A Study on the Information Behaviors of Teachers

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Teachers are very key members of our society, seeing as they are vastly responsible for instilling necessary information into upcoming generations in order for them to become functioning members of society. It is for that reason that it is so necessary to understand the information behaviors of teachers. This paper seeks to explore the information behaviors and habits of teachers, including how they respond to information needs, how they regularly seek information, and what challenges or barriers they face to information. Areas for potential future research and recommendations regarding teachers and their information needs will also be discussed.

Context and Background

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), in the 2020-2021 school year there were over 3.7 million public school teachers. Of these, more than 2.8 million, or approximately 76.8%, of them are female. Over 1.884 million are elementary school teachers, with that being defined as prekindergarten through 6th grade, and around 1.88 million are secondary school teachers, with that being defined as 7th through 12th grade. Around 26.3% of them have over 20 years of teaching experience, 37.3% have between 10 and 20 years of experience, 29.1% have 3 to 9 years, and 7.3% have less than 3 years. Approximately 14.2% of teachers are under the age of 30, while 27.0% are age 30 to 39, 28.5% are 40 to 49, 22.3% are 50 to 59, and 8.0% are 60 and over. The subject interviewed for this paper, henceforth Ms. L, is a high school science teacher, though she mainly teaches and currently only teaches biology. Ms. L is in her mid 20s and is about to finish her first year of teaching. She works at an Early College high school which is located on the campus of a community college and currently has less than 300 students enrolled.

Teachers' information behavior stems from several different aspects of their job. They might be seeking information for lesson planning, different teaching methods/approaches, information for colleagues, specific questions from students, etc. Perrault (2007b) refers to schools as information ecologies, with teachers and students being a key relationship in the ecology. Therefore, because teachers are such influential information sources for students, it is important that they have the most accurate and up-to-date information possible. Because of this, they are often seeking to confirm that the information they already have is of a good quality. Information needs also arise when they feel that they don't have enough information on a given subject or topic. Especially in the modern world where new research and discoveries are always occurring, and teachers' education sometimes becomes outdated, it is important that they stay informed on these topics.

Literature Review and Findings

In today's society, the internet has become a massively relied on resource, especially for information searches, and teachers are not exempt from this. Despite there being an abundance of educational resources and databases available, often times teachers are not using these and instead rely on non-educational sources and basic search engines to find information. In the study done by Perrault (2007a), she found that 70 out of 72 survey respondents reported use of the internet. She also found that 99%, or 69 out of 70, of the teachers who reported using the internet used search engines for instructional planning, while only 24% reported using online databases, and only 20% reported usage of digital libraries. In the study from Shipman et al. (2015), 0.9% of respondents reported never using websites for information seeking for professional purposes, while 19.9% reported that they never use online databases. Shipman et al. also found that 65% of respondents indicated that they preferred to find information online,

while 35% preferred printed information. They also found a statistically significant relationship between age and preference for online information seeking, with younger generations preferring internet resources. When questioned about her information seeking preferences relating to the internet, Ms. L indicated that she uses the internet for information seeking related to her job almost every day. She also said that she tends to either seek out specific websites that she has found helpful before or use search engines, but only makes use of resources such as digital libraries or online databases a few times a month.

Teachers and educators often turn to each other when an information need arises. It makes sense that one's colleagues are going to understand their needs/issues/questions better than someone in a different field. Shipman et al. (2015) found that 32.4% of the 306 respondents turned to other teachers in their department daily when looking for information for professional purposes. Only 5.9% of the respondents said that they never use other teachers in their department as information sources. A majority of respondents also indicated that they turn to teachers in other departments and teachers at other schools on occasion, when their needs are not met by other sources. As mentioned earlier, Perrault (2007b) describes schools as information ecologies. She notes that, in addition to the relationship between teacher and student in this ecology, another notable relationship is that between a teacher and other teachers. Perrault also specifically notes teachers sharing information and resources with each other in virtual formats. Ms. L discussed her frequent use of specific websites where teachers share things such as lesson plans, ideas, and information resources with each other. She also discussed her frequent use of experienced colleagues in the science department as information resources, noting how, as a new teacher, she trusts them to not only give her information when possible, but also point her in the direction of resources for further information. In the study by Bitso and Fourie (2011), they

found that colleagues were amongst the most often used information sources that teachers reported. Bitso and Fourie also examine teachers' information behavior through the lens of the Leckie model of information seeking, through which they consider work roles and tasks, and how that affects the sources an individual turns to for information. They further consider how that can play a role in the information seeking of teachers, specifically when they turn to resources such as their colleagues, versus when they turn to other sources before their colleagues. They also note the looping nature of this model based on the outcome, and how if a teacher is not satisfied with the results of their first search, they will engage with a different resource in the next seeking episode.

To better understand the reasons that teachers prefer certain methods of seeking information, it is appropriate to look to their education. That is why many researchers have brought up the issue of information literacy skills/education and information seeking skills/education. In the study done by Perrault (2007a), 30% of the respondents said that they did not use digital libraries because they did not feel comfortable using them. Additionally, 27% of respondents indicated the same reason for not using either online databases or electronic discussions. Perrault highlights that it is notable that this many teachers do not feel comfortable using resources developed to support them, and that it may indicate a need for more formal training in areas such as information seeking and information literacy. Perrault (2007b) notes that it is important for teachers to possess effective online information skills not only for seeking resources, but also to serve as models for students in an age where both information and the online world continue to expand and these skills grow in necessity. In the study done by Gunasekara and Balasubramani (2020), they asked respondents about their library skills and found that when given the statement "It is difficult to locate materials I need in the library," 28%

were neutral, 14% agreed, and 11% strongly agreed, while only 10% strongly disagreed and 31% disagreed. Other similar statements were presented as well, and results were also similar. Shipman et al. (2015) found that 58% of respondents indicated that they had received information literacy instruction from a librarian, while 42% reported that they had never. Shipman et al. also found a statistically significant relationship between prior library/information literacy instruction and preferred information sources. Those that had participated in previous library instruction tended to prefer sources such as the Education Information Resources Center, which is run by the United States Department of Education, online library databases, school librarians, publications from both the U.S. and state departments of education, and professional journals/magazines. When asked about confidence in information seeking skills and information literacy skills, Ms. L indicated that she feels generally comfortable with basic searches within resources such as libraries and online databases, but she does believe that she would need assistance with more detailed or specific searches. When questioned regarding prior information literacy education, Ms. L reported that she took a course in her undergraduate program that focused on information literacy in digital environments, though she did note that none was specifically required of her in order to become a teacher.

A barrier to the information needs of educators that has been noticed in schools around the world is the issue of school funding. A lack of necessary funds has led to schools not being able to provide teachers with up-to-date quality resources such as textbooks. This lack of resources in the schools has forced teachers to change their information seeking habits. Gunasekera and Balasubramani (2020) asked respondents about barriers they faced when using their school libraries and the most frequent response, with 86.2% of respondents citing it, was a lack of materials relevant to their needs. In the research done by Bitso and Fourie (2011) on

teachers in Lesotho, they reported that a majority of respondents indicated that their libraries are filled with outdated and irrelevant materials. Respondents also indicated that a lack of funding was the main cause for the outdated and irrelevant materials. The subject, Ms. L, corroborated this when asked about the main barriers she faces to information seeking. She discussed how, due to a lack of necessary funds for materials/resources, she is forced to resort to internet sources. She notes that "all of the, very few, materials I do have are pretty old." When questioned further, she indicated that she did not know exactly how old the textbooks she was provided with were. She also pointed out that they were "falling apart" due to years of use from students and teachers alike, which makes it even more frustrating to use them.

With things such as school curriculum changes, increased class sizes, and more challenges arising every day, the demands placed on teachers has also increased. This has led them to having less time for things such as instructional planning, and therefore less time to seek for and evaluate information resources. In the survey done by Perrault (2007a), many respondents indicated a lack of time as a reason for not using various information resources, with 23% citing it for nonuse of websites, 37% for digital libraries, 39% for online databases, 33% for electronic discussion lists, and 14% for print resources. The interviews done by Perrault further confirmed the idea that lack of time heavily influences teachers' information seeking behaviors. She found the influence of time so significant that it was one of the four notable themes drawn from her study. Bitso and Fourie (2011) reported that a majority of participants in their study cited a lack of time as a major challenge to their information seeking, and that increased teaching loads and bigger class sizes further reduced the amount of time they had for information seeking. These findings held true with what Ms. L reported. She discussed how she often finds herself rushing to find information and not being able to be as thorough as she would like. She also

discussed how sometimes she feels as though she has to make a decision between finding more information or finding the best quality/most reliable information. While she noted that she feels fairly confident in her ability to evaluate sources, if someone was not confident or experienced with doing that, a lack of time would only exacerbate the issue.

Gaps in the Research

There are several areas that are lacking research on the topic of information behavior in teachers, that perhaps should be expanded upon in the future. One area in which there is a notable lack of research is the influence that a teachers' information behavior has on their students. Majority of the research has focused solely on teachers' behaviors and the different influences on their behaviors, but it seems to brush over the fact that the teacher is then relaying that information to students. Perhaps it would be useful to study how the teachers' information behavior affects student learning, student grades, student information behaviors, etc. As Perrault (2007a) notes, teachers are a part of a system of information sharing, so it may also be beneficial to study how their behavior affects the entire system as well, including other teachers and administrators in the schools. It is also significant that all of the literature discussed here relied on teachers self-reporting their information behaviors. Therefore, it is possible that the information gathered is biased or not entirely accurate, and future research studies should perhaps consider more observational methods of research.

Additionally, there is a noticeable lack of attention to certain details/demographics about the teachers studied. One of these that could potentially be researched in the future is the type of school that the teacher is employed at. For example, comparing the information behaviors of a teacher at a public school to that of a teacher at a private school, a charter school, etc. These different types of schools often have different challenges and issues, and those differences could

possibly affect their information behavior. Future research may also consider the differences in behaviors between elementary school, middle school/junior high, high school, and early college teachers. Furthermore, there is little to no attention paid to the potential differences in behaviors between teachers of different disciplines/subject. For example, a science teacher, especially one at a higher level such as an honors or Advanced Placement teacher at a high school, is likely to have different information needs than say an elementary school English teacher. Furthering research of teachers' information behaviors into areas such as these can help library and information professionals to better understand their needs and therefore better serve them.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of research focused on information behaviors in teachers, there are several things that could be done to strengthen the information skills of teachers and make information seeking more accessible to them. Providing schools and school libraries with more relevant and up-to-date materials would prove vastly beneficial. It would allow teachers to make use of the libraries and not force them to rely on outside sources such as websites just to have enough information to complete their duties. Additionally, lessening the demands on teachers, such as class sizes, would give them more time for information seeking for things such as lesson planning. While having more time does not inherently mean that teachers would do more thorough information seeking, it would remove a frequently faced barrier that prevents them from doing so, and therefore makes it easier and more likely to occur. It should be noted that these recommendations are easier stated than done, as decisions such as these often occur at a much higher level than that of a teacher.

It is also advisable, based on the findings, to implement more formal training of information skills and information literacy for teachers. This should not be an optional thing

where individual teachers get to decide if they want/need it, since false confidence in their information skills could be an issue. Rather, this should be a strict requirement for all teachers, and even possibly extended to all school staff in general. Having these trainings cover library skills as well, and potentially being led by librarians would also be valuable, as it would strengthen the relationship between teachers and library staff and would likely make teachers feel more comfortable to turn to library professionals for assistance even after the training session has ended. This would not only be of service to teachers when they have an information need, but also would potentially serve as a model to students to show that they should make use of the library and its resources, including library staff.

Further, more in-depth research into the information behaviors of teachers, especially the online behaviors, would be helpful in upgrading and refining the information resources that are designed for teacher/educational use. Knowing and understanding how/why teachers seek information and evaluate information sources would allow information professionals to design resources such as online libraries, databases, and other educational resources so that teachers are more easily able to use them when they don't have applicable physical resources in their schools or when they face other issues such as time-restrictions. Improving these valuable resources would mean improving the quality of information that teachers are getting and therefore the information they are relaying to their students.

Conclusion

The information behaviors of teachers are a very important topic to understand because of the nature of their job and the ripple effect of these behaviors that can be felt throughout schools and our society as a whole. Teachers nowadays rely heavily on internet resources, and those are frequently not scholarly or educational sources. The lack of necessary materials in

schools/libraries and time constraints on teachers limits the ways in which they can seek information. While there are studies of these behaviors, in order for library and information professionals to best serve teachers there are certain areas that need to be researched more thoroughly. Moreover, there needs to be institutional change that encourages better information seeking habits amongst teachers and stronger relationships between teachers and library professionals.

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