

Pre-kindergarten Students Are Coming, but Can School Librarians Serve Them? Examinations of Certifications and Standards in the United States

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Introduction

Early childhood learning environments and interactions matter mightily for young children's health and wellbeing across the lifespan (Garcia, Benhoff, Leaf, & Heckman, 2021). The importance of early learning has prompted discussions of policy, expansion of public pre-kindergarten (pre-K) (Friedman-Krauss, Barnett, Garver, Hodges, Weisenfeld et al., 2021), and escalation of public pre-K enrollment in the United States (U.S.) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Pre-K students are present in public schools throughout the U.S, but it is unclear whether school librarians currently have the leeway and/or necessary guidance to provide services to them.

Statement of the Research Problem

This paper uses a document analysis study (Bowen, 2009) to identify 1) whether school librarians across the US are certified to provide services to pre-K students and 2) whether standards provide guidance for how school librarians should be serving them.

Literature Review

High quality pre-K programs facilitate learning and promote relationships amongst children and teachers (National Association for the Education of Young Children, n.d.). Presently, one-third of 4-year-olds in the U.S. attend state-funded pre-K, but cost free access to pre-K is uneven across the U.S. (CityHealth and National Institute for Early Education Research, 2019). An initiative of the Biden administration is to make free preschool available to all 3- and 4-year-olds (White House, 2021).

School librarians connect classroom instruction with real-world, authentic, inquiry driven learning experiences that empower learners to think, create, share, and grow (AASL, 2016/2018a). Pre-K students learn important skills when they have opportunities to access the school library (SL) and interact with the school librarian (Cahill, 2004), but the regularity of SL service and access for pre-K students is unclear. The few studies exploring SL services for pre-K students are dated (Thomas & Cooper, 1995; Tullio, 2006), but recent SL circulation policy studies suggest limited access to SL resources for pre-K students (Bailey-White & Stewart, 2016; Reily, 2017).

AASL (2018b) *National school library standards for learners, school librarians, and school libraries* are ungraded and are meant to be applicable for learners of all ages and situations. Several states have either adopted AASL's standards outright or aligned their SL standards with them (e.g. Kentucky Department of Education, 2020; Maryland State Department of Education, 2019). Other states have created SL standards that diverge from AASL standards in structure and/or competencies (e.g. Mississippi Department of Education, 2020), and in some states a professional association has crafted SL standards, but the state department of education has not officially approved them (e.g. Massachusetts School Library Association, 2009). Several states also certify school librarians to practice at the pre-K-12 levels, thus creating a pathway for SL services to pre-K audiences.

The expansion of SL services to pre-K students has the potential to support their learning and growth. However, there is limited information about the services that school librarians should and do provide to pre-K students. This study attempts to provide some evidence to guide the field regarding service to this potentially growing population.

Methodology

For each state and DC, we a) examined school librarian certification with respect to pre-K students, b) identified whether the state had adopted SL standards, and c) determined whether the state had either approved standalone early childhood standards and/or included pre-K within the major academic standards (i.e. English Language Arts and Reading, Mathematics,

Science, and Social Studies). Finally, we reviewed each state's SL standards (if available) to determine whether they included guidance for serving pre-K students.

Findings

Populations for which school librarians are certified to serve are not clear cut in all states. With that in mind, 26 states appear to certify school librarians to serve pre-K students, while 24 states and DC seem to restrict service to grades K-12.

Currently, the level of guidance for school librarians' service to pre-K students varies considerably across the U.S. In three states, SL standards explicitly address what pre-K students should know and be able to do and academic and/or early childhood standards guide the integration of SL learning with classroom-based learning. In another seven states, SL standards offer some direction for what all learners should know and be able to do, and the academic and/or early childhood standards provide more explicit direction for weaving those competencies with other domains of learning when serving pre-K students. SL standards in the 40 remaining states and DC exclude pre-K; however, early childhood or academic standards provide some guidance in one-third of those.

Discussion

As our findings demonstrate, the issue of SL service to pre-K students in the US is murky and unbalanced. Only half the states certify school librarians to provide services and instruction for the grade level, and in only three states do they have both standards that explicitly address SL learning expectations for pre-K students and academic and/or early childhood standards that enable integration with other domains and facilitate collaboration with classroom teachers. Of particular concern is the lack of guidance provided to school librarians via standards in four states where they do have authority to serve pre-K students.

If school librarians and school library association leaders truly subscribe to the AASL (2019) vision, "Every school librarian is a leader; every learner has a school librarian" (p. 1), then they should advocate for policy changes that would enable school library services and programs for pre-K students in all schools. This project was focused exclusively on the United States context; yet pre-K education is on the rise worldwide (Blau, 2021). Examinations of school librarians' roles in pre-K education in other countries might yield information and descriptions that support future collaborative international work (Coelho, Astrom, Nesbitt, Sjoman, Farran, et al., 2021).

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Biographies

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