

YOU CAN COUNT ON READING: Library Media Specialists Make a Difference

David V. Loertscher

We are told we need to restructure, re-think, reorganize, redesign, and reconsider. That process is a must for all of us if we are to avoid gridlock and hardening of the categories. Like you, I've been dabbling in a variety of new technologies tasting, experimenting, embracing, adopting, postponing, and rejecting. How do the new technologies affect our concept of the Library Media Center? What's essential about the Library Media Center program? What can be tossed? What should be saved? Could it be that embracing the idea of a high tech center and tossing out the reading center is the way to go? I've thought that over, and it strikes me that knowing how to read and read well is a key that unlocks not only the print world but the electronic world as well. There is an old Irish folktale that I remember Ruth Sawyer telling titled *The Peddler of Ballahardarine*. The story is of a kindly old gentleman who loves to give away more than he sells and when there is nothing left to sell and hunger knocks at the door, the peddler has a dream. A voice tells him he is to take a journey as a quest to find his fortune. Taking the advice, he travels on to the appointed place and waits. And waits. And then the miracle. He learns from the same voice that his fortune is buried back home in his front yard. I have spent a career urging library media specialists to broaden their vision to include resource-based teaching, and lately, information literacy in their daily regimen never dreaming that some would abandon reading motivation, a long-standing pillar of library programs. And then I met Stephen Krashen, a linguist from USC who reminded me of the basics:

Readers have a chance!

Non-readers? Well, good luck.

Readers Are Made, Not Born

If you are reading this article, you're probably an avid reader hopelessly hooked or plugged into the world of words. I can probably predict, with Krashen's help, how you got that way. Check off the factors that apply to you on the list above top center.

Recently, on the plane, I gave that little prediction checklist to a 25-year-old reader next to me. He answered No to all the questions except the last one. How does one of seven children, whose parents disdain education, has nothing to read at home, and who is skilled to death in reading minutiae by teachers at school, turn out to be a reader?

It takes an intervention. A big one!

Supply the scenarios yourself of readers you know: *There was this teacher who . . . There was this library media specialist who . . . I had to read (blank) and then . . . It wasn't until (blank) happened that I . . .*

KRASHEN'S READER PREDICTION FACTORS

- A print rich environment at home.
- Access to a print rich environment at school.
- I had time to read what I wanted to read.
- When I started to read in earnest, I couldn't help myself - I had to do it.
- Someone read aloud to me regularly.
- My parents loved to read.
- It was okay to be a reader; if not, I didn't care what my peers thought.

There are stories everywhere. Consider Malcolm X. Ask Oprah Winfrey. Ask Ben Carson.

Ben Carson is a neurosurgeon at Johns Hopkins University who separates Siamese twins. He says, "It wasn't until my mother decided that my brother and I were watching too much television and becoming just like the rest of the street crowd that she put down her foot. We were to visit the public library every week, read two books, and write her a book report. That was when I discovered science. . . ."

Readers are not created in flocks, herds, gangs, or crowds. They blossom one at a time. One more, one more, plus one more equals three, plus one more equals four, plus one more equals five . . . The sad thing is,



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there are too many ones out there who never make it to the avid reader pool. The problem isn't so much that we have masses of totally illiterate kids. We don't. Krashen reminds us that the information society simply demands so much more reading power from everyone.

Proving over 100 years of research in hundreds of studies, Krashen pronounces the conclusion: Free Voluntary Reading (that's the kind you want to do, not have to do) is *the best predictor* of: reading comprehension, vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and writing style.

Library Media Specialists, Readers, and the LMC Program

Stand up, library media specialists, and take a bow! You have been turning kids on to reading for fifty years. It has been the right thing to do, and it's still the right thing to do. You make a difference! Would you bet the rent on that? Want to test it?

1. Divide any group of students into two groups regardless of age or grade level avid readers and not-so-avid readers (including non-readers) and compare their test scores.

2. Turn a kid into an avid reader and watch the jump in test scores.

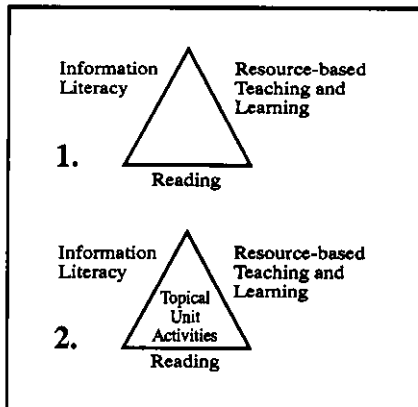
3. Divide a class into two groups avid readers and not-so-avid readers. Give them an engaging information problem to solve using the fanciest information technology you can find. Which group comes up with the goods? In what amount of time? With the best understanding? With the best product?

4. Conduct a massive reading promotion campaign that covers the entire school year. What happens to test scores on standardized tests?

5. Design a resource-based teaching unit with lots of free-choice reading as a part of the unit. Which students learn the most? Readers who read a lot? Readers who read some? Non-readers?

Foul! That's not pure research, you say. There are other factors, you say. Of course there are other influences, but free voluntary reading is your first and best bet. If you don't believe it, just try to prove Krashen wrong.

Does that mean you should abandon resource-based teaching and emphasis on teaching research skills or information literacy and retreat back to a program of books and literature? Of course not. What it does mean is that you must build a program in the LMC that will have the best chance to help the most students. The educational community is discussing integration at the moment. We've discussed it for years in the library media community. Let's take an example. Suppose I choose to emphasize three aspects of my LMC program: information



literacy, resource-based teaching and learning, and reading.

Notice that reading is the base of the triangle because without a base, the other two legs don't stand very well. I could choose to create a separate program or a complete curriculum around any one of these elements. I could spend all day, every day teaching information literacy and research skills. I could spend all day doing reading promotion. The integrationist argues that a clever plan is to fit these three essential components into a central picture so that the whole becomes larger than the sum of its parts. Thus, the picture looks like the second diagram.

In this view, we concentrate on a large perspective fitting our agenda into what the school and teachers are doing very cleverly. *Very cleverly!*

The opportunities are everywhere. Let's try a multiple-choice approach. What choices would you make in the following scenarios?

1. In faculty meetings, the principal worries that test scores are low. You are appointed to a task force to offer a plan.

You:

- Listen to others' ideas, serve as a resource, and help carry out any suggestions.
- Compile a bibliography from the literature about what other schools are doing to meet the same problem and supply the team with the articles.
- Persuasively present the Krashen research and present a visionary plan for a massive reading program that will integrate into the current agenda of the school.

2. The eighth-grade team consisting of science, social studies, and language arts is planning a month-long topical exploration.

You:

- Offer to collect materials and have the center open and available for their students to carry out planned activities.
- Offer to teach the research process and help students find information for the video reports students will be doing.
- Help create the engaging problem for students, and suddenly realize that while reading will add depth, that

students who understand fact vs. opinion are more likely to succeed in this study, and that using a wide variety of print, electronic, visual, and audio will make the topic even more fascinating. You offer ten creative ideas. Three are adopted enthusiastically by the team and two others are modified. You help carry out the unit and assist in evaluating the portfolios.

3. The fourth-grade teacher sends down a group of students who are supposed to do a report on anything related to your state's history.

You:

- Help the group find a few resources and send them back to their classroom.
- Discover that the students can find materials pretty well but seem confused about what to do next. You offer to work with them while the teacher is working with another group.
- Realize that you have been left out of the picture this time, so you help as best you can, but figure out a way to get into the next topical unit before it gets set in concrete.

The a and b choices may or may not make a difference, but we do them sometimes because we can't be all things to all people all the time. We can do the c choices some of the time and be confident we are making a difference.

Putting the Research to Work

Krashen provides some major suggestions to maximize the amount read. That's what has to get done. It's time on task. Time spent reading counts. If the amount read doesn't increase, neither will reading comprehension, spelling, vocabulary, grammar, or writing style. Let's chart the suggestions and explore a few possibilities for integration.

1. Suggestion from the Research: Create a print rich environment.

Ideas for Integration: You flood the classroom collection and create special take-away displays of materials in the LMC on a topic being studied by students. Materials come from many libraries.

2. Suggestion from the Research: Read aloud every day to every student (Pre-K to 12).

Ideas for Integration: As a topic study approaches, you and the teacher plan what will be read aloud in the classroom and the LMC. A wide variety of genres and up to two grade levels of difficulty above the students can be read aloud using the topic literature.

3. Suggestion from the Research: Provide time to read.

Ideas for Integration: During a topical study, some groups are not getting enough time to read. The Library Media Specialist schedules a group into the LMC and arranges a quiet corner to accommodate these topical readers. There's plenty to read. It's comfortable. It's quiet.

4. Suggestion from the Research: Encourage young people to read.

Ideas for Integration: The school is participating in Count on Reading The First Billion Books. A goal of 10,000 books is set. You realize that several smaller incentive programs will be more effective than one massive one. By selecting several themes that work into other school plans such as Black History Month, Children's Choice Awards, state history, Book It, football season, the environment, a dinosaur unit, etc. mini goals with reading connections/suggestions for each event are created. Reading/activities/bashes/celebrations/book talks/storytelling/bibliographies/displays fit in perfectly.

5. Suggestion from the Research: Light reading (comics, magazines, newspapers, series books) helps. That is, start where the kids are.

Ideas for Integration: You ask: What would kids enjoy reading about any topic currently being studied? Realizing that light reading often includes such things as travel, scientific principles, social problems, and pop culture connections, you knock yourself out finding a wide range of topical materials that are sure to appeal to readers on the topic.

6. Suggestion from the Research: The existence of school libraries, full-time school librarians, and large collections makes a difference in how much kids read.

Ideas for Integration: First, you see to it that the LMC is never empty, but always teeming and bustling with activity and I didn't say schedule every class into the LMC with back-to-back scheduling. If you've got this one figured out, you are probably so integrated that no one can figure out where the classroom leaves off and the LMC begins.

An Invitation to Make a Difference

As a way to demonstrate in thousands of communities that school LMCs are worth their keep, consider hooking up with AASL's Count on Reading Committee in a two-pronged program: 1. Count on Reading The First Billion Books challenges our young people to read a billion books enough 1/2 inch books stacked on a single shelf to span the diameter of the earth! Young people who contribute to the goal use as motto: Choose to Read/Count the Rewards. 2. Count on Reading The Evidence. This activity asks you to conduct some type of action research in your school to test the power of reading and then to publish the results locally and share them nationally. You won't see gains unless students substantially increase their reading over a school year. It's more than worth the effort for the Library Media Specialist, the Library Media Center, and the young readers. How do you get more information? Write to:

COUNT ON READING, P.O. Box 266, Castle Rock, CO 80104. And you can invite the Committee to make a presentation in your state.