SCHOOL LIBRARIANS AND SPECIAL EDUCATORS WORKING TOGETHER 
TO IMPROVE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

by

Kelly A. McDaniel

An Abstract
of a research paper submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Library Science and Information Services
in the Department of Educational Leadership and Human Development
University of Central Missouri

August 2015
ABSTRACT

by

Kelly A. McDaniel

The research in this literature review will show how the school library impacts special education, how special education teachers and librarians work as a team to improve student achievement, and how a librarian supports special education. During the review of literature I searched educational databases and professional websites to gather information. In the end the literature review describes how a librarian and a special education teacher work together to improve the overall achievement of students.
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APPROVED:

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Student achievement is a highly discussed topic in schools. Teachers and schools are evaluated on how students perform on standardized tests. To improve student achievement, every adult within a school building needs to be involved in educating students. Librarians and special educators have unique roles within a school and are able to work with all students in a building on improving skills.

Students with special needs often need different types of instruction, because they are not always able to learn with general classroom instruction. A school librarian and special education teacher work together to make sure students have access to resources as well as a variety of instructional techniques to improve their overall achievement. The librarian and special educator have unique training, which allows them to be able to support classroom teachers to create lessons to improve the achievement of students with disabilities.

This research paper explores how librarians and special education teachers work together to understand special education, the roles of special educators and librarians working in collaboration to serve this population, how librarians work to support students with special needs, and the impact of the school librarian on special education students.

Statement of the Problem

With a change in how students and teachers are assessed, district administration are working and searching for ways to improve and increase the amount of time students are spent learning without putting all responsibility on the general education teacher. Librarians and special education teachers have the training and education to teach students skills needed to improve learning, therefore, leading to higher achievement in and out of the classroom.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to review literature to show how librarians and special education teachers impact student achievement. Special education teachers and librarians have been identified as skill teachers and have training and information to help students improve their learning, which will lead to higher achievement. The result of this study shows how librarians and special education teachers work together to understand special education, the roles of special educators and librarians working in collaboration to serve this population, how librarians work to support students with special needs, and the impact of the school librarian on special education students.

Research Questions

Research shows special education teachers and librarians impact student achievement, but the two working as a team can show greater improvement. The following questions guided this paper:

1. How does the school library impact special education?
2. What is the role of the special education teacher and librarian as a team to improve student achievement?
3. How does the librarian support special education?

Limitations

The limitations of this study include the lack of up-to-date literature, the number of peer-reviewed full text sources, and the amount of time to search for and to fully understand each source. When beginning the review of literature, the author of this research paper found a lack of variety in individuals who have researched the topic. Through more refined searching, additional information was located.
**Definition of Terms**

Achievement—improving knowledge and showing accomplishment

Differentiation—how instruction is delivered based on student needs

Disability—impairment that impacts learning

General education—a location where all students are educated using state standards

Special needs—person with a disability or impairment, which requires an alternative setting or curriculum

**Research Design**

The research in this study consisted of reviewing literature in peer-reviewed sources and published websites with factual information. The University of Central Missouri’s databases were used to acquire information needed to complete the review of literature. Databases used were *Academic Search Complete*, *ProQuest Central*, and the *Sears List of Subject Headings*. When searching the databases I started searching for the “benefits of librarians and special education teachers working together” and then expanded to “how librarians can help special education” and “how does a school librarian impact student achievement.” When searching *Sears List of Subject Headings* I searched for “student achievement”, “school libraries” and “librarians and special education.”

**Conclusion**

This research study includes 3 chapters on the benefits of special education teachers and librarians working together to improve the achievement of students. Chapter 2 explores different techniques and procedures that can be done to improve a students learning which will then help
with overall academic achievement. Chapter 3 offers answers to the research questions as well as a list of references.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

“Collaboration between the school librarian and the special education teachers helps establish a strong library media program that supports student achievement; yet establishing collaborative partnerships can be challenging” (Jones et al. 83). This is because librarians and special educators may not understand what the other does to improve student achievement; but collaborating improves that understanding (Jones et al. 83). The librarian and the special educator work together through the teaching and learning processes, which lead to the education and achievement of all children. Student achievement in all areas is improved by school staff who collaborate to understand the learning needs of special education. This research paper explores how librarians and special education teachers work together to understand special education, the roles of special educators and librarians working in collaboration to serve this population, how librarians work to support students with special needs, and the impact of the school librarian on special education students.

Special Education

Special education is designed to meet the needs of students who are unable to be successful with standard classroom instruction. In-depth planning and knowledge of disabilities are required of a special educator before preparing an individualized education program (IEP) for the student with special needs. This requires an understanding of the least restrictive environment (LRE) for learning, special education categories, and knowledge of the teachers’ responsibilities and abilities to best educate each child who has been identified as having special needs.

Students in special education have an individualized education program (IEP) designed to meet their specific learning needs. The IEP is a federal document that is written by a case manager who is a special education teacher. The case manager for each of these students is
required to provide a copy of the IEP to each teacher who educates that student. Every educator who works with a student with an IEP is required to follow the instructions in the document. An effective IEP is the cornerstone of special education. Many people are involved in the steps of an IEP creation, including the special educator, general educators, parents or guardians, and the local education authority (LEA) for decision-making to ensure students’ educational needs are met (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 16). Awareness of students with disabilities and knowing how to support and enhance their education is necessary for success. If every adult in the school had an understanding of the IEP and the student’s disabilities, this would help the student achieve at a higher level. School librarians have the benefit of being certified information specialists and trained educators with the ability to reach every student in the school environment. With the unique position a librarian has, awareness and knowledge of student disabilities and accommodations is needed to meet individualized student needs (Hill 1).

Special education teachers are required to write and follow the IEP to make sure individual students’ needs are met in the most appropriate setting. Federal law requires students to be taught in the least restrictive environment (LRE). "These requirements state that, to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities must be educated with children who do not have disabilities” (IDEA 12). The library is considered a general education setting where all students have equal access to materials and librarian assistance, which can greatly impact a student’s academic achievement. The library offers services, which meet each student's unique needs and learning style.

The United States Federal Government has defined thirteen categories of disabilities that qualify for students to have an IEP: specific learning disabilities; mild or moderate mental retardation, currently referred to as intellectual disability; emotional impairments; speech or
language impairment; hearing impairments; visual impairments, deaf-blindness; severe or profound intellectual disability; multiple impairments; orthopedic and neurological impairments; traumatic brain injury; autism and chronic illness; or other health impaired (Zambone and Jones 20). Each of these disabilities has a unique way of presenting itself in each student who has been identified; therefore, considerable work and planning will take place when preparing to teach a student with a disability. To educate a child takes many educators working and planning together to meet individual needs and assist each student to excel in his or her own way.

Special educators have a unique responsibility to teach students who have been identified in one or more of the thirteen disability areas and to follow the Individualized Education Program. The IEP states goals and objectives for each student to achieve within the school year, and special educators are charged with keeping data on the progress of that student for each goal. Special Education teachers are also required to make sure that each individual in the school who will be educating a student with an IEP is aware of the student and that student’s disability. “No matter what role you play in special education, there is always a need to be able to fully understand symptoms, causality, evaluation, diagnosis, prescription and remediation as well as communicating vital information to professionals, parents and students” (American Association of Special Education Professionals 9). If one educator does not meet the responsibility of following the IEP, it could be detrimental to the education and achievement of the student. It can also impact how other educators are able to work with the student.

The Roles of Special Educators and Librarians

Many types of educators work in a school, each with a specific role. A special educator’s and librarian's roles are different, but helping students learn and achieve is one job they have in common. Both special educators and librarians provide support for students and teachers by
offering curriculum support, teaching to improve student achievement, working with all students within a school, and working together by collaborating to meet student needs.

Librarians and special educators promote student learning by offering curriculum support in a student’s weak areas. All students need teachers within the school that they are comfortable with to help them understand classroom curriculum content. Because a special educator and a librarian both provide student support, are not core content experts, and do not grade student work, many students feel more comfortable expressing their confusion and getting help from one of these individuals.

Perrault found that special educators and librarians report gaps in knowledge and lack of resources that are detrimental to their teaching of students with disabilities (Perrault 3). Although a lack of knowledge and resources exists, special education teachers and librarians focus on teaching skills rather than content. Skills that special educators focus on could be similar to what the librarian might teach, such as leadership skills, group collaboration, productivity, research and information access, and other skills that help students master content in all areas.

Special educators and librarians encourage student achievement by providing motivating inquiry-based lessons and promoting student choice whenever possible. Inquiry-based lessons allow students to explore and investigate their own questions (Grueber and Whitin 42). Watt suggested it is discovery learning without a teacher’s guidance (Krueger and Stefanich 41). Special needs students may be overwhelmed because of issues with organization and require extra help, but inquiry is still a beneficial teaching method (Krueger and Stefanich 41). The impact of student choice on achievement is not a topic that has had in depth research, but has been discussed in teacher training.
The librarian and special education teacher may use differentiated instruction to improve achievement of individual students. Differentiated instruction has been found to be an effective instructional strategy to meet students at their level of learning and for students to be able to demonstrate knowledge in different ways (Anderson 50). With differentiation, learning is very personal for everyone involved, but each learner and experience can have commonalities. Therefore, it is important for teachers to have one lesson, but be able to adjust for individual needs and to show students they can meet each individual at their level of learning (Hattie 15-16).

A librarian has the role of teaching students 21st century skills and literacy skills, which will impact student achievement in all core content areas. The school librarian teaches many of the 21st century skills, so students learn how to engage through inquiry, use diverse sources and evaluate the information, and create new content in multiple formats using the new information and knowledge acquired (Kruger 41).

Librarians also teach literacy skills. This term has changed rapidly over the last few years; it formerly meant teaching a student to read and write. Literacy now includes an understanding of many of the new technologies, reading, writing, and how to use the skills for successful communication and academic achievement (Asselin 18). These are skills the students will use throughout life. The American Association of School Librarians has a program called Learning4Life and has determined ways librarians work to increase student achievement and narrow the achievement gap among students. “School librarians are in a key position to help guide students to make sense of new information in order to draw their own conclusions, create new knowledge, and share their knowledge with others in an increasingly global society” (American Association of School Librarians 1).
The knowledge and expertise the special educator and the librarian hold can work well together when trying to improve student achievement. The school librarian is a valued, respected, and influential teacher who works along with special educators to improve the learning environment for students with special needs (Jones et al. 66). As a team school librarians and teachers can work to make sure they have an understanding of the needs and abilities of the students and to ensure information is available and accessible to all students (Franklin 59). The school librarian is known for being a school leader and a strong communicator, who has the respect of teachers and administrators. As a recognized equal teaching partner and school leader, librarians have a positive effect on the school environment and student achievement (Haycock 3).

Librarians have the benefit of working with all students within a school building, so they have the responsibility to make sure library services meet the needs of each individual child. Understanding and knowing how to work with each child takes collaboration and time with the regular educators and the special educators. “Regardless of the views of a school system, school librarians have a responsibility to ensure that all students are educated appropriately” (Allen and Hughes-Hassell 57). Therefore, a librarian’s knowledge and skills of how to best meet the needs and learning styles of all students can help each one excel in learning and achievement (Allen and Hughes-Hassell 57). One way to know about student needs and learning styles is to work with the students and watch how they interact with adults and their peers throughout the school day. This is accomplished by working with the classroom teacher, special education teacher, and reading the IEPs to get information about students. When learning styles and needs have been determined, this information is taken into consideration when a librarian and teacher are making lesson plans for the library or a general education classroom. The lesson plans are designed to
meet the needs of students and their abilities and will be beneficial to higher achievement for all students.

Although librarians and special educators have different roles within a school, they both have the responsibility to collaborate to meet the needs of all students and to support teachers. Special educators and librarians find themselves working to support the learning needs of students with disabilities while working in an inclusive classroom setting and reducing the demands put on teachers preparing lessons (Downing 69). Collaboration takes place when discussing a student’s IEP or working together to create a curriculum lesson or unit for the classroom or library. Hill suggests that special education teachers collaborate with school librarians when writing the IEP to create goals on information literacy. General educators also rely on the expertise of the special educator and librarian to help meet the needs of individual students in learning the general education curriculum. Together the librarian and special educator work to make sure general education teachers have the knowledge and resources in the classroom to improve the achievement of students with or without disabilities. The establishment of a clear and easy-to-understand role for the librarian and guidelines on how the school library will meet students’ needs is essential for meeting the educational needs of students (Wisely 3). When everyone has a clear understanding of what types of collaboration the librarian is capable of, it will help the library and its programs function better in support of all students and their achievement, even those with special needs.

**How Librarians Support Students with Special Needs**

School librarians meet the needs of the diverse learning styles of the special needs students by finding ways to help with their lack of reading skills, writing skills, and organization. To teach students with disabilities, librarians create starter pages to help with lesson structure,
Librarians and Special Educators Working Together

ensure there is equal access to all material, offer small group instruction or project-based learning, and create lessons using universal design.

Winter suggests librarians use starter pages to help students with disabilities learning and paying attention while in the library. Starter pages are designed to give structure to the lesson or project being presented. These can be designed by the librarian and special educator working together to meet each student's learning ability (Winter 38). Starter pages can be designed with an online application and be prepared ahead of time, so students start working as soon as the lesson begins. This helps prevent confusion or frustration for the student and allows them to stay on task and meet assignment deadlines.

Librarians are required to offer students with special needs equal access to all materials and activities in the library. Students with disabilities will not have a positive experience in a library if they lack access to equipment or materials adapted to their learning needs. Occasionally behaviors caused by their disabilities impede their learning, or the learning of others, while in the library and this may restrict students’ activities in the library setting with their peers. Librarians work to make sure equitable physical and intellectual access is provided to all students and that tools are readily available for a stimulating and safe working environment (Perrault 6). The Americans with Disabilities Act prohibits discrimination of individuals with disabilities, so it is ensured the library is a place students with disabilities will have equal access to the same opportunities as their peers without disabilities while in the school library (Equal Access 1). A library program offers activities to support students with learning disabilities or low social functioning to meet the law’s requirements, support students at their level, promote growth, and help narrow the achievement gap.
Whole class instruction isn’t always the best way to teach students, especially students with IEPs. Some teachers, especially special education teachers, prefer small group or individualized instruction. One form of teaching is Project Based Learning (PBL) and many schools and teachers are choosing this way of teaching. PBL is another way for students to use inquiry-based learning as well as give students choices in how they learn content. PBL will take more time up front with preparation. Students will need to develop skills on how to search and investigate the answers to their questions; therefore, the librarian will play an important role in helping students understand how to find quality research. PBL allows students with disabilities to work with students without disabilities in a setting of equal access to a librarian, special education teacher, as well as a general education teacher. The librarian will work on research skills while the special educator will work on how to put the information into a quality presentation. The general education teacher will help with the understanding of the curriculum content.

Librarian Melanie Wilke refers to a PBL project students were assigned where they were required to meet with the school librarian to get approval of their information sources (39). She thought meeting with the students would take thirty minutes or less and was shocked that students did not have credible information or reliable sources (Wilke 39). Wilke realized that her class lesson and presentation on finding credible sources did not mean much to the students because they could not relate the topic to previous skills or knowledge (39). She found when they started working on research for a class assignment they were better able to relate to the information being presented. Therefore, Wilke decided to give each student an individualized lesson on locating credible sources. If a librarian has time to meet with each student individually, the students will be able to achieve at a higher rate and retain more knowledge (39). It is almost
impossible for librarians to give individualized instruction for all students, but small group instruction could be considered and will help the librarian work with the students to see who understands the instruction and who needs additional help.

“Universal design (UD) means that rather than designing your facility and services for the average user, you design them for people with a broad range of abilities, disabilities, and other characteristics—such as age, reading ability, learning style, language, culture, and others” (Equal Access 1). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides guidance for creating lessons that meet the needs of individual students. These lessons take individual needs into consideration from the very beginning of the planning stages, so designing lessons requires long-term considerations (Zhong 36). With UDL the school librarian and the special educator work together to make sure all necessary materials are available for student use. Universal Design principles can be presented in a variety of ways: equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive presentation of content, perceptible presentation for all students, tolerance for error, and a learning environment with appropriate size and space (Bender 26). With so many ways for schools, libraries, and teachers to meet the needs of students, they achieve at a much higher level than they have in the past (Blue and Pace 49). “Based on brain research on the recognition, strategic, and affective networks, UDL seeks to provide students with multiple ways to attain, engage, and express ideas and information” (Blue and Pace 51).

**Impact of the School Librarian on Special Education**

Certified school librarians have a positive impact on the achievement of special education students. They play an influential role in many aspects of student learning and teach skills to help student succeed outside of the school building (Young 30). A librarian’s impact within a school,
however, depends on how school administrators view the library program and if fellow educators view the librarian as an instructional partner.

Librarians are teachers and instructional partners within a school who are responsible for teaching students how to search, use, and document information sources. School librarians teach students how to organize, present, and share information using technology; how to maintain personal safety on the Internet; and how to ethically observe intellectual property rights (American Association of School Librarians 1). Research has shown that school librarians play a beneficial role while students are completing work at school and home, by helping students recognize interests and providing them with strategies and skills to study. Students have reported that school libraries have impacted them by helping them find information; stay organized, and find support to deal with personal and social concerns or issues (New York Comprehensive Center 10). Studies have found many benefits result from having a certified librarian to support students in achieving in and out of school; therefore, time for teachers, including the special education teacher, to plan and collaborate with the school librarian is important for student achievement (Franklin 59).

One way to promote the positive impact of a library program on special education is for administrators to see the role a certified, well-trained librarian plays in student achievement. District administrators across the United States will look within their school and ask themselves, especially in light of higher state standards, student assessments, and the No Child Left Behind legislation, how district educators and administrators can improve student achievement (Wisely 1). No Child Left Behind (NCLB) changed how districts look at students with disabilities, and now the federal government is working on an Elementary and Secondary Education Act which continues the standards set by NCLB (Elementary and Secondary Education Act). Districts have
always been accountable for the achievement of all students, but students with disabilities are in a subgroup in which standardized tests are examined more closely (Parker 1). Administrators want to make sure special education students are performing at a rate similar to their peers and to ensure that adequate yearly progress is being made (Parker 1). This puts a strain on every educator who is in contact with the students, including the librarian, to make sure they are setting high expectations for each and every student to be able to achieve at more than they have in previous years.

The librarian has knowledge in areas that could help the special educator and general educator. School librarians have knowledge about resources in different formats that teachers and students can use to enhance the curriculum. This allows special educators to match materials with individual student needs (Farmer 40). The librarian has the knowledge to collaborate and co-teach with general and special educators to reach all levels of students and improve learning. Together librarians and special education teachers create and find resources to help and challenge students in ways that were not possible before.

Conclusion

Student achievement is the focus and goal in a school. When students achieve at a high level and the achievement gap is decreased, it is better for everyone in the school and community. Students with special needs benefit from the collaboration of teachers to meet their specific learning styles and needs. When the school librarian and the special educator work together to create lesson plans and create tools for students and teachers to use, teachers focus more on student achievement and students concentrate on the lesson being presented.
CHAPTER 3
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Student achievement is important for students as well as a school district. Teachers work hard to make sure students get the curriculum content needed to be successful. A special education teacher and librarian also play a role in student achievement, but in a different way than a general education teacher. The literature reviewed in chapter 2 explores how librarians and special education teachers work together to understand special education, the roles of special educators and librarians working in collaboration to serve this population, how librarians work to support students with special needs, and the impact of the school librarian on special education students.

This research answers the three questions posed in chapter one. How does the school library impact special education? What is the role of the special education teacher and librarian as a team to improve student achievement? And how does the librarian support special education?

Library Impact on Special Education

The school library is a central learning space for all students within a school. The librarian and school library have opportunities to educate every student within a building. The school library is able to offer services to meet student needs at different levels. To accommodate the different learning levels and styles, federal law requires every library to have equal access to information and materials, so every student is able to use technology and get the information needed to be successful.

Librarians have the same responsibility as all educators to follow an individualized education program (IEP) and understand its contents. The IEP requires that all students with an IEP be educated in the least restrictive environment. The school library is considered a general
education setting and, therefore, is to be a least restrictive environment for students with an IEP. The library is able to foster lessons requiring inquiry based learning, which includes small group instruction and project based learning.

**Special Education Teachers and Librarians Improving Student Achievement**

Special education teachers and librarians have a different role than general education teachers within a school. Special education teachers and librarians have specialized training to teach students’ skills rather than content. Both special educators and librarians are able to meet the needs of all students and support classroom curriculum across all grades and content areas.

To improve student achievement special educators and librarians teach lessons which promote inquiry to allow for exploration of new material. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is another way to improve learning. A UDL lesson is designed with all students in mind and can be easily adapted to meet special needs.

**Librarians Supporting Special Education**

Librarians have the knowledge and skills to teach students how to use technology to search for information. Librarians also help students understand how to use the information learned at school and teach them the skills needed to apply it to situations out of the school building. Because students with disabilities all learn using different tools and different rates, librarians help special education teachers locate tools to meet the needs of the students’ different learning styles.

When a special educator and librarian are able to collaborate they are able to create lessons to meet students at their level of learning. Meeting students where they are in skill and ability helps them improve their academic achievement. The collaboration of educators within a
school building improve achievement of students with disabilities, because lessons are created to meet their diverse learning needs.

**Conclusion**

School libraries and librarians have a lot to offer to students to help them achieve at high levels. When librarians and special educators work together they create lessons that will challenge special education students as well as teach them skills to perform tasks some students never thought possible. Collaboration on student needs and lesson planning improves student performance and achievement.
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