Professional development for the library para educator: Developing a guide to answer questions about school libraries in the 21st century

Tifini Foglesong

University of Northern Iowa

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Abstract
The purpose of this project was to create a manual for new and existing library paraprofessionals as well as administrators who coordinate teacher librarian professional inservice days. This information will provide content for library paraprofessionals to understand both the procedures and principles of school libraries.

This open access graduate research paper is available at UNI ScholarWorks: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/2299
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR THE LIBRARY PARA EDUCATOR: DEVELOPING A GUIDE TO ANSWER QUESTIONS ABOUT SCHOOL LIBRARIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

A Graduate Research Project
Submitted to the
Division of School Library Studies
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by
Tifini Foglesong
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This Project by: Tifini Foglesong

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has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts.

Jean Donham

4/30/2012
Date Approved
Graduate Faculty Reader

Jill Uhlenberg

5/1/12
Date Approved
Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION ............................................................................ 1  
  Research Problem .......................................................................................... 1  
  Purpose ........................................................................................................... 3  
  Research Questions ........................................................................................ 3  
  Assumptions ................................................................................................... 3  

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................................ .4  
  Professional Development ............................................................................. 4  
  What is Needed? ........................................................................................... 6  
  Summary ........................................................................................................ 7  

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY ........................................................................... 9  
  Procedure ....................................................................................................... 9  
  Limitations ................................................................................................... 10  

CHAPTER 4. PROJECT ....................................................................................... 11  

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ................................. 12  
  Summary ...................................................................................................... 12  
  Adjustments ................................................................................................. 13  
  Conclusions .................................................................................................. 13  
  Recommendations ........................................................................................ 13  

REFERENCES ...................................................................................................... 15  

APPENDIX A: PUBLIC LIBRARY, PUBLIC SCHOOL AND COLLEGIATE LIBRARY ADDRESSES AND PHONE NUMBERS ................................................................. 16
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As duties and responsibilities of teacher librarians expand, the library paraprofessional is often left to handle day to day duties in the school library. For example, when technology is being updated, it is sometimes up to the individual paraprofessional to figure it out on his/her own. While teacher librarians are required to keep up credentials through training and professional development, the library paraprofessional’s need for continuous training is often overlooked.

Research Problem

School districts typically have regularly scheduled in-services for certified staff. Teachers in larger districts often meet by subject area or assignment to discuss issues that occur on the job, brainstorm classroom management ideas, and gain a deeper understanding of their profession. The in-services not only provide time for teachers to work with other teachers but it is a time that typically provides renewed energy and commitment to the profession. However, paraprofessionals have not had the benefit of such regularly scheduled professional development in this researcher’s school district.

In the district where this researcher is employed, a proposal for online training for paraprofessionals has been advanced. While the idea that paraprofessionals would receive training is a sign of progress, the proposed training is “generic” and in no way gives unique training to library paraprofessionals. For most paraprofessionals in a school setting, training on mandatory reporting or student management in recess settings may be adequate, but for a library paraprofessional, training needs to extend to more specific knowledge and skills required to be...
effective in a library setting. Library paraprofessionals may lack skills necessary to perform the
duties expected of them in the library. Perhaps more important are questions of policy and
principles unique to libraries. Questions like, “Why do we weed?” and “Why don’t
we purchase books from the Dollar Store because they are cheap?” need responses that help
paraprofessionals understand and support the values and principles of effective librarianship
according to American Association of School Librarians (2009) guidelines as defined in
Empowering Learners.

When a library paraprofessional has background knowledge that supports the
professional decisions made in a library, the teacher librarian and the paraprofessional may be
more able to work as a team. A report by The American Library Association states,

The issue of basic library education is more complex than that of general education. In
considering general education for paraprofessionals the content of that education or the
suitable delivery systems are not generally debated as they are with library education;
rather the appropriateness of an already established level of education and/or credential
from an existing educational system are discussed. (ALA, 2006.)

Paraprofessionals should have some background knowledge of library policy and rationale
as well as skill in using library automation systems. In some instances, paraprofessionals may
need basic skills in computer applications and front-line troubleshooting. The Bettendorf
Community School District Policy Code Number 410.4 states:

The Board may employ para educators or other instructional classified employees to
support licensed employees in non-teaching duties, including, but not limited to:
• performing other limited services to support teaching responsibilities when such
   responsibilities are determined and directed by the teacher and the job description
   responsibilities.
• attending to the physical needs of children; and
• managing and maintaining records, materials and equipment;

Para educators must have a minimum of 60 hours of college credit. The Board has the right
to waive that requirement for a hard-to-fill position. It shall be the responsibility of the
principal to supervise para educators.
This policy represents the typical failure of districts to give no consideration to specific assignments when hiring paraprofessionals. In this case, no specific training is required to become a library paraprofessional even though the duties are far different from those of a classroom paraprofessional.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to create a manual for new and existing library paraprofessionals as well as administrators who coordinate teacher librarian professional in-service days. This information will provide content for library paraprofessionals to understand both the procedures and principles of school libraries.

**Research Questions**

This project seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What types of information should library paraprofessionals be given so that the library professional values are embraced?
2. What procedural knowledge for library paraprofessionals should be included in a training handbook?

**Assumptions**

The researcher assumed that library paraprofessionals value professional development and seek to improve their knowledge and skills. It is also assumed that many paraprofessionals do not receive additional professional development for their specific duties in a school library.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this project was to examine what skills and knowledge library paraprofessionals require in order to understand the library profession and their role in carrying out a library program that meets the expectations of the school library profession as defined in *Empowering Learners* (AASL, 2009).

**Professional Development**

Very often staff development opportunities offered to paraprofessionals are not targeted to their specific needs (Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay & Stahl, 2001). In their study, researchers surveyed administrators, teachers, and paraprofessionals in the Midwest region of the United States on the competencies teachers who direct the work for paraprofessionals should possess. The purpose of this study was to determine if teachers themselves were in the best position to train the paraprofessionals that work alongside them and what knowledge teachers should have when training a paraprofessional. The administrators, teachers, and paraprofessionals in the study cited seven skills as important when supervising a paraprofessional. Those found to be the most important were communication with the paraprofessional, planning and scheduling, instructional support, modeling for the paraprofessional, management of the paraprofessional, and public relations.

When ranked, the importance of each category was different for each group. Paraprofessionals ranked training highest on their list of importance. In comparison, administrators ranked planning and scheduling at the top. Additionally, administrators ranked
communication with paraprofessionals and instructional support lowest. The researchers of this study suggested a need for a common understanding of the paraprofessional roles.

It was also found that administrators, school boards and teachers might not be aware of the changing roles of paraprofessionals and therefore not aware of needed training. When it came to these areas being demonstrated, both teachers and administrators felt that they were being demonstrated, but paraprofessionals were less positive. When teachers were asked why competencies may not be demonstrated, the reason was a lack of preparation time and/or need for training. It was suggested in this study that teachers needed a set of expectations and a clear job description of what paraprofessionals should be doing in order to assist with training. Additional communication with paraprofessionals and a needs assessment would also aide in possible professional development not only for those supervising the para but for the paraprofessionals themselves.

Brown, Dotson, and Yontz (2011) researched professional development for school librarians and the importance of having opportunities to attend conferences, webinars and belonging to organized professional organizations. They stated that school librarians should model being lifelong learners. Local and national listservs were used to disseminate the survey. Both qualitative and quantitative responses in a survey of seventy school library media specialist participants were used in the research. Researchers found a significant positive relationship between “job embedded professional development” with opportunity to “try new things” in the work environment (p. 58). The study also showed that those who participated in “one time” workshops were less motivated to try new things than those who were working with on-the-job professional development. It is possible that the same may hold true for library paraprofessionals who are working with students, books, technology, and everyday maintenance
of the school library. This study also found that successful professional development had two main elements, 1) a strong theoretical base, and 2) the expertise of those who could provide current information and methods in the profession.

**What Training is Needed?**

Granick, Moshoyannis, and Pickett, (1999) used surveys with random paraprofessionals and teachers in New York City schools as well as a focus group. After collecting information from surveys, three sets of questionnaires were created to further identify the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals. The researchers wanted to find what the training needs and roles of teachers supervising paraprofessionals were. In total, 495 paraprofessional and 241 teacher questionnaires were completed and returned.

From the survey, Granick et al. (1999) found a need to improve the ability for paraprofessionals to effectively contribute to their positions as well as increase and enhance opportunities and career development. The open-ended survey also showed concerns from teachers and paraprofessionals in the need for clarification of their roles and responsibilities. Both groups voiced their desire for time to meet and share information about student needs, goals and instructional strategies. Further findings from the survey revealed that paraprofessionals felt “thrown” into their positions and desired pre-service, on-going, and other professional development training. The ability to communicate well with colleagues, students, parents or other caregivers, an ability to work as an effective member of the instructional team, and an understanding of the distinctions in roles and responsibilities of professional and paraprofessional personnel were ranked highest of the common competencies paraprofessionals should possess.
In the second survey, Granick (2009) sought to determine what training or education paraprofessionals needed and what barriers might hinder these needs. This survey, using the same pool of participants found 79% of paraprofessionals learning about their job on their own or on the job (self-taught or observation). Sixty-seven percent indicated that they were taught by a supervisor while 40% said they were aided by another paraprofessional. Only 32% reported that there was a formal training for their specific position. When asked about the types of training they should receive, responding paraprofessionals sited in-service, on-site, regularly scheduled and specific to the job training. Of those surveyed, 64% of paraprofessionals said that they want training related to the work that they were performing in real work environment situations.

A study conducted by Ashbaker, Young and Morgan (2001) investigated the education and training of paraeducators and to learn how they viewed their role. A total of 159 paraprofessionals were surveyed at state and regional paraprofessional conferences in the United States, Canada and England. Paraprofessionals were questioned about their duties, areas of instruction and training received. Paraprofessionals were asked if they had received training, and while over 50% had obtained training, their answers ranged from short workshops to what they learn from their school district. The data collected showed that on average 39% of the paraprofessionals had not graduated from high school. Hence, the qualifications for hiring paraprofessionals may not always support the ALA stance for having highly qualified support staff in the library.

Summary

While the research was not specific to library paraprofessionals, the emerging theme was that paraprofessionals wanted and needed training specific to the duties that they perform on a
daily basis. Library paraprofessionals need professional development that is specific to their duties in a school library. General training on classroom management and procedures is basic information that all paraprofessionals should receive. However, because the duties for a library paraprofessional range from re-shelving books and weeding to book processing and technology use, there is a need for even more specialized training. The studies in this literature review also revealed that paraprofessionals not only want training, they want to know the expectations of their jobs as a paraprofessional. Administrators and teachers must also be given time to work with the paraprofessionals whom they supervise. While the literature lacks particular investigations of the library paraprofessional, the implications of the study by Granick et al. (2009) in particular indicated that paraprofessionals have expressed a desire for job-specific training. It is in response to this need that the project to develop a training guide for library paraprofessionals for the Bettendorf Community Schools was born. This guide will fill a gap in resources to help met the professional development needs evidenced in studies of paraprofessionals.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

School districts provide professional development for certified staff so that they learn new ways to succeed in the classroom. Para professionals receive minimal training that is limited to classroom management and school procedures. Library paraprofessionals perform more than routine duties in the school library yet the training for their positions is limited to what information they learn on the job.

The purpose of this project was to create a manual for library paraprofessionals to help clarify duties, explain reasoning behind procedures like weeding and confidentiality as well as provide basic explanations of school technologies. The manual was also intended to guide professional development in school districts so that library paraprofessionals receive additional training that will help build their knowledge of a school library.

Procedures

The researcher began the project by contacting the libraries at institutions listed in Appendix A, soliciting examples of handbooks that they use in their libraries. These were intended to serve as models for the research project. However, upon request, it was discovered that none of these libraries had staff handbooks to share with the researcher.

To find local and national standards and principles to inform paraprofessional training, the researcher used the following resources to collect position statements for paraprofessional training and professional development:

1. ALA (American Library Association): www.ala.org
2. AASL (American Association of School Librarians): www.ala.org/aasl
3. NEA (National Education Association): www.nea.org
4.  ISEA (Iowa State Education Association): www.isea.org

After information and data were collected, content was typed and prepared for review by teacher librarian Christine Iossi. Christine Iossi has been a teacher librarian for over 20 years in the Bettendorf School District. Taking suggestions into account, the researcher designed the format of the handbook, determining layout, graphics, and text features to create a manual that is easy to read and understand for both librarians and those who have not had formal library training.

This manual was placed in a pressboard binder and included a table of contents with these headings: Job Expectations, Confidentiality, Standards, Technology, Weeding, and Resources.

Limitations

Limitations included the lack of input from outside school districts and academic or public libraries regarding library training manuals. The researcher also found that there were no training manuals available from the schools within the local school district to serve as models for format or resources for content. This handbook was limited to information relevant to K-12 public school library paraprofessionals. The handbook focused on library procedures and library policy rather than behavior management or general education procedures.
CHAPTER 4
THE PROJECT

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As duties and responsibilities of teacher librarians expand, the library paraprofessional is often left to handle day to day duties in the school library. Whereas teacher librarians are required to keep up credentials through training and professional development, the library paraprofessional’s need for continuous training is often overlooked.

The purpose in creating the paraprofessional manual was to educate library paraprofessionals in the rationale for school library policy and procedure. Instead of instilling policies that may not make sense to a library paraprofessional, the manual shows actual school policies or beliefs by professional affiliations like the American Library Association. Due to the lack of training or guides for library paraprofessionals, the manual would also serve as a reference guide to library paraprofessionals new to a library setting. Through research, it was discovered that library paraprofessionals desire additional training that will support their jobs and answer some of the “why” questions that they have regarding a school library. The researcher found no paraprofessional guides or manuals available in the four school districts surrounding her own district.

Summary

The library paraprofessional manual created was designed not as a textbook of information but an ongoing reference guide. Librarians and their paraprofessionals may add information as they see relevant to the position so that a new or existing library paraprofessional can have easy access to some of the basic questions about working in a school library. It is not expected that a library paraprofessional will know all that there is to know about running a library. Procedures such as weeding and policies related to privacy are followed by district
policies or articles from professional journals. Also included are simple step-by-step directions for processing books and inter library loans using Destiny. The purpose for including some of the "how to" pages was to alleviate time spent searching through large manuals when a simple step-by-step reference may be needed. Finally, this manual is bound in a press bound binder so that as the librarian and paraprofessional discover new information or topics that are useful, they can be easily added for future updating.

**Adjustments**

After reviewing the manual, teacher librarian Chris Iossi suggested that additional information regarding inter library loans. The reasoning behind her suggestion was due to the fact that in the past, some district library paraprofessionals either did not know how to process a book for inter-library loan or the librarian did not want to participate. Due to this, there had not been many loans taking place. Iossi also suggested information be added to the section on roles in reading and privacy. She felt that it was important that paraprofessionals know that the only person who can tell a student that they cannot check out a book is his/her parent. The same holds true for those who should have access to a student's library records. The researcher took the suggestions into account and added the information into the manual.

**Conclusions**

It is the hope of the researcher that this library paraprofessional manual will be utilized by librarians and their paraprofessionals in an ongoing process. It is also the hope that the increased awareness of lack of training for library support staff is taken into consideration and additional training will be given so that paraprofessionals feel they are receiving the professional support they desire.
Recommendations

It is recommended that school districts that employ library paraprofessionals have a plan in place for additional training or support for their library paraprofessionals. Library paraprofessionals do more than supervise children. They are required to know how to use specific technologies to access books and materials, process materials, fix and mend books, not to mention locating resources for teachers and students. Suggestions for training include the creation of a library paraprofessional manual for each school library. The manual resulting from this project may serve as a model or template for other schools as they develop manuals unique to their settings. Each librarian would be responsible for introducing such a manual to all new and pre-existing library paraprofessionals. If no professional development is allocated then districts should provide time for district librarians and their paraprofessionals to meet quarterly to discuss issues, have technology training and collaborative time. Additional time for library paraprofessionals to meet and discuss issues along with specific training is also suggested.

It is further suggested that the manual be reviewed yearly by both librarians and their paraprofessionals to consider what additional information should be added. Finally, a copy should be given to the district administrator in charge of paraprofessionals.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

PUBLIC LIBRARY, PUBLIC SCHOOL AND COLLEGIATE LIBRARY

 ADDRESSES AND PHONE NUMBERS

Bettendorf Public Library
2950 Learning Campus Drive
Bettendorf, Iowa 52722
Phone: 563-344-4175

Davenport Community School District
1606 Brady Street
Davenport, Iowa 52503
Phone: 563-336-5000

Davenport Public Library
6000 Eastern Avenue
Davenport, Iowa 52807
Phone: 563-326-7832

Pleasant Valley Community School District
525 Belmont Road
Bettendorf, Iowa 52722
Phone: 563-332-5550

St. Ambrose University
518 West Locust
Davenport, Iowa 52803
Phone: 888-272-8542

Scott Community College
500 Belmont Road
Bettendorf, Iowa 52722
Phone: 563-441-4001