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## Opportunities for Autism Information Shared Through Professional Conferences

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## **Opportunities for Autism Information Shared through Professional Conferences**

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**Abstract:** *With prevalence most recently reported at 1 in 44 (Maenner et al., 2021) children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the United States, school librarians can and should expect to see these children in their schools and in their libraries. However, previous work indicates that school librarians are not being provided with an adequate education about this in their graduate coursework (Layden, Anderson, & Hayden, 2021). This study expands upon previous work to explore the preparation of school librarians about autism by examining the previous five years of state library conference programs.*

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### ***Introduction***

School librarians are uniquely positioned in their institutions to reach all students including those who receive special education supports and services. Those supports and services are the responsibility of all school professionals who work with that student, including the school librarian. Like all professionals supporting students with disabilities, school librarians are expected to tailor lessons, programs, and services to better meet student needs as identified on their individualized education plans (IEPs). With prevalence most recently reported at 1 in 44 (Maenner et al., 2021) children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the United States, school librarians can and should expect to see these children in their schools and in their libraries. However, previous work indicates that, while interest and need for education about working with children with ASD is prevalent, school librarians are not being provided

with an adequate education about this in their graduate coursework (Layden, Anderson, & Hayden, 2021). Instead, opportunities for learning and growth are made only through professional development and a librarian must actively seek this out while already on the job. This study expands upon previous work to explore the preparation of school librarians about autism by examining the previous five years of state library conference programs.

### *Literature*

School librarians are expected to work with all students at their schools, including those with disabilities. With 1 in 44 children in the United States meeting the criteria for an autism diagnosis (Maenner et al., 2021), it is likely that most if not all school librarians will have some contact with a student with ASD. However, previous research indicates that they feel unprepared to work with students with ASD (Layden & Anderson, 2021).

School librarians do have opportunities for professional development, including through webinars, trainings, and independent study. One specific area of professional development in which librarians are able to advance their knowledge is through conferences. While multiple personal narratives from school librarians laud the value of attending conferences (see Alaimo, 2004; England, 2003), one study surveyed librarians broadly to learn the reasons why they chose to attend professional conferences, finding Professional Rejuvenation, General Sessions, and Networking to be the top three results (Vega, 2007).

Sessions at conferences designed for school librarians may range from brief reports presented through “lightning talks” or poster sessions, to panel discussions and research paper presentations. And, as professional development opportunities are broad in scope, topics within run a wide range of possibilities. A study of IASL conference research papers by Mardis indicated that the most common topic fell into the category of Information Skills and Literacy, followed by Information Technology, Reading and Reading Promotion, Education in LIS, The Profession, Analysis of LIS, Other Aspects of LIS, Information Seeking, LIS Activities, Methodology, Publishing, National Survey, Censorship, Principal Support, Scientific and professional communication: information storage and retrieval, and other studies (Mardis, 2011). More recently, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have been focused on within conference topics with some frequency, and within these tracks disability may be addressed.

### ***Methodology***

This study poses the following research question: What professional development opportunities exist within state conferences for school librarians to learn about students with ASD or disabilities?

To address the research question, researchers collected state library conference programs from those available of 13 states which are designated by the US Census as South East: Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, DC, Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi.

Documents were analyzed through quantitative methods, using basic descriptive statistics. Each researcher coded the same 18 of 36 total documents to determine intercoder reliability prior to dividing up remaining documents and coding independently.

### ***Preliminary Findings***

Preliminary findings indicate that information about autism has been rarely offered to school librarians through state conferences. Disability broadly has also rarely been discussed. Even within conferences in which the focus was regarding diversity, autism as a neurodiversity was rarely offered as a session topic.

### ***Discussion***

Though school librarians are interested in learning more about working with students with autism, little support is given through state library conference sessions. It is possible that this is because school librarians themselves are the ones proposing and presenting these sessions. However, there are some sessions offered, and the frequency of those sessions does seem to be increasing. Furthermore, this study only examined conference session titles and descriptions, and it is possible that presenters do explore autism and disability within sessions not labeled as such.

### ***Implications and Conclusions***

It is clear that more attention could be given to increase the knowledge of school librarians about autism through professional conferences. More support should be given to school librarians educated in autism to share this knowledge with their peers, and targeted calls for participation should be shared with conference solicitation materials. Additionally, experts

from outside of the field (for example in Special Education) should be invited in to present at school library conferences. Our field, and most importantly our students, would benefit from this knowledge shared.

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## ***Biographies***

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**Amelia Anderson** has extensive experience on the topics of neurodiversity and libraries through her work as a public librarian, researcher, and educator. She earned her Ph.D. and MLIS from Florida State University.

**Selena J. Layden** focuses her work on supporting professionals in public schools to improve their knowledge and skills in working with individuals with disabilities and specifically individuals with autism spectrum disorder. Her expertise comes from her experiences as an educator and researcher. She earned her Ph.D. from the College of William & Mary in Virginia.