Building Connections, Collaboration, and Community for Differently- and Typically-Able Students in a Middle School Library in the United States

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Abstract:

Data from around the world offer compelling evidence regarding the impact that school librarians and library programs have on student achievement. Research investigating inclusive library programming, or programming serving both typically-able and differently-able students, however, is extremely limited. This case study examined inclusive library programming in a rural middle school library in the southeastern United States. Best practices and inclusion in the school library served as the axis from which a school culture of inclusion and valuing differences emanates. Findings from this study offer guidance for educators and librarians serving multiple grade levels in both school and public library settings.

Keywords: school libraries, library programming, inclusion, accessibility, equity of access

Introduction

In today's increasingly diverse society, it is critical that administrators, educators, parents, and students guarantee that inclusive practice is a part of all school environments. School librarians need to ensure that inclusionary practices are part of their library programs, and that library services are equitable for all students. The School Library Guidelines of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) "envision a world of inclusion, equity of opportunity and social justice." (2015, p. 13)

Although many school librarians worldwide follow the IFLA guidelines by providing inclusive practices in their libraries, there are few studies examining inclusive library programming, or programming serving students who are both typically-able and differently-able students. The case study described in this paper examined inclusive programming conducted with adolescent students in a middle school library (Grades 6 – 8) in the United States. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How does inclusive library programming impact the value that students with special needs place on literacy?
2. What are the ways in which typically- and differently able students respond to inclusive library programming?
3. What are the ways in which inclusive library programming affects the overall school culture?

Background and Statement of Need

Pioneers in library accessibility research, Drs. Linda Lucas Walling and Marilyn Karrenbrock (Stauffer) assert, "If libraries and media specialists serve children and young adults who are disabled without recognizing what they give us in return, we devalue them. We fail to see their abilities and their potential, and we fail to help them use their abilities and achieve their potential. When we see a child with a disability realistically, we discover a person who can enrich our lives and society at large." (1993, p. xv). During the 1980's and early 1990's, Lucas Walling and Karrenbrock (Stauffer) continued to bring attention to library accessibility issues and the need for librarians to provide equitable access through inclusionary library programming and resources. In 1985, President Reagan's Committee on the Employment of the Handicapped honored the first edition of their book, *The Disabled Child in the Library: Moving into the Mainstream,* which was published in 1983. The second edition of the text, *Disabilities, Children, and Libraries: Mainstreaming Services in Public Libraries and School Library Media Centers* was published in 1993. Walling's and Karrenbrock's influential body of work was followed by Wesson and Keefe's 1995 publication, *Serving Special Needs Students in the School Library Media Center*.

The need for inclusionary practices in libraries is addressed in school library guidelines and standards from around the world. For example, the IFLA School Library Guidelines assert in Standard 5.2: Program and Activities that a quality school library program "contributes to the social goals of a school such as student engagement, inclusion of diverse learners, and relationships with the broader community." (2015, p. 38) In addition, the *American Association of School Library (AASL) Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* (2007) state, "School libraries provide equitable physical and intellectual access to the resources and tools required for learning in a warm, stimulating, and safe environment." (p.13). Another division of the American Library Association (ALA), the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) addresses equitable access for library patrons in its document, *YALSA Competencies for Librarians Serving Youth*. For example, Area Two – Knowledge of the Client Group states that "[the] librarian will be able to identify and meet the needs of patrons with special needs." (2010, p. 3) Finally, in its *Standards of Practice for School Library Learning Commons in Canada* (2014), the Canadian School Library Association affirms the importance of "ensuring accessibility for all" (p. 19).

Even though these library standards, and others throughout the world, advocate for the equity of access in schools and libraries, barriers to equitable access persist. An examination of three decades of literature in the field reveals some issues that need to be resolved when it comes to the disparity in library services for students who are differently-able. Listed below are three of the most frequently cited concerns:
- Financial and other resource limitations (including perceived limitations),
- Lack of awareness regarding the existence and impact of inaccessibility, and
- Insufficient preservice and continuing education.

Fortunately, research in the field has already led to efforts to address issues related to inclusionary library practices. For example, Project **ENABLE** (Expanding Non-discriminatory Access By Librarians Everywhere) was created in response to the findings of a study funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). This three-phase study was conducted from 2006-2009 by a team of researchers at Syracuse University's Center for Digital Literacy (CDL). Project **ENABLE** provides free training, designed specifically for public, academic or school librarians worldwide, to help them gain the knowledge and skills needed to create inclusive and accessible libraries that meet

the needs of all students. The Project's study found that school librarians rated their services to students with disabilities lowest on all surveys. None of the school librarians surveyed reported providing separate instruction to students with individualized education programs (IEPs). Data from the study further revealed that the majority of school librarians in the study felt that their knowledge regarding special education was inadequate. (Myhill, Hill, Link, Small, & Bunch, 2012)

An additional study by Farmer (2009) determined that it is important for school librarians and Special Education (SPED) teachers to collaborate regarding the best resources and services for students with special needs. More recently, Subramaniam, Oxley, & Kodama's study documented the value of providing school librarians with pre-service and in-service training for working with students with disabilities in special education and non-special education schools(2013) One of the recommendations of the researchers was that library and information science programs provide information about SPED services in their courses for pre-service school librarians.

Methodology and Analysis

The setting for this case study was a rural middle school in South Carolina in the United States. The study took place from April through June of 2015. The researchers visited the school four different times, with sessions ranging from 1 – 1.5 hours each. This included one classroom visit, four sessions in the library, as well as time spent conducting interviews with students and faculty. Multiple data sources were used in this study. Data were collected during each of the school visits. Qualitative data were collected from the following sources:
- Field notes and recordings obtained from observations during the classroom and library sessions
- Semi-structured interviews with the following:
  - Typically-able students
  - Classroom teacher
  - Classroom assistant
  - Librarian
  - Principal
- Photos taken during the sessions
- School district documents

Each researcher took detailed field notes while they observed the students in their classroom and during the library sessions. Audio recordings and photographs were also taken during the sessions to provide additional context. The researchers observed the behaviors and interactions of the typically-able students and their differently-able peers. The observations, recordings, and photographs provided insight regarding the ways both sets of adolescents responded to inclusive library practices.

Because the differently-able students' verbal skills were limited, the researchers were unable to formally interview them for this study. Instead, they had informal conversations with the students during the visits, during which there were verbal and non-verbal modes of communication. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with other members of the school population to gain insight into their experiences with the differently-able students. The interview questions were probe-based to help maintain the focus of the discussion. The researchers took detailed notes during the interviews with Ms. Salley the librarian, Ms. West, the classroom teacher, and Mr. Paul, an assistant in Ms. West's classroom. (Pseudonyms are used for all of the participants in this study.) The final set of interviews was conducted with typically-able students, and Ms. Jenkins, the principal of the school. The typically-able students were selected by Ms. Salley and Ms. West, since they frequently took part in the inclusive library sessions, as well as other school events. The authentic conversations conducted during the study allowed the researchers to further examine the participants' behaviors and the effect of inclusive library practices, through the eyes of a variety of members of the school community.

In order to analyze the study's data, the researchers read and re-read the field notes and transcripts from the interviews. They independently took notes and coded the data until patterns and themes emerged. The researchers discussed and documented the themes and their frequency, until eventually reaching a consensus on what to include in the findings.

Findings

The findings from this study are based on the interviews and observations conducted during the four sessions. The inclusive practices used by the librarian during each library programming session included the following:

- Scaffolding techniques, such as student questioning and discussion, context clues, and summarizing strategies,
- Reading aloud from picture books,
- Showing the students storybook plush characters,
- Using visual aids such as videos, posters, and flags,
- Using auditory skills when the students listened to, and sang along with, music.

Another inclusive practice that the librarian used pertains to the classification system used in the library. Rather than labeling the picture books that she uses with the students as "E" or "Easy" books, typically used for younger readers, Ms. Salley uses "QR" for "Quick Read."

The themes that emerged from the data analysis are:

- The Library as a Welcoming Facility
- Differentiated Instruction
- Teaching Acceptance
- Skills Development

The findings based on these themes are presented below, along with references to best practices that were observed during the study.

The Library as a Welcoming Facility

A predominant theme throughout the study was that the library was an open and welcoming facility that served as a hub of the school. The library environment was cheerful with flags hanging alongside school trophies, gnomes and other statues, a hornet nest, and plants. At the beginning of each library session, Ms. Salley used a picture book to tell a story, followed by an interactive literary activity. Every session ended with the students singing and dancing to their favorite songs. After every class ended, the students selected books to take back to their classroom. When discussing the students time in the library, Mr. Paul, the teaching assistant, said "They know that if they work on learning and reading, Ms. Salley will give them books they'll love and enjoy."

Ms. Salley created a welcoming library environment by honoring the students' individual needs. Mr. Paul commented, "Even the students who were unable to speak were given a 'voice' through their physical actions." For example, when one of the students participated in an animal matching game using the white board, he was unable to say "owl." Ms. Salley pointed to the owl, and she asked the other students to say its name to help the student. Then, when he could not physically move the stylus to make the match, she held his hand to help him guide the stylus to the owl.

Ms. Salley also made every effort to have typically-able students interact with the differently-able students in the library. When they were in the library at the same time, Ms. Salley invited the typically-able students to join the dancing that was held at the end of every library class for the

differently-able students.   Several of the typically-able kids felt so welcome that they began asking their teachers if they could come to the library to be a part of the classes with the differently-able students each week. Ms. West, the teacher of the differently-able students, stated, "Ms. Salley makes it easy for people who don't know them to come in and not be intimidated by them." She also stated, "Salley opened a door to change at our school."

Differentiated Instruction

Another theme that emerged from the data was that Ms. Salley provided differentiated instruction for each student. Rather than creating a one-size-fits-all program, Ms. Salley honored the specific needs and interests of individual students. For example, after she read *Never Smile at a Monkey: And 17 Other Important Things to Remember* (Jenkins, 2009), she asked each student to point to their favorite animal in the book. Also, when the students participated in dance time, they were allowed to pick their favorite songs. Every effort was made to play a favorite song for the students, with all of them joining together to sing while they danced. Ms. Salley found out from one student's sister that he liked Lady Gaga so she played *Edge of Glory* for him each week (Germanotta, Garibay, & Blair, 2011).

Teaching Acceptance

A third theme that appeared throughout the data was that the library was an inclusive space where individuals are taught to accept and embrace differences. For example, Ms. Salley invited the entire school community to get to know Ms. West's students and to recognize them for their abilities, not their disabilities. As Ms. West said about her students, "A lot of teachers and staff who don't normally see the kids have gotten to know them through the library – they stop in to see the dancing. They wouldn't know the kids if it weren't for the library program."

Ms. Salley also had the students include everyone in the library activities. For example, Robert was limited to his wheelchair during dance time, but his classmates would swing his arms and roll his wheelchair back and forth so that he could be a part of the dancing activities. They also carried books over to him and shared them when it was time to check them out. As Nathan, a student with one of the highest intellectual abilities pointed out, "We are all different, but different in a good way."

Impact

The typically-able students in this study developed a variety of skills as a result of their participation in the library programs. Some of these skills appeared to be a result of best practices conducted by Ms. Salley. For example, the students were able to make personal connections to the readings because Ms. Salley used the reading strategies of "text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world."   An example is when she read a story about Martin Luther King to the class and she showed a picture of the civil rights leader at the Lincoln Memorial. When she asked the students where Dr. King was in the picture, one of the students replied, "Washington, D.C.", since he had recently traveled there.

Another strategy Ms. Salley frequently used was to define and repeat new vocabulary, as well as the characters' names in the stories. In addition, she often paused to question the students about the text in the stories she was reading. This helped to engage the readers as active listeners, and it allowed Ms. Salley to check their reading comprehension before reading further.   In their classroom, it was apparent to Ms. West and Mr. Paul that the students were showing significant improvements, due to their time in the library. For example, Ms. West reported that she observed a "strengthening of their ability to focus during read-alouds, (and an) increase in listening comprehension." She also stated that, "The skills in listening and thinking that Ms. Salley would always encourage in the students led to me being able to ask for more higher level thinking in the classroom." Similarly, Mr. Paul said that some of the students were speaking more in class "as a result of library instruction and interacting with older students."

The principal, Ms. Jenkins also noted the impact of the school library programming on the differently-able students. She described the "skills that developed" and the fact that literacy skills were developed when Ms. Salley and Ms. West replicated activities and read-alouds in the students' library and classroom settings. She also said, "One thing they get in the library is information on their level. Informational text is read to them and Ms. Salley makes sure they understand it." She gave the example of a Black History month lesson, when Ms. Salley made sure that the students knew Dr. Martin Luther King's name by the end of the lesson.

Another impact of the inclusive school library programming was that it extended beyond the library walls. For example, the friendships that developed in the library between the typically-able and differently-able students were apparent throughout the school. The principal, Mrs. Jenkins noted, "There is lots of love for these children school wide – everyone knows them." Mr. Paul added, "They walk around the school and the other students know them by name and high-five them." Ms. West felt that these inclusive relationships were a result of Ms. Salley's efforts to establish an inclusive community at the school. She said that Ms. Salley "helped push me into getting the children into other parts of the school culture."

One example of how inclusive the entire school environment had become occurred when one of the male students was invited to be a member of the school's basketball team. As several of the students and faculty members reported, the student shot the winning goal in an extremely close game and the fans from both teams "went wild." This student was also elected the "Most Valuable Athlete" at the school, an honor previously awarded only to typically-able students. Another example of school-wide inclusiveness is that three of the differently-able students were invited to go on a science field trip with a class of typically-able students.

The typically-able students were also significantly impacted by their experiences with inclusive library programming. They came to realize that "[A] person is so much more than the name of a diagnosis on a chart." As one of the students said, "Interacting with the students makes me happy. When you do stuff with them and they say, "'Yay!', it makes you feel good." Another student noted how "inspiring" it was to be around the students in Ms. West's class. Finally, a third student commented that she was "no longer afraid to be around people who are not just like me."

It is apparent from this study's findings that Ms. Salley created an inclusionary culture that promoted the acceptance of individual differences in her school library and the greater school community. This is something that all school librarians should strive for – developing an inclusive school environment where all students can learn, and that helps students and faculty recognize that all students bring gifts and strengths to our libraries, classrooms, and beyond.

Conclusion

Since many school librarians have indicated that they do not feel prepared to deal with practices related to special education, they need to learn about best practices for developing accessible and inclusive library programs. Few studies exist that investigate inclusive school library programming or issues related to equitable access and services in libraries; therefore, this study helps to fill a critical gap in the literature. Results from this study provide librarians with the opportunity to learn about the benefits of inclusive library programming. In addition, it offers librarians ideas for how to develop effective inclusionary strategies for their own libraries. Learning about a model school library program that implements and demonstrates effective inclusionary practices is an important way to ensure "a world of inclusion, equity of opportunity and social justice." (2015, p. 13) How can phenomena and realities be studied accurately if they are not studied from the lived experiences of the individuals for whom they have a direct impact? (Copeland, 2012)

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