Filling the Gap: Autism Education for School Librarians

Introduction: The University of South Florida's School of Information, in collaboration with Old Dominion University's Special Education program, proposes to help address the gap in knowledge many school librarians report in working with autistic students in their schools. The proposed *Forum* project, which will gather practicing school librarians across the nation to learn valuable information from autism experts, meets the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program Goal 3, Objective 3.2: *Create and/or refine training programs that build library and archival workforce skills and expertise in contributing to the well-being of communities.* In a study of 11 communities, the CDC reports[1] a current prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) of 1 in 36 children, demonstrating that autistic children are firmly situated in the communities in which school librarians serve. Yet this project team's recent studies indicate school librarians are not receiving training to properly support members of this population. With an aim to raise autism awareness in school librarians that will ultimately lead to more opportunity for acceptance and inclusion in K-12 schools across the nation, the project team will develop and host a freely available online forum that engages autism experts, open to all school librarians and staff across the U.S. to provide professional development (PD) and act as an educational resource in the field. Resulting takeaways of best practices in offering inclusive library services for autistic students will be further disseminated through conference presentations and practitioner publications.

Project Justification: While some schools have programs specifically designed for autistic children, most U.S. schools utilize an integrated approach to education, with autistic children in the same classrooms and programs as their neurotypical peers. Though school librarians are already working with autistic children and teens in their schools, most feel unprepared for this task[2]. Based on the results of 3 survey studies performed by this project team, school librarians are not likely to receive education about autism or disability through their graduate MLIS programs, their schools, or PD offered through conferences[3,4]. Additionally, school librarians are often excluded from students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), are challenged in describing inclusive programming they may provide for autistic students, and have little knowledge of effective evidence based practices (EBPs)[5]. However, when PD is provided, surveyed librarians do report more confidence in serving autistic students[2]. This proposed project will fill this lack of autism education and PD by bringing autism educators together with school librarians, with an aim to increase knowledge, present effective EBPs, improve library pedagogy that supports teaching and learning, and increase workforce skills and confidence in school librarians in the U.S. Ultimately, autistic school children across the US will benefit from having more knowledgeable librarians.

Project Work Plan: This project's high-impact activities will include 1) planning a national virtual forum to bring school librarians together for autism education; 2) hosting the national virtual forum; 3) disseminating information through recorded sessions, conference presentations, and practitioner publications; and 4) contributing to the body of knowledge from autistic self-advocates through a manuscript published in an open access journal or made available through an open access institutional repository.

The *virtual forum* is preceded by distributed surveys to school librarians and autistic library patrons that will help to guide the session programming, followed by a series of meetings in which invited experts at the intersection of autism and school librarianship in concert with autistic self-advocates will discuss topics to inform and support school librarians. While tailored forum sessions will be guided by previous studies indicating areas of need, additional surveys will be conducted to further shape these sessions. In the first survey, school librarians will be asked what information they would like to learn about autism through the proposed forum. The second survey will ask autistic individuals what information they wished their librarians knew or had known about autism and the ways in which they think librarians might assist with their learning and library experience. The project will invite and select forum sessions to supplement critical trainings that will further knowledge in these areas. This forum participation call will be distributed through national outlets and advisory board networks. Anticipated topics include collection curation to include neurodivergent characters, sensory story times, adapted books, and more. Presenters will be compensated with stipends for their participation. Forum information will be distributed through LISTSERVs such as those hosted by state chapters of AASL, social media outlets, and relevant groups on ALA Connect. Advisory board members will disseminate information through their networks. A free virtual forum allows for unlimited attendees. Those unable to join for the synchronous sessions can view high quality, professionally produced recordings posted online afterwards. These measures allow for broad national impact and access for the greatest number of people. *Conference presentations and practitioner publications* will further meet this goal. *A*

scholarly manuscript will provide insight into the needs of autistic library patrons that help shape this forum, adding to a growing body of work supporting concepts within these initiatives.

In addition to regular meetings between the project team, project assessment will include surveying attendees and presenters to gather feedback and determine how to continue to offer information about autism to school librarians.

Project Timeline: **Year 1**: 8/24: Hire a USF MLIS student as graduate assistant. 9/24: Meet with advisory board. 10/24: Distribute surveys to guide forum session programming. 11/24: analyze survey data 1/25: distribute call for forum participation. 2/25: Meet with advisory board; evaluate and select forum topic submissions. 3/25: Notify forum presenters. 4/25-7/25: Plan and organize forum event; prepare keynote sessions. **Year 2**: 8/25: Meet with advisory board; Hold virtual forum. 8/25-9/25 Collect evaluative data; submit conference proposal for result dissemination. 9/25: Prepare, post, and disseminate recordings. 10/25-12/25: Prepare and submit manuscript(s). 1/26: Meet with advisory board. 6/26-8/26: Present findings at national conference; revise and resubmit manuscripts as needed. 8/26: Submit final IMLS report.

Team and Advisory Board Expertise. Notably, PI Amelia Anderson has IMLS experience as a managing co-PI (LG-246292-ols-20) and project director (RE-31-16-0129-16) and will take the lead in project planning, implementing, and managing. Co-PI Selena Layden will assist and lead the project in content development as subject matter expert. The PI and co-PI have a multi-year successful history of collaborative research, focusing specifically on the intersection of school librarians and autism[2,3,4,5]. Advisory board members will provide guidance and feedback through a series of four virtual meetings. Identified advisory board members are experts in school librarianship and autism services, including Adriana White, a school librarian, autism self-advocate and administrator of the "Autistics in Libraries and Their Allies" Facebook group, Dr. Ruth Small, the founder and PI of Project ENABLE (Expanding Non-Discriminatory Access by Librarians Everywhere), and Dr. Nancy Everhart, a former AASL (American Association of School Librarians) president with autism expertise. The project will provide an MLIS graduate assistant with practical experience to include forum event planning, data collection, and presenting within the field. The USF College of Arts and Sciences Office of Communication and Marketing will provide marketing support, and will liaise with a production team hired to ensure and accessible event and professional, polished recordings.

Diversity Plan: It is critical that autistic individuals are included in the planning process of this forum. Our advisory board, all with diverse areas of expertise, will include members of the autistic community. Autism itself is intersectional, and we will collect data from a large variety of autistic library users, sampling to ensure representation is included from a wide range of backgrounds, to help inform keynote session offerings. Forum attendance and the resulting recordings will be free for all to access, thus removing barriers associated with cost for potential attendees. Acknowledging needs differ by community, particularly in rural and underserved locations, anyone affiliated with school libraries is invited to attend, not just those with an MLIS or with the official "librarian" title.

Project Results: High level project results include a more informed school library workforce, ultimately leading to more inclusive and accepting school libraries for autistic children. In providing accessible virtual training, both synchronous and posted online for later viewing, this project seeks to narrow that knowledge gap. Forum recordings will be posted freely online through a platform such as the Project ENABLE website, usable by school librarians or others in the community who may benefit. Session planning details through feedback from the autistic community will be published in an open access scholarly manuscript, allowing other researchers and event planners to replicate such efforts. Takeaways from forum sessions will be provided to librarians through conference presentations and a practitioner publication, allowing the greatest possible access to information about serving autistic students in the school library.

Budget Summary: The anticipated budget is $146,024. This includes funding for USF **personnel** (PI: 18,888, Co-PI: 18,000, GA: 16,190), **tuition** (10,440), **forum participant stipends** (2,400), **advisory board stipends** (6,000), **fringe benefits** (8,138), **indirect costs** (57,968), **PI & co-PI travel** (5,000), and **materials and supplies** to ensure a professional online event and resulting recordings (3,000).