LM_NET listserv is to encourage conversation between practitioners. According to the home website:

Conversations on LM_NET should focus on the topics of interest to the school library media community, including the latest on school library media services, operations, and activities. It is a group for practitioners helping practitioners, sharing ideas, solving problems, telling each other about new publications and up-coming conferences, asking for assistance or information, and linking schools through their library media centers.

While conversations are encouraged, and those conversations have on occasion facilitated participation in research studies, the primary goal is practitioner related. Conversations related to conducting research are infrequent and would likely be out of place in this environment. The success of this listserv in connecting practitioners cannot be underestimated in terms of the value it adds to professional school librarians.

However, it is noteworthy that a similar vehicle for ongoing discussions related to research within the school library is lacking.

Conclusion

The value of examining student perceptions of key issues or trends is in viewing the correlation between the reality for practitioners and the aspirations of leaders in the profession. The challenge for new school librarians is to deliver excellence through standards while balancing the rapidly changing demands within school systems. While the students did not identify specific standards as issues, they did identify dimensions of the standards as priorities. The selection of issues reflects the AASL (2007) emphasis stating that learners use [information literacy] skills, resources, and tools to:

- inquire, think critically, and gain knowledge;

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- draw conclusions, make informed decisions, apply knowledge to new situations, and create new knowledge;
- share knowledge and participate ethically and productively as members of our democratic society; and
- pursue personal and aesthetic growth (p. 3).

The role of the school librarian is viewed as a multiplicity of responsibilities. The necessity to juggle tasks was not viewed as overwhelming, but rather as a natural consequence of a rapidly evolving information landscape within the 21st century schools. Perhaps the most striking aspect of these student reflections was the future focus they maintained with emphasis on the need to do research and develop plans to meet upcoming challenges. Leadership in the school learning community and advocacy for the valuable role they provide were viewed as necessary outcomes of these turbulent times. They do not see their professional roles as static and articulated a clear view of the educational horizon.

Three key learnings:

- Technology and the issues associated with staying current as a technology specialist dominated the concerns of both new school library graduates and subscribers to the listserv, reinforcing the need for continuous development and design of coursework that prepares school librarians for this role.
- The role and importance of the AASL learning standards was implicit within the issues chosen as priorities.
- The value of a practitioner listserv is noteworthy, but the discussion range does suggest that a more robust forum for interactive debate on research and how to apply standards to the profession is necessary to provide more breadth of support for active school librarians.

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