What School Principals Need to Know about Libraries: Implications for Practice and Preparation

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Principals in K-12 education face increasingly complex responsibilities and must maximize student learning within the boundaries of available funding and staffing. Effective library programs have been correlated to higher test scores and can be a resource for principals to meet improvement goals. The purpose of this Delphi study was to describe the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed by K-12 administrators to direct effective school library programs. Across three expert profile groups, 23 panelists participated in three rounds of the Delphi process. A high level of consensus led to 44 statements of application for aspiring and practicing administrators. The four highest ranked items were statements of dispositions about the library program. Implications for administrators in preparation and practice are noted.

School principals face increasingly complex and overwhelming responsibilities (Wise, 2015). For example, the current trend of accountability through high-stakes testing drives public school administrative decisions about programs, facilities, and resources (Ravitch, 2010). National educational leadership standards (the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium or ISLLC) report that school leaders are "increasingly accountable for raising student achievement among students from all population subgroups" (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2008, p. 3). In best practice, administrator decisions for student learning are evidence-based. One example of a campus resource that is evidence-based and tied to increased student learning is the effective school library (e.g., Haycock, 2011; Kachel, 2013; Todd, 2007). As the "biggest classroom in the building" (Kuon, Flores, & Pickett, 2014, p. 65), the library can be positioned to serve as the "silver bullet for boosting literacy and academic achievement" (Kachel, 2012, p. 33).

In contrast to those research findings supporting the implementation of effective library programs, however, K-12 administrators and boards of education are frequently seen cutting, reducing, or removing the library from the campus educational plan (Ballard, 2012; Hartzell, 2012b; Lance, 2010). Yet, because of the library's potential to increase student learning (Kachel, 2013), school leaders and those who prepare them must ensure they are aware of the research base for the library and in particular, aware of those identified attributes that correlate to student achievement (Francis, Lance, & Lietzau, 2010). Not using a school asset correlated with increased student achievement has been called "benign neglect" at best (Kaplan, 2006, p. xi) and programmatic "inequity" at worst (Achterman, 2008, p. 191).

Why might the misuse of a resource that supports student learning happen? The phenomenon may be explained by the K-12 administrative literature and principal preparation programs. Studies have documented the lack of information about effective library programs in the curricula of school leadership preparation programs (e.g., Hartzell, 2012a; Pickett, 2013; Roberson, Schweinle, & Applin, 2003). Additionally, professional reading for school leaders largely lacks data from the most recent library impact studies, which now point to libraries supporting gains in student reading and writing, narrowing the achievement gap, and improving graduation rates (Coker, 2015; Haycock, 2011; Kachel, 2013; Lance & Schwarz, 2012). This lack of exposure leaves principals out of the global conversation that "school library programs with certified, full-time librarians are essential building blocks for 21st century learning" (Kachel, 2013, p. 3). In light of this lack of exposure, the purpose of this Delphi study was to describe the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed by K-12 administrators to direct effective school library programs, in particular programs that are embedded within the larger goal of school improvement. Such an understanding of principals' competencies can carry implications for in-service professional development of school leaders, as well as inform higher education preparation programs for administrators, teachers, and librarians.

Research at the Nexus: Libraries and Pre-Service Preparation of Administrators

The literature of principal preparation programs first crosses the literature of effective school libraries after the 1980s. Both disciplines were experiencing the early tremors that would later become the turmoil of school reform and high-stakes accountability. During that decade, the first national standards for higher education preparation programs were being shaped (McCarthy, 1999). In that decade as well, the national standards for school libraries and librarians were shifting to highlight the collaborative instructional and curricular roles for media centers (libraries) and their media specialists (Midland, 2008). The convergent story lines for the two

disciplines are recounted in five scholarly articles that underscore two foundational principles: The nature and purpose of the school library program was becoming increasingly correlated to student achievement; and new and experienced school administrators were largely unaware of the new potential of libraries, unable to value them, and unable to fully serve as instructional leaders without that knowledge. Ironically, the literature did support principals as having "tremendous influence" to position their library programs to influence student learning (Roberson et al., 2003, p. 99).

In 1991, Veltze published a dissertation from the University of Southern Mississippi focusing on the status of the inclusion of information regarding school libraries in the curricula of principal preparation programs. Her literature review reported no previous literature existed that considered the nexus of the two fields. Veltze (1991) conducted a quantitative, linear regression study of a randomly selected national sample of 77 professors in higher education school administrator programs. Of those professors, 47% reported not including information about libraries in what they taught; yet 84% agreed their students should be encouraged to learn about the library program. Participants indicated general agreement with the fairly new national standards for school librarians, but these professors held no clear understanding of the implications of those standards. Conclusions conveyed two crucial implications for administrator preparation programs: the critical need to include in the curricula information about the new conception of libraries, and the need of the faculty themselves to understand that conception, particularly as expressed in the updated national library standards (Veltze, 1999).

Concurrent to Veltze (1991) completing her study, Wilson and Blake (1993) were also studying the nexus of principal preparation and school libraries. Both were faculty members at the University of Houston-Clear Lake, Wilson teaching library science and Blake teaching educational leadership. Together they examined the experience and perceptions of a randomly selected national sample of 423 school principals and 572 library media specialists. They reported that participating school administrators were generally unaware of the library's role in teaching and learning. Most of the principals (69%) reported they were inadequately prepared regarding the management and function of the school library. Additionally, a majority of participants (78%) agreed that information about facilitating library programs should be included in principal preparation programs. Comments from both principal and librarian participants were used to describe specific topics about libraries that should be included in preparation programs. Taken as a whole, Wilson and Blake (1993) identified this content as the missing component in principal preparation curricula, concluding that "until education leadership programs at universities across the nation highlight information concerning school library media programs in their course work, the potential of the school library. . . in the educational process *will not be reached* [emphasis added]" (p. 68).

A few years later, another study from the University of Houston-Clear Lake was published by library professor Wilson and educational leadership professor MacNeil (1999). In this study, the researchers explored the question of what principals actually learn in their preparation programs. Specifically, Wilson and MacNeil (1999) sought to determine if the preparation programs were providing principals with information about the expanded role of libraries in K-12 schools. From a randomly selected national sample of faculty from educational leadership programs certified by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, a total of 250 professors responded to the questionnaire. Of those 250 faculty, only 19% indicated they did include information about school libraries in their courses. But follow-up telephone interviews clarified that a more accurate response was probably less than 15%: A

number of the original positive responses had counted instruction about research methods as constituting information about school libraries. This phenomenon again supported that aspiring principals were exiting leadership programs unprepared for the potential of libraries. Wilson and MacNeil (1999) concluded, "Very few principal-preparation programs across the nation are preparing school principals for the leadership role related to the school library media center" (p. 23). The authors recommended professors provide library information in K-12 administrator preparation and accreditation agencies include descriptors specific to school library supervision that would encourage institutions to do so.

Alexander, Smith, and Carey (2003) revealed principals who had pre-service with information about libraries were statistically significantly more likely to value the library than were principals who received no such training. In 1990, the state of Kentucky initiated a broad-sweep reform of its public schools through the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA). An additional $1 billion funding for education promoted the option of libraries, and in 2000, KERA was amended to require a library in each public school. But in 2003, Alexander et al. revealed that a randomly selected sample of Kentucky state principals regarded libraries as only of moderate importance. In general, those principals held only an amorphous understanding of the expanded role of librarians to impact student learning. The authors attributed this lack of knowledge in part to the principals' inadequate preparations, with less than 10% of respondents reporting that they had received any preparation for implementing a library program. Yet those who had been so trained were strikingly more aware of the valuable potential of the library to support student learning. This study supported the idea that principal preparation had not kept pace with the changes in the field of school librarianship and the re-conceptualization of the role of libraries and librarians (Alexander et al., 2003). The authors theorized that principals unprepared to manage that changed reality were not aware of and were ill-equipped to take advantage of the potential of the school library for student achievement.

A 2003 study by faculty from the University of Southern Mississippi provided a discussion of what strategic pre-service principal curricula might resemble. Almost 10 years after Veltze's (1991) study from this institution, Roberson et al. (2003) reported their institution's work to design curricular changes to the education administration program to adequately prepare principal candidates to manage effective libraries on their campuses. The first of their two-part study examined the current state of school libraries in Mississippi, and their findings aligned with the national body of empirical work supporting effective libraries as correlates to improved student achievement and narrower achievement gaps. The second part of their study described the curricular changes their university was implementing in principal preparation courses. Grouping their preparation courses in three blocks or stages, the faculty was embedding library information strategically in each block. In addition to the model for program curricula, Roberson et al. (2003) provided two compelling findings: "Students in [Mississippi] schools with better funded, better equipped, and better staffed libraries tend to perform better on standardized tests" (p. 111), and that, despite the body of research that supports similar conclusions for other states, there is a "void [about this research] in the knowledge possessed by pre-service principals" (p. 111). The authors concluded that "the need for [library] training in educational administration programs is imperative" for administrators and professors to understand the "vital and essential element" that the library presents for student learning (Roberson et al., 2003, p. 111).

Taken together, these five studies support the foundational concepts of the dynamic role of the school library program and the void in the knowledge of aspiring principals to understand

the potential of the library to support student achievement. To understand national expectations for preparation of K-12 administrators, our study took the perspective of national school leadership standards articulated originally by the ISLLC in 1996 and revised in 2008 and in 2015. These standards have evolved to prioritize leadership that deals with a school's instruction, worded as "leadership for learning" (CCSSO, 2014, p. 6), specifically serving to "outline what educational leaders should know and be able to do" (CCSSO, 2014, p. 6) toward the goal of college and career readiness. The latest iteration emphasizes the continuing purpose of "communicat[ing] expectations to practitioners" (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, p. 4). In our study, the standards provided the framework for examining curricular content of leader preparation: What are the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed by K-12 administrators to direct effective school library programs?

Method

Developed in the 1950s, the Delphi technique involves a selected group of experts who reply to a researcher's series of questionnaires (Dalkey, 1968; Linstone & Turoff, 2002). The method is structured to minimize group influence on individual responses. After each round of questions, the experts receive feedback concerning the group response and "range of opinions" (Ludwig, 1994, p. 55). Each iteration builds upon the previous round with the goal being "to reduce the range of responses and arrive at . . . expert consensus" (RAND, 2014, para. 1). In our study, individuals acknowledged as experts in school administration and library programs were invited to develop consensus regarding the effective principal and the school library. Working through a collaborative and dynamic process, these experts sought an understanding that did not exist in prior literature—a concise articulation of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed by K-12 administrators to direct effective school library programs. The Delphi was selected as the most appropriate method because the research topic did not "lend itself to precise analytical techniques" but required the collective experiences of experts (Linstone & Turoff, 2002, p. 4).

As advised by Keeney, Hasson, and McKenna (2011), participants were selected according to criteria that targeted the expertise needed in this study. First, the participants were selected based on their knowledge and experience in three arenas: K-12 administration, K-12 librarianship, and higher education preparation of K-12 educators. Second, participants were recognized as experts by national acknowledgement of effective performance in their area of practice. Because the American Library Association annually awards exceptional individuals from the three areas examined in this study, a pool of candidates was drawn from their list of honorees.

Although there is no consensus in the literature about the ideal sample size for a Delphi study (Hsu & Sandford, 2007), some support is given for panels with fewer than 25 participants (Brooks, 1979). After initial contact, 23 panelists, who were nationally recognized for their work with school libraries, participated (three administrators, seven librarians, and 13 higher education faculty). The experts had a mean of 25 years of educational experience. Panelists were widely dispersed among 14 states. Of the 23 participants, 18 were women and 22 identified as White. All 23 panelists participated in three rounds of data collection representing a 100% response rate throughout the study.

In a Delphi study, the instrument is designed to elicit data to generate a broad range of ideas by posing open-ended questions (Keeney et al., 2011). Those responses are used to shape the subsequent rounds (Linstone & Turoff, 2002). The Round 1 questionnaire, as shown in

Table 1, was refined through a pilot study to improve validity and consisted of four open-ended questions about the roles, values, and understandings of a principal leading an effective school library program. Participant free-text responses were verified before analysis and from the confirmed responses, we used content analysis techniques to identify categories. We grouped similar ideas and comments and concluded by identifying 10 themes in the expert opinions. From these themes, we created 77 statements using participants' exact words and phrasing. Those statements were grouped by the domains expressed in the study's research questions: knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Those statements, in those three groups, constituted the Round 2 questionnaire.

Table 1
Round 1 Open-ended Questions

Open-Ended Question
1. In a school with an effective library program, what is the role of the principal regarding the library?
2. In a school with an effective library program, what understandings or general knowledge about the library does the principal use?
3. In a school with an effective library program, what skills does the principal demonstrate in his work to support the library?
4. In a school with an effective library program, what does the principal value about that program?

In Round 2, participants were asked to evaluate the importance of 77 statements using a 4-anchor scale: *not important at all, not very important, somewhat important, very important*. Experts were also invited to add free-response content in optional open-ended questions for each domain. After a frequency analysis, we selected statements using a priori consensus levels (i.e., rated as important by 100% and very important by 75%). For the Round 3 questionnaire, experts were given the results of the group's ratings from Round 2 and asked to confirm, deny, or amend importance ratings. Results from Round 3 confirmed broad agreement of 44 statements (see Appendix) ranked as *important* or *very important* by at least 75% of the experts.

Findings

Organized across the constructs of knowledge, skills, and dispositions, we identified 44 statements of high consensus by the expert panelists in the study after the completion of three rounds of the Delphi as shown in the appendix. Of those, five statements received unanimous agreement at the highest level. In this paper, we will focus on these five key findings as displayed in Table 2. These findings provided details about the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed by K-12 administrators to direct effective school library programs.

Table 2
Five Statements of Unanimous Agreement

Statement receiving 100% support	Domain
1. The principal values the strong library's impact on student achievement.	Disposition
2. The principal values the librarian's expertise as a teacher.	Disposition
3. The principal values the library being an integral part of instruction.	Disposition
4. The principal values the library providing equitable and open access to its resources.	Disposition
5. The principal hires and retains the best certified librarian available.	Skills

Discussion

The consensus of the panelists aligned with the ISLLC Standards in targeting a single goal: authentic student learning resulting from well-prepared and knowledgeable leaders. The learning goals of each of our study's five unanimous statements echo the focus on student growth: student achievement (Statement 1), instructional expertise of the librarian (Statement 2), the library as an integral part of instruction (Statement 3), equitable access to library instruction and resources (Statement 4), and the presence of an effective certified librarian (Statement 5). Each of these statements align with the dispositions of an instructional leader, and thus the statements hold powerful implications for principal preparation programs and curricula.

Of the five unanimous expert statements, four were categorized as dispositions and none were grouped within the study's domain of a principal's knowledge. Yet the disposition and skill statements developed by our study's experts necessarily depend on knowledge of the decades of research about effective libraries. For example, in order to value the library's impact on student achievement (Statement 1), an administrator understands and believes the evidence concerning the relationship of certain library attributes to increased student test scores (e.g., Coker, 2015; Haycock, 2011; Kachel, 2013; Lance & Schwarz, 2012). The literature on the nexus of principal preparation and school libraries, however, has demonstrated that administrator candidates do not learn about school library impact through preparation program curricula (e.g., Hartzell, 2012b, Roberson et al., 2003; Wilson & MacNeil, 1999). This gap in knowledge helps explain why school district administrators might neglect, defund, or even remove library programs and staff (Kaplan, 2006, 2010; Kuon et al., 2014; Shannon, 2012).

Statement 2 from the study's findings, the principal values the librarian's expertise as a teacher, reflects the teaching experience and expertise required of certified librarians in most states. In many cases, the certified librarian has earned a bachelor's degree and certification in education, has taught for at least two years, and has then earned a master's degree either in library science or other instructional area (Lance, 2006). In schools with effective library programs, principals aware of these librarian qualifications might be able to utilize the certified librarian for collaborative lesson planning and co-teaching, as well as for expertise in curriculum

design, inquiry lessons, and project planning. Moreover, Kachel (2013) noted that in-service training provided by librarians correlated to higher student scores. Educational leaders unaware of this instructional expertise of the librarian might fail to take advantage of this instructional resource.

Both Statements 3 and 4 of the study's findings speak to the cross-curricular and interdepartmental strengths that a certified librarian and the program bring to supporting student learning. These concepts indicate the centrality of the library's reach into many areas of learning. Lance and Schwarz (2012) suggested that the greatest impact from libraries was experienced by students who are most at-risk academically. For these students, the possibility of greater loss by absent library programs raises questions of equity and social justice when leaders fail to provide resources (Achterman, 2008; Kuon et al., 2014). Principal preparation programs should ensure that candidates recognize the positive impact of libraries, as well as the negative impact for students whose learning lacks the support of an effective library program.

Statement 5 of the study findings sums up the collective body of knowledge needed by a school administrator: the principal hires and retains the best certified librarian available. Without the knowledge necessary for implementing Statements 1 through 4, a principal might be unable to identify, let alone hire and supervise, an effective school librarian. Without identifying what constitutes an effective library program, the hiring of an effective librarian is made more difficult. Fortunately, three decades of library impact research have consistently identified the attributes of an effective school librarian (e.g., Coker, 2015; Haycock, 2011; Kachel, 2013; Lance & Schwarz, 2012). When a principal knows and values these attributes, he or she is more likely to hire and supervise an effective librarian. Principal preparation educators can empower their candidates when they embed research about effective libraries in their preparation curricula. The experience of educational leadership programs cited previously (Roberson et al., 2003; Wilson & Blake, 1993) provides evidence to both the means of including such curricular content in preparation curricula and the effectiveness of doing so. Together, the five statements of findings represent what an effective administrator needs to know regarding library impact on student achievement.

Conclusion

Principals and school administrators lead the work to improve schools (Hess & Kelly, 2007), and the myriad challenges they face are overwhelming (Wise, 2015). The potential of the school library program to support school leaders and student learning is promising, but the knowledge to implement that library program eludes many school principals. In this study, experienced administrators recognized for their work with school libraries collaborated with recognized librarians and higher education professors to develop a high degree of consensus on five key statements. Together this body of experts gave direction for educators seeking to potentiate student learning through effective school libraries: Principals need to know what an effective library looks like, how a credentialed librarian works, and the synergy created by leadership, librarians, and teachers.

Evidence and experience have shown that most principal candidates lack the knowledge to supervise a school library. Likewise, evidence and experience have provided guidance for those seeking to do so. The latest iteration of the ISLLC Standards, now published as *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders* (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015), calls for fresh approaches to improve learning for all students and to

achieve "more equitable outcomes" (p. 1). There has been some progress in improving preparation programs for school leaders by including performance tasks and relevant field experiences in the preparation curricula (Wise, 2015); however, more work is needed. The implications from our study call for including strategic instruction about effective school libraries and the research base thereof in the curricula of preparation programs. In doing so, candidates might be able to develop an "equity lens" needed by school leaders (Wise, 2015, p. 113).

Although we applied Delphi procedures with legitimacy according to literature (e.g., Hsu & Sandford, 2007; Linstone & Turoff, 2002), limitations should be noted. The 44 statements (see Appendix) produced through this collaborative work represent what recognized experts in the field of K-12 administration and library practice believed to be the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions of the principal of an effective library program. It is possible that other Delphi studies, using justified experts answering the same questions, could produce answers with differing degrees of consensus. Another limitation was the lack of ethnic and gender diversity among the expert panel members. Although we used a specific sampling strategy that did not include consideration for gender and ethnicity (see explanation in Method section), future researchers might consider this limitation in their research designs.

Both fields of professional practice represented in this study, administration and librarianship, are deeply entrenched in their relevant research, responsibilities, and priorities. Although this study attempts to find overarching goals and to arrive at mutually beneficial paths to those goals, the division between the fields will remain. Yet, as one administrator expert commented, "library values and beliefs should be the same as the principal's, definitely not something separate . . . the beliefs of the leader should flow into and throughout the library." Future research that more closely conjoins the mutual aspirations and activities of principals and librarians could continue to build common understandings.

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Appendix

44 Statements of Highest Consensus after Three Rounds of the Delphi

Delphi Statement	% rating *very important*	Domain
60. The principal values the strong library's impact on student achievement.	100	Dispositions
57. The principal values the librarian's expertise as a teacher.	100	Dispositions
76. The principal values the library being an integral part of instruction.	100	Dispositions
56. The principal values the library providing equitable and open access to its resources.	100	Dispositions
33. The principal hires and retains the best certified librarian available.	100	Skills
58. The principal values the librarian's expertise as a collaborator.	96	Dispositions
59. The principal values the librarian's expertise as a leader.	96	Dispositions
63. The principal values instruction for digital and information literacies.	96	Dispositions
6. The principal understands that credentialed librarians are certified teachers who integrate with the curriculum to support instruction.	96	Knowledge
30. The principal clearly communicates to teachers the value of the library program to student learning	96	Skills
34. The principal includes the librarian in the campus' professional development activities, in order to keep the librarian informed and current.	96	Skills
40. The principal trusts in the knowledge, skill, and professionalism of an effective librarian.	96	Skills
44. The principal ensures proper technology infrastructure for the library.	96	Skills
45. The principal holds the librarian accountable for a strong, integrated program.	96	Skills
48. The principal supports reading across the curriculum.	96	Skills
62. The principal values the library's work to build engagement for a culture of reading.	91	Dispositions
50. The principal recognizes that "adequate" is not enough and expects and supports a strong library program that increases student learning and engagement.	91	Skills
53. The principal values the library's welcoming and accepting environment.	87	Dispositions
55. The principal values the unique nature of the library program and supports it accordingly.	87	Dispositions

61. The principal values the library's integration of technology to strategically support the curriculum (not just gadgets).	87	Dispositions
6. The value the school librarian can bring to the students' learning is essential knowledge for the principal. (Added in Round 3)	87	Knowledge
15. The principal envisions the library as the hub of the school, setting a welcoming and accepting environment.	87	Knowledge
18. The principal understands the importance of continuous and adequate funding to maintain an effective collection of print and digital resources.	87	Knowledge
20. The principal understands the need to schedule time for the librarian to collaborate, plan, and teach.	87	Knowledge
3. The principal understands the changing role of libraries during a time of widespread educational change.	87	Knowledge
31. The principal seeks out the definition of a strong school library program, learns about it, expects it on her/his campus, and asks for change or celebrates its strength.	87	Skills
43. The principal leads in establishing a culture centered on reading and the pursuit of knowledge.	87	Skills
54. The principal values the library program's contribution to teacher development.	83	Dispositions
64. The principal values building student self-confidence and independence as readers and learners.	83	Dispositions
66. The principal values the library engaging both students and faculty in the process of learning.	83	Dispositions
67. The principal values the library's facilitating 21st Century learning.	83	Dispositions
68. The principal values the librarian's integration of library standards into curricular content.	83	Dispositions
74. The principal values intellectual freedom.	83	Dispositions
23. The principal understands the importance of equitable and open access to library resources.	83	Knowledge
8. The principal knows what a good librarian does.	83	Knowledge
28. The principal allocates appropriate funds for the library from the building budget.	83	Skills
35. The principal initiates and expects teacher-librarian collaboration.	83	Skills
39. The principal schedules grade-level or content-area collaborative time that includes the librarian.	83	Skills
69. The principal values the library offering just-in-time, at-point-of-need, instruction.	78	Dispositions
71. The principal values the library as the hub for media resources and technology.	78	Dispositions
73. The principal values the library's high-quality	78	Dispositions

collection of resources.		
75. The principal values affective support for students (beyond quantitative measures and statistics).	78	Dispositions
11. The principal understands what constitutes 21st Century skills and how the librarian mediates that learning.	78	Knowledge
4. The principal holds an accurate understanding of the librarian's complex role.	78	Knowledge