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## Michigan Teachers Transitioning to School Librarianship

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# School Library Connection | Michigan Teachers Transitioning to School Librarianship

by Kafi Kumasi and Gwenn Marchesano, March 2021

Feature



Pursuing additional degrees and certifications can be a costly proposition in terms of money, time, and return on investment that results in gainful employment. In this article, we take a look at how a group of Michigan teachers perceive the value of the knowledge gained in a graduate certificate program towards school library certification compared to their prior knowledge and level of importance they assigned to the learning standards.

## Program Info

In 2018, Wayne State University associate professor Kafi Kumasi was granted a waiver by the Michigan Department of Education to permit WSU School of Information Sciences to offer a 15-credit hour experimental school library certificate program (ESLCP). This experimental program seeks to address the critical shortage in Michigan of certified school librarians by building an abbreviated pathway for teachers to earn the school library media endorsement outside of the traditional master of library and information science degree. This program features the same number of hours required to obtain other graduate certificates in the School of Information Sciences.

In recent years, the number of full-time certified librarians in Michigan has dropped sharply.

The experimental program is designed for Michigan classroom teachers who have an interest in becoming school librarians. Candidates must have a valid Michigan teacher's certificate to be recommended for school library media endorsement by the School of Information Sciences. In recent years, the number of full-time certified librarians in Michigan has dropped sharply. As Koby Levin reports, "only 8 percent of schools have a librarian today; the figure has declined roughly 73 percent since 2000. The number of people trained to be librarians has fallen sharply, too, so much so that librarians are on the state's 'critical shortage' list even as the number of available jobs shrinks" (2019). Since the inception of the ESLCP, enrollment in the master's level school library courses has been triple the numbers it had been in recent years. Currently, 30% of the students in the program are working in libraries in a librarian role, 60% are classroom teachers, and 10% are working as a library aide. One-third of the students are either already in a school library position or have a library position waiting for them upon completion of the program.

## Data Gathering

In June 2020, current ESLCP students were surveyed, as well as those who participated in the program in 2019. Some of the survey participants were pursuing the full master of library science degree, yet the majority were seeking the certificate only.

The survey employed a Likert scale to gauge students' perceived importance of a range of topics drawn from the Michigan Department of Education Standards for the Preparation of Teachers of Library Media. Next, participants rated their level of knowledge of topics before their participation in the program. Those who had completed the coursework also rated their level of knowledge of the topics after the program. This allowed us to see areas where students felt least knowledgeable, most confident, and areas where students gained most growth. All students also were asked about their intentions to complete the full master's degree; 75% said they intend to do so or would consider additional library coursework beyond the certificate.

## **Results**

We were surprised to see that the students identified all topics as important to learn. There was not much variance in importance, although Professional Development, Networking, and Library Management topics were chosen as marginally less important. The areas of Literature, Reading Promotion, and Respect for Diversity were rated more important. One possible explanation for the lack of variance is that the survey identified the topics as being drawn from the standards, and, given their background as certified teachers, the participants accept that all state-endorsed standards are of value. The results also show that knowledge of books and reading are considered more important than other aspects of the school librarian's role. This finding is not surprising given the popular conception that school librarians' sole responsibility relates to managing books and promoting reading, although the school library preparation curriculum and AASL's *National School Library Standards (2018)* recognize the roles of school librarians to involve other important areas such as: instructional collaborator, information specialist, and program manager to name a few.

Survey participants identified themselves as having the least amount of prior knowledge in the following areas: Collection Development, Networking, and Advocacy. After completing the program coursework, the participants reported that they had made the greatest gains in these same areas.

## **Lessons Learned**

In analyzing what made greatest difference in the students' self-reported growth areas of greatest growth, we reflected on various aspects of our program that correlate to the students' remarks and report on three overlapping areas: Advocacy, Networking, and Collection Development.

### *Advocacy*

Students participated in targeted learning experiences to increase their proficiency in advocacy. They heard from advocacy leaders, equipped themselves with statistics, summarized their understanding in infographics to target a stakeholder audience, and developed elevator speeches. As a result, students grew in their confidence to advocate for themselves and the value of the school library. Several students added comments in the survey that they were energized to speak up about the need for properly staffed school libraries in their districts. One student used her new-found confidence to reach out to an old acquaintance who is now serving in the Michigan legislature, while others shared their new learning through social media, as sample survey data illustrates below.

"I've been able to do a thorough collection analysis and have also been working on advocacy to support the media program in my district."

"The experimental program is an important option as we are working to reinstate certified positions."

"I am hoping to advocate in my district for an elementary school librarian, as they do currently employ them but only in our middle and high schools."

### *Networking*

Many of the students were unaware of the professional organizations and social media groups that can provide inspiration and support for school librarians. Targeted activities raised students' awareness, and many students found new networks that were a good fit for their needs as expressed in the following comments.

"I also appreciate the fact that the program allows us to develop a new network of colleagues through the group work and cohorts."

"The best part of the program is working closely with my mentor during the practicum (and

before). I have learned so much from her and her expertise."

While professional organizations and social media provide many opportunities for support, we wanted students to develop relationships with other Michigan school librarians. The school library program management course requires each student to identify a Michigan school librarian to support them through project-based learning experiences. Because many Michigan school districts do not have certified school librarians, it can be difficult for students to make these connections. This year, COVID-19 compounded the challenge by prohibiting site visits to public and school library buildings. The Michigan Association for Media in Education, the state's AASL affiliate, has a vibrant, willing membership that volunteers to serve as these informal course mentors. We match students with these professionals based on their interest level (elementary, middle, high school, K-8), and when possible, by geographical proximity. The relationships begin as a sounding board for questions, but by the end of the term, students have a Michigan school library professional they can reach out to in the future.

To give them even more connections, students listen to/watch interviews with Michigan school librarians serving in different types of settings (rural/urban), different grade levels, and at different stages in their career. Each interview provides advice and motivation for those just entering the profession.

### *Collection Development*

Emphasis on inclusive collections increased as a result of the students' ESLCP coursework. Namely, the instructional collaboration class was centered around students' designing collaborative lesson plans/units of study that center on an anchor text that has a clear connection to the theme of race, equity, and inclusion. In order to help students identify such texts, they were also assigned a multicultural children's and young adult book award presentation. This assignment covered over twenty book awards ranging from the more popular ALA-sponsored awards (e.g. Coretta Scott King and Pura Belpré) to a host of independent awards (e.g. Skipping Stones and Ezra Jack Keats) which allowed students to become familiar with a range of literature written by and about people from historically underrepresented backgrounds. In addition, students designed LibGuides to showcase their lessons that featured other multicultural library resources and antiracist readings such as opinion articles written by authors of color (see e.g. Stone 2020), and tools for teaching about diversity in the school library such as *School Library Journal's* Diversity and Cultural Literacy Toolkit (<https://www.slj.com/?detailStory=diversity-cultural-literacy-toolkit>), among others as reflected in the comments below:

"At the district level, our focus on inclusive/diverse collections increased because of the program."

"I have focused on purchasing high interest, multi-cultural books, diverse books, and books by diverse authors. I teach in a very diverse area and there were almost no books that represented characters like my students."

### **Conclusions**

One of the most promising attributes that these graduate students exhibited is agency. As the survey results indicated, students felt motivated and confident to advocate for the importance of professional library staffing in their school buildings and districts, where there has not been a professional school librarian. Students also felt more motivated and better equipped to immediately put their new knowledge to use by making improvements to collections and emphasizing diversity and inclusion. Although networking was an area they considered themselves weak in terms of prior knowledge, their coursework connected them with professional organizations and other Michigan certified librarians as informal mentors, so that they left the program equipped with a strong network of practicing school librarians to support them.

One of the limitations of this study is that only a portion of the survey respondents who had finished the required courses were able to report on the "knowledge gained" category since the others were still completing their coursework. Therefore, this data provides only a partial assessment of the students' overall experience in the ESLCP. However, by looking deeper into the results related to the prior knowledge section of the survey, we were able to make some general insights into where students see gaps on their perceived prior knowledge compared to the level of importance they assigned to a given topic.

Evidence suggests that the program is meeting a demand and interest for certified librarians in Michigan. The 2019 and 2020 cohorts will be surveyed again to ascertain their employment placement to glean their satisfaction with their work performance as part of the teacher preparation program accreditation process through CAEP.

## Final Thoughts

The adage says, "You don't know what you don't know," but these teachers did know what they didn't know. By participating in the program, they grew in confidence and self-agency. We are encouraged to see that, despite limited positions in Michigan, classroom teachers are still seeking to become school librarians. It's a common story to hear that students decide later in life that they want to be a school librarian when they grow up. Many of them express that after fifteen-to-twenty years in a classroom they are ready for a change, and they see the school library as a good fit. Several students feel their impact on student literacy can be expanded through the school librarian role. Others come from districts that have not had a library program and are looking to resurrect the program.

"I hope to obtain my certification while possibly working in a library media specialty position. My district has several openings that I have applied for and am waiting for interview information. I may be using the information gained in class immediately."

These graduate students are taking steps to determine their own future. They must advocate for their own positions, for more positions, and for diverse collections. This is a tough realization in an era of fiscal retrenchment and an already diminished workforce. But the mere fact that they entered the program, mostly with only classroom teaching experience, and have taken a risk that they will find a school library position are symbolic of personal and professional forward thinking.

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