Reaching All Learners: Understanding and Leveraging Points of Intersection for School Librarians and Special Education Teachers

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Abstract

This study investigated the information-seeking practices and interactions of school librarians and special education teachers to better understand how they support the learning of students with disabilities. The work of school librarians and special education teachers may appear divergent; however, as professionals in a rapidly changing educational environment, they share the need for resources in a variety of formats. In-depth interviews were conducted with six school librarians and six special education teachers representing a wide range of backgrounds and years of experience. Both groups expressed an increased need to learn more about accessing and using a wider range of multimodal resources and adaptive technologies. They also acknowledged the influence of the growing population of students with disabilities and the shift in PreK–12 public schools to more inclusive educational practices. Understanding the dynamics of their information-seeking behaviors may lead to additional entry points to use in helping all educators refine their information-seeking practices.

Introduction

In an inclusive or blended classroom, students with physical, cognitive, and emotional disabilities often are in a coteaching environment rather than in separate special education classes. An inclusion teacher will work alongside the classroom teacher to provide individualized support to students with a disability. In another possible scenario, consultant teachers share their expertise and knowledge with classroom teachers to help them meet the needs of the students. These models represent a shift from the self-contained special education classroom as the sole setting for learning and teaching for students with disabilities. Inclusion is the belief that the stakeholders of the learning community have "a responsibility of educating all students so that they can reach their full potential" (Friend 2011, 21). Inclusive education practices are becoming more widespread in PreK–12 education.

About 12 percent of the school-age population, or more than 5.7 million students between the ages of three and twenty-one, have a disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Advocacy, legislation, and litigation brought about major changes in how students with disabilities are educated. One result of these influences is the legal right of students to be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE). While this is often understood to mean the general education classroom, there is no one arrangement appropriate for every student.

One result of changing student demographics is that teachers are entering the field of education with elementary or secondary certification as well as literacy or special education certification. While these teachers may be well prepared academically, challenges in finding instructional materials still exist. For instance, in several recent studies educators shared that they are regularly frustrated when seeking the resources and materials required to adapt and modify science activities to support the needs of a variety of students (Hanson and Carlson 2005; Harris Interactive 2011; Hoffman and Mardis 2008; Perrault 2007). Teachers try to find a range of resources—visual, auditory, and interactive—that they can use in their instructional planning and teaching. However, many report that they did not know where to start looking for resources or what alternatives are available in adapting lessons and activities to meet all students' interests and abilities.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate how school librarians and special education teachers access, evaluate, and use resources that support their work with students with disabilities. The study participants were New York State school librarians and special education teachers.

Literature Review

Changing Landscapes for Teachers

Inclusive education is on the rise and with a "greater percentage of special education students receiving services within the general education classroom, the roles of general and special education teachers have undergone significant changes" (Arthaud et al. 2007, 1). Special education legislation, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), specifically speaks to the necessity of special education teachers to forge partnerships with general education teachers to best support students with disabilities. Collaboration is the act of planning and working together, and "by itself, is a powerful professional development tool" (Brownell et al. 2006, 169). Collaboration with peers is widely viewed as a means to gain additional expertise and as an important form of professional development (Brownell et al. 2006; Klinger 2004; Klinger et al. 1999; Rogers and Babinski 2002; Santoli et al. 2008). Educators increasingly report an ongoing need for professional development related to inclusion activities (Burke and Sutherland 2004; Kuester 2000), and they view collaboration as a key component in helping support the learning of students with disabilities (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin 1995). Collaboration occurs between two or more or individuals but does not typically happen by chance; it is considered more a process than a product. Ultimately, collaboration should result in a better outcome for students and embody the idea that through working together we accomplish more.

Today's education professionals deem some skills and dispositions essential for successful participation in collaborations—for example, thoughtfulness, knowledge, compassion, and leadership. The educational literature suggests reflective consideration of these traits may reveal areas for self-improvement and, in turn, lead to stronger collaborations (Eccleston 2010).

School Librarians and Special Education Teachers
Supplementing an extensive body of research on collaborative practices between general education and special education teachers is the research addressing the dynamics of collaborations between school librarians and general education teachers (Monticel-Overall 2005; Oberg 2009). However, there is limited discussion about how school librarians and special education teachers actually collaborate despite the fact that they have some similar aspects of their roles and responsibilities (Smith Canter et al. 2011). For example, both groups must interact with a diverse network of colleagues to support the learning of all students. Purposeful collaborations with peers will allow them to reach the full potential of their respective roles. The work of both school librarians and special education teachers offers a mix of instructional, administrative, and supervisory responsibilities different from that of general education teachers. For example, it is not unusual for special education teachers to supervise paraprofessionals and serve as a liaison for their staff to administrators (Eccleston 2010). Similarly, school librarians supervise library staff, frequently interface with administrators, and regularly collect and use data to support student learning.

In addition to some similarities in the respective responsibilities of school librarians and special education teachers, it is interesting to note the shared themes in the professional standards and dispositions of their professions (Smith Canter et al. 2011). Anderson Downing (2006) addressed these shared attributes and dispositions when she called for more collaborative relationship between school librarians and special education teachers for the sake of the students. She noted that each group brings specific strengths and expertise to the table that benefits one another, the general education teachers, and most importantly, the students.

Murray (2002), who has studied the relationship between school librarians and special education teachers for several years, also noted that although good practices exists to support the learning of students with disabilities, more could possibly be achieved through enhanced communication and cooperation between school librarians and special education teachers.

Recently, the question of whether school libraries and school librarians "provide adequate services and resources to students with disabilities" was posed to New York State school librarians in a study by Small, Snyder, and Parker (2009). In this large-scale study with more than 1,600 respondents, the researchers stated that school librarians report addressing individual student learning abilities, needs and styles; Individualized Education Programs (IEPs); and selecting materials that feature individuals with disabilities when planning, implementing, and modifying library programs and services, they also indicate less attention to adequately physical accessibility and access to assistive technologies for students with disabilities (Small, Snyder, and Parker 2009, 12).

Notably, in all three phases of the Small et al. (2010)studies, the librarians reported that they "lacked the knowledge and skills to provide adequate services and resources to special-needs students" (19). Teachers should have access to a variety of current and reliable special education

resources that they can integrate into their teaching and learning practices and thereby create authentic learning experiences.

The role of appropriate resources and the importance of access to them are noted extensively throughout the teacher education literature. Teachers' access to resources, including the ease of access and the scarcity of resources, is one reported influence on attrition (Ball and Cohen 1999; Clark and Yinger 1979; Moore and Hanley 1982). The recognition of the importance of a range of resources for teaching and learning activities, coupled with the constraints of time, is cited as a potential driver for collaboration between colleagues (Eccleston 2010; Sardo-Brown 1990). Effective collaboration requires sharing resources (Carter et al. 2009; Friend 2011). By sharing resources, "everyone engaged in the collaboration shares ownership for the activity or intervention" (Friend 2011, 101). Sharing resources during a collaborative effort also may help develop the members' professional knowledge.

Collaboration offers educators an avenue to "working smarter" when time is at a premium; it comes from "new strategies for coordinating, integrating, and redeploying resources" (Adelman and Taylor 1998, 58). Although a school librarian rarely participates in discussion about a school-based team approach to coordinating resources for students with disabilities, his or her expertise in accessing and evaluating information may be a valuable addition. For example, when a resource map is created and includes links to additional resources in the community at a local, state, and national level, the librarian's information-seeking skills may come into play.

Method

A grounded theory approach was used as a strategy for investigating the information-seeking practices of school librarians and special education teachers. In-depth, semistructured interviews were conducted with six school librarians and six special education teachers in western New York State. A purposeful sampling approach was taken to recruit participants who represented a range of backgrounds and years of experience, although not by gender as all participants were female. The participants were a mix of early, mid-, and late-career individuals and varied in grade levels and types of schools. The breakdown is as follows:

School Librarians
- 20+ years experience in a large urban high school
- 30+ years experience in a large urban high school
- 5–7 year experience range in a suburban middle school
- 10–15 years experience range in an urban elementary school
- 2–4 years experience range in a suburban middle school
- 5–7 years experience range in a rural high school

Special Education Teachers
- 20+ years experience in a suburban elementary school
- 2–4 years experience range in a suburban middle school
- 10–15 years experience range in a rural middle school
- 5–7 years experience range in a suburban high school
- 5–7 years experience in a large urban high school
- 20+ years experience in a mid-size urban high school

Participant interviews were conducted either in-person or by phone, and field notes were taken for each encounter. The interviews typically lasted about 30–45 minutes and were digitally recorded with the permission of the participants. A constant comparative method was used, and interview transcripts, field notes, and memos were analyzed as they were completed.

Questions asked of school librarians included the following:

- Would you talk about how you work with students with disabilities in the library media center?
- How familiar are you with the characteristics of the different disabilities of your students? Do you have a need to learn more about the different disabilities?
- What resources do you currently turn to, or might you turn to, if you wanted to learning more about disabilities or inclusion strategies?
- How often, and in what ways, do you partner with special education teachers in your school?
- Are there environmental influences that either enhance or restrict your ability to collaborate with the special education teachers?
- Are assistive or adaptive technologies available to you and your students? How would you rate your comfort level in using assistive and adaptive technologies?
- Do you use resources from the public library in your work with students? Do you refer classroom teachers to the public library?
- Where do you typically turn for professional development?

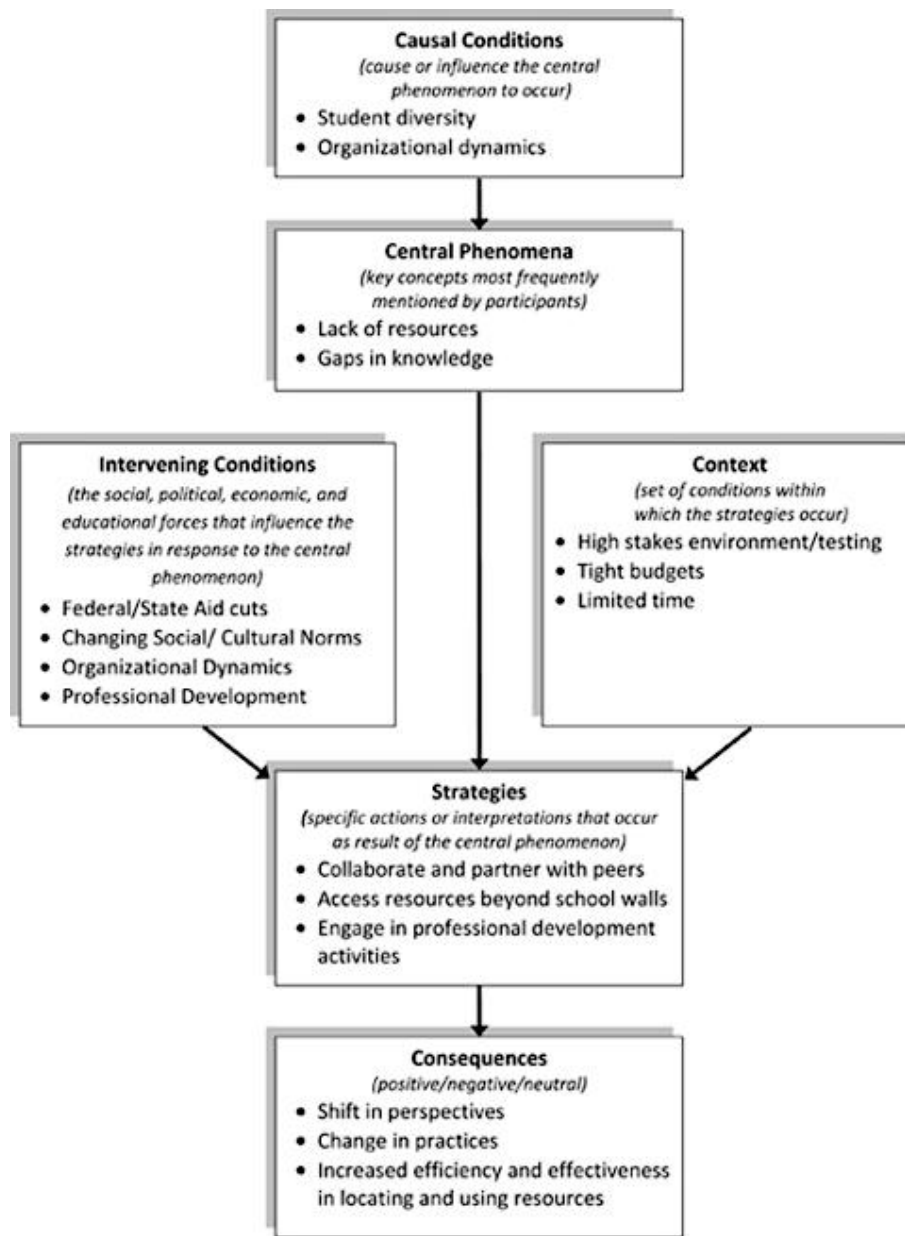Questions of special education teachers include the following:

- Do your students go to the library media center? If so, for what purposes?
- Do you or your students use the databases available from the library?
- How often, and in what ways, do you partner with the school librarian?
- Do you feel the library media center is accessible to all users? Why or why not?
- Are there environmental influences that either enhance or restrict your ability to collaborate with the school librarian?
- Do you use resources from the public library in your work with students?
- What resources do you currently turn to, or might you turn to, to learn about teaching and learning strategies to meet the needs of students with disabilities?
- What resources might you use if you want to learn more about assistive technology?
- Do you or your students with disabilities use multimodal resources?
- Are assistive or adaptive technologies available to you and your students? How would you rate your comfort level in using assistive and adaptive technologies?
- Where do you typically turn for professional development?

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection and data analysis are a simultaneous process when performing grounded theory research. Data are analyzed using a constant comparative method for themes or categories to make an interpretation or draw conclusions (Creswell 2009, 203). Open coding, the first step in the process, was first completed with the data. AtlasTi, a qualitative software tool, was used in the data analysis. The twelve interview transcriptions were carefully read and analyzed, and categories of information emerged from this process. Categories are units of information to be

analyzed that comprise events, happenings, and instances of phenomenon (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Axial coding of the data followed the opening coding process. This involved interrelating the categories and creating a visual model of the theoretical framework that emerged (see **Figure 1**). The visual theoretical model created for this study outlines the casual conditions, context, central phenomenon, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. The central phenomenon—the key concept most frequently identified by participants—was identified from the various categories of open coding. The database was then revisited, and additional analysis was completed to continue relating the categories of information to the central phenomenon category that was initially identified.

Figure 1. Points of Intersection for School Librarians and Special Education Teachers in Supporting the Learning of PreK–12 Students with Disabilities

Causal Conditions
(cause or influence the central phenomenon to occur)
- Student diversity
- Organizational dynamics

Central Phenomena
(key concepts most frequently mentioned by participants)
- Lack of resources
- Gaps in knowledge

Intervening Conditions
(the social, political, economic, and educational forces that influence the strategies in response to the central phenomenon)
- Federal/State Aid cuts
- Changing Social/ Cultural Norms
- Organizational Dynamics
- Professional Development

Context
(set of conditions within which the strategies occur)
- High stakes environment/testing
- Tight budgets
- Limited time

Strategies
(specific actions or interpretations that occur as result of the central phenomenon)
- Collaborate and partner with peers
- Access resources beyond school walls
- Engage in professional development activities

Consequences
(positive/negative/neutral)
- Shift in perspectives
- Change in practices
- Increased efficiency and effectiveness in locating and using resources

(Theoretical model draws from the work of Creswell 1998 and Strauss and Corbin 1990)

Research Design Limitations

There were several limitations of the research design that should be noted. First, the study examines perceptions and practices as reported by school librarians and special education teachers. As a result there is insufficient evidence to generalize across these two areas of education. Second, findings in a qualitative study may be subject to other interpretations. Future survey work and member checking may serve to triangulate and validate the accuracy of the findings.

Findings

This study of the information-seeking practices of school librarians and special education teachers found evidence of the need for shared information and resources. Both groups cited gaps in knowledge and lack of appropriate resources as detrimental to their work with students with disabilities.

The need for ongoing professional development that focuses on supporting students with disabilities emerged as a point of intersection for these two groups. Both groups repeatedly cited the challenges of keeping current in the best practices to support an ever-increasing diverse group of students as a significant area of concern. They specifically mentioned the challenge of keeping their knowledge base up-to-date and how important professional development is to them. Collaboration with other professionals and access to resources beyond the school walls were additional themes that emerged from this study.

Parallels

Special education teachers and school librarians spoke meaningfully and purposefully about their work with students with disabilities. The professionals were reflective in what they are doing to assist those students, but also were very aware of the challenges and influences they faced from multiple directions. Shared themes emerged in the comments by school librarians and the special education teachers in this study, including:

- The transitory nature of their positions and how they may be moved between schools and be assigned to multiple schools within a school year
- The sense that their work with students was strengthened though collaboration with colleagues in the school
- The continuous need for a wide range of multimodal resources to use in teaching and learning activities
- The supervisory, administrative, and management aspects of their positions.

The parallels that became evident in these two professional groups are reflective of the finding of other researchers in the area of need (Anderson Downing 2006; Smith et al. 2011).

Points of Intersection

The key concepts, or central phenomena, that were most frequently mentioned by both school librarians and special education teachers were lack of appropriate resources and gaps or lack of knowledge in three distinct areas: (1) characteristics of certain disabilities, (2) pedagogical

approaches to meet the needs of students with disabilities, and (3) how to access and use multimodal resources in the most efficient and effective ways. The shared need for more knowledge and more resources is a point of intersection in the work of these two groups supporting the learning of PreK–12 students with disabilities.

The other categories that emerged in the data analysis were then organized around this central theme to allow an understanding of the phenomenon in a form that could be tested against data later in the study. **Figure 1** is a theoretical model showing the results of the data analysis in a visual framework as proposed in grounded theory research by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

Understanding Characteristics of Certain Disabilities

An elementary school librarian stated that she would like to know more about different physical disabilities to offer different modalities in terms of resources. Several other school librarians mentioned that they rely on informal conversations with teachers or the personal aide if they had questions about that student's disability. Challenges may arise when the special education teacher or classroom aide is not in the library with the student. One librarian with many years of experience shared that "sometimes I know a kid has a disability because he has been in with a class in the library and I have worked with the class and just anecdotally picked up that there is something different about the way the kid is approaching the class. There is some sort of clue. I talk to the teacher and I say, 'what is this kid's disability and what do I need to know?'" This librarian then shared, "I offer students with disabilities different ways to approach what they need to do." To varying degrees, all the librarians mentioned speaking with the special education or general education teacher to learn more about a student. Some said it happened informally in the hall when they ran into the student's teacher; other participants spoke of tracking down the teacher for the information. Few participants mentioned reviewing the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) for a particular student with a disability.

An IEP is a document prepared by the multidisciplinary team that specifies a student's level of functioning and needs. It includes, among other things, the instructional goals and objectives and information regarding supplementary aids and services (Friend 2011). It is appropriate for school librarians—as professionals that potentially come in contact with a significant majority of students in the building—to review the IEPs of students they need to know more about. An IEP is a valuable tool for librarians to use in tailoring resources and services to meet the information needs of students in both the library and the classroom. However, reading and acting on a student's IEP does not yet seem to be a widespread practice by school librarians. Of the six librarians interviewed, three of them had previously read IEPs for students. One librarian said she only looks at IEPs "if it is a behavioral problem and I am trying to understand why this student can't hold it together in the library setting; otherwise it is a conversation with the teacher." Another librarian said, "I should know if a child has oppositional defiance disorder or is a hemophiliac so I can best address the situation if something happens in the library." Some librarians expressed either confusion about their access to the IEPs or were not aware that an IEP could help them understand more about a particular student's disability.

Interestingly, even the special education teachers interviewed for this study who typically participate in writing the IEPS of students expressed an ongoing need for access to more information about characteristics of various students' disabilities. In particular, several people mentioned researching aspects of autism spectrum disorder because they are working with an increasing numbers of students that are in the autism range. The ongoing need for both school

librarians and special education teachers to learn more about the specifics of their students' disabilities is another example of how their information needs intersect.

Potential Causes for Knowledge Gaps

School librarians and special education teachers both referred, in various ways, to two factors: the increasing number of students with disabilities in the schools and changing frameworks for supporting diverse learners. These two factors may be considered, in part, as the causal conditions for the lack of appropriate resources and gaps in knowledge.

Lack of preparation in their pre-service or graduate programs was cited by the school librarians and special education teachers as reasons for knowledge gaps, or lack of confidence, in their pedagogical practices in working with students with disabilities. One librarian, discussing her lack of preparation and background knowledge, stated, "I feel I could definitely make more use of best practices in dealing with students with special needs. I did not have any exposure in my graduate studies." Library and information studies graduate programs may wish to review course work to ensure it is preparing students to work with children and youth of all abilities. Specific content and learning experiences should foster an understanding in graduate students in how to best meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Pedagogical Approaches

Study participants pointed out knowledge gaps with respect of current characteristics of different disabilities and also concern with using a broad range of pedagogical approaches for some students with disabilities. The desire and commitment to help "students succeed" was expressed. Several participants said their schools approach was "every teacher a reading teacher." Literacy and reading comprehension were two areas frequently mentioned by school librarians and special education teachers where they struggled to find appropriate teaching strategies and resources for their students with special needs. One special education teacher shared that her biggest struggle is finding appropriate interesting materials that appeal to older students, but that is written at a lower level so they can read and understand it is an ongoing challenge. She stated "I tend to make all my own materials so if I find a lower level version of *Romeo and Juliet*, I'll make my own study guides and graphic organizers, or I will modify something that I have seen somewhere else so it is more accessible to my students."

Literacy activities and resources for students with disabilities definitely represent a point of interaction for school librarians and special education teachers, and they offer potential for purposeful collaborations.

Strategies

In response to the challenges identified, two strategies were voiced in the interviews that need to be undertaken by educators to better support students with disabilities. First, most school librarians and special interest students appeared to recognize that in this changing landscape, collaborations and partnerships with colleagues are imperative to their work. Second, both groups acknowledged that access to resources and information, often needed to support diverse learners, might exist beyond the walls of the library or school.

One special education teacher in a large 7–12 urban school spoke of accessing and using online resource for teachers:

"There is another website that I have used—more in the past, not recently—but it is called wetheteacher.com and it's a free website for teachers to use and share their materials. So if I have *To Kill a Mockingbird* materials and I upload it and you are teaching it and you search you can share my materials and read them. So I use the Internet a lot in finding resources."

These professionals recognize it is not just about increased use of online resources to help their students, but also finding resources for them though community agencies and public libraries. When asked about using the public library as a resource, a teacher at a large urban school replied,

"I do a lot with the public library—yes. Especially because my focus is history so I access the public library. They have a lot of local history resources and they have put them all online and you can access them from home.*"*
When this teacher asked about interacting with the public librarian, she replied,

"In the summer of 2009, I took a series of professional development courses and we went on a field trip every day. One of the days it was to the public library and they showed us how to access all of these electronic resource. The public librarian showed us what they had and how to use it. And ever since then, once I found out about it, I've used the resources a lot."

Another librarian termed herself "a frequent flyer" of her local library with regard to finding resources to support students with disabilities. When asked about drawing on community resources, one librarian noted that in the region she lived "we have a lot of agencies that are very willing to share their time and resources. And some of those agencies are actually in our union handbook, so I may call an agency and ask for advice or if they have materials they can share with me."

Participants shared that employing some of strategies had resulted in both anticipated and unanticipated consequences, ranging from a shift in perspectives to a change in actual practices to, at times, an increased efficiency and effectiveness in locating and using resources.

Discussion and Areas of Future Study

All students are unique, with particular strengths and areas of growth, but students with disabilities require different learning techniques and supports. A fundamental belief that underpins AASL's *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* is that equitable access is a key component for education, or more specifically stated, "All children deserve equitable access to books and reading, to information, and to information technology in an environment that is safe and conducive to learning" (AASL 2007, 2). All educators therefore strive to meet a professional responsibility to grow and refine key areas of knowledge, skills, and dispositions, particularly around changing curricula and pedagogical practices, technology, and advanced information-literacy skills. Each group of educators brings to the relationship specific professional domain strengths that have the potential to contribute to, and shape, the collaboration in a mutually constitutive fashion (Perrault 2010). This study offers evidence of untapped areas of common ground between school librarians and special educations teachers that offer fertile ground for richer interactions, which may lead to collaborations and exchanges of information and resources.

A possible implication for making the effort to broaden the network and build on the shared mission to support all students is highlighted in the following story by a high school librarian:

"I think it is so important that we support these kids…we are a family at our school. We have two or three students with disabilities in the top ten and I think they are there in part because of the excellence in teaching and they are there I think because of the support they got in the library. And they didn't get left hanging, and that is quite an accomplishment for them."

Initially, this study confined itself to interviewing school librarians and special education teachers. Using the emergent themes, a survey instrument will be developed and distributed to a wider range of educators, including administrators. A survey will offer the chance to validate the accuracy of these findings and further explore the identified phenomena. The rationale for this step is to extend the scope and depth of this underexamined area of research. In particular, exploring how school librarians work with special education and general classroom teachers in supporting the transition process of young adults with disabilities from high school to higher education or to the workplace may prove beneficial to many students.

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Cite This Article

Perrault, Anne Marie. 2011. "Reaching All Learners: Understanding and Leveraging Points of Intersection for School Librarians and Special Education Teachers", *School Library Research*. American Library Association. <**http://www.ala.org/aasl/aaslpubsandjournals/slmrb/slmrcontents/volume14/perrault**>

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