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*Learning through
Books, Media and Technology*

Planning Time and Library Time: It's Time to Reconsider

The Role of the Elementary School Library

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*For of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: "It might have been."*

—JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER

For decades, the elementary school libraries of this nation have been held captive, locked into a rigid scheduling pattern that has devastated the ability of any library media specialist to make a substantial contribution to academic achievement. I speak, of course, of the need that teachers have for a planning period. That need has generated the funding in many districts across the country to hire a librarian and perhaps music, art, and physical education teachers. These specialists fulfill the master contract's requirement that each teacher have a planning period. Take away the planning time — take away the librarian. While there has been lip service to the importance of libraries and the other support personnel, what happened during "teacher planning time" was never central to the mission of the school. It was only a means to an end. That is why at the first sight of financial crisis, the support services were cut. Inventive administrators further discovered (and the news traveled fast) that one could hire paraprofessionals in the library to conduct the planning period activities at half the price and with no apparent change in the impact the library was having on the educational program.

There are many arguments for professional library media specialists and the contribution they make in reading, collaborative planning, and information literacy, but these contributions, left unmeasured, are not as convincing as the financial savings. Numerous arguments have been given in the professional literature and national standards speaking against rigid schedules. The national rhetoric has

been begging instead for a flexible approach where teachers use the library as a learning laboratory based on curricular need. For many districts, these arguments have met deaf ears — in fact, outright opposition. Some library media specialists and district supervisors are told that rigid scheduling is a basic condition of employment and no other schedule is tenable. I should like to make a radical but very serious proposal to school library media specialists everywhere, not

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a proposal that has been tested in research, but one to seriously consider and test. In fact, an initiative to find new solutions to this old problem is so desperately needed, we may not have elementary school libraries unless we find a new method.

Many districts and library media specialists have used all their persuasive powers and have had flexible schedules dictated. A trumpet sounds. Free at last! Sadly, many library media specialists have not been successful when their dream became a reality. Without scheduled visits, the library is suddenly empty. Seeing libraries empty, administrators revert quickly back to the rigid schedule — and well they might — for an unused library is a terribly expensive fixture.

There are some advantages to rigid scheduling. Some of these advantages are worth preserving and others are not. The best argument is the support of the reading program. Weekly, students can exchange their books, and if

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policies are liberal enough (they aren't in many schools), students can increase the amount they read through regular visits. Students who develop a reading habit automatically increase their academic achievement. Where strict limits are placed on the number of books children can check out, the impact on reading scores is so slight that the library program is difficult to defend. If the library is a pleasant place to be, and the librarian makes it a friendly place to visit, then the library habit of weekly visits is a valuable contribution to the child. There are two other areas of the scheduled library system that might make a difference: the teaching of library skills, and literature-based reading instruction. As a profession, we have not been successful in measuring the impact of the library skills instruction program on learners. As far as literature-based instructional activities, we only know that they increase academic achievement if they cause the child to read more.

I would propose that a group of schools using library time as teacher planning period time enter into a scheduling experiment.

Creating LSSR Time

I would propose that a group of schools using library time as teacher planning period time enter into a scheduling experiment. In every experimental school, the library time would be retained but renamed "Library Sustained Silent Reading Time" (LSSR Time). In the experiment, every classroom would have its normally scheduled time in the library under the supervision, but not the direct tutelage, of the librarian. Here is a scenario:

Students would come to the library with book(s) in hand. Then they would (1) spend all but 10 minutes of the period reading silently (they might do this in a designated reading corner or comfortable area created especially for this activity); or (2) do a book exchange and/or return and check out a rotating classroom collection. The librarian would (1) supervise from a distance but not teach or interact; and (2) teach the classes at the beginning of the year on the expected behavior and the area to use for LSSR.

Advantages to this approach:

- Children would be raising their achievement related to reading (comprehension, spelling, grammar, vocabulary, and writing style).
- Teachers would have their planning period undisturbed.
- The master contract/union demands would be met.
- Every child would have access to the library on a regular basis.

Disadvantages to this approach:

- Reading guidance and storytelling by the professional

would have to be done on occasions other than the LSSR period.

- Precious space in the library would be taken up by the LSSR corner, making it difficult in some facilities for other groups to use the library simultaneously.

Adjustments to be made:

- The LSSR area may have to be stocked with high-interest materials such as comics, quick picks, and specialty picture books to serve those readers who never seem to have something they want to read.
- The library media specialist would need to work with teachers to decide what materials stocked in the LSSR area would be of most value to students learning English.
- LSSR time should be productive for every reader, whether reluctant or challenged.

What would the librarian be doing if released from teaching scheduled classes?

Establish a Program of Library Learning Lab Time (LLT)

One area of the library should be arranged in such a way that classes doing research, in addition to LSSR classes, could be accommodated. This would be reserved space requiring the teacher to schedule a collaborative activity/unit. This flexible time would be in addition to the regular library period. It would have to be planned in advance by the teacher and calendared. Classes doing research would have the benefits of the total resources and technology the library has to offer. They would also have two adults (the teacher and the librarian) working with them during the library research time.

Information literacy skills (not the old library skills) would be taught only during LLL Time and at no other time. This would ensure that all information literacy instruction would be integrated and would establish library research as the preeminent program of the library — commanding the full attention of the teacher/librarian team. Professional librarians with responsibilities for more than one school would use the majority of their time at each school doing library laboratory activities with teachers.

Advantages of this system:

- The majority of a professional's time is spent raising academic achievement (partnering in instruction).
- Teachers would begin to compete for the attention of a librarian with whom a partnership learning laboratory activity would likely produce excellent learning gains.
- Technology skills and information literacy skills would be on a "just-in-time basis" to achieve maximum time efficiency.
- Teachers would have the benefits of flexible access: being able to sign up every day for a few days and then perhaps not come again until the next major research unit began.
- Teachers would begin to realize that the library and "research" and the library and "learning laboratory" were synonymous.
- Reports documenting collaborative activities would be simple and a natural extension of the library calendar.

Disadvantages of this system:

- Some teachers may want to take advantage of the librarian who has now become a teaching partner — spending

library research time correcting papers or some other activity.

- Some teachers may not be interested in library laboratory activities as a part of their curriculum.
- It will be more difficult to track the sophistication level of students in technology and information literacy sophistication because every student would not have been exposed to a particular library lesson at the same time.
- At first, teachers may think the librarian is trying to get out of work.

Adjustments to be made:

- At any time during the day, the library might be filled with two large groups — one quiet group and one with “busy noise.” Spaces would have to be created in such a way for the two groups not to bother one another.
- If the librarian did not have paraprofessional help, there would be some interruption from the LSSR group as they came and went or required disciplining. The teacher would have to understand such interruptions and feel comfortable taking a leadership role when such interruptions occurred.

Creating Flex Time

As the two library groups learn to coexist, a third activity (flex time) should be encouraged to develop. Both individuals or small groups not needing the attention of the librarian should be able to come to the library to pursue independent work using a space dedicated to that purpose. This means that there would be essentially three work areas in the library: LSSR, LLLT, and small group/individual space. The floor plan of the library would have to be designed in such a way that traffic patterns would not interfere with the three major activities. Such a space utilization plan should ensure a full utilization pattern of the most expensive space in the school. (Did you realize that library space is the most expensive space in the school?)

Phasing-in the Idea

While a full-scale implementation could begin after a professional development day, the plan might be tried in an experimental mini-phase mode. Six volunteer teachers who would have back-to-back LSSR Time might agree to participate. Their block would become the flexible LLLT for a three-month or semester basis. The group would form a planning committee to track the experiment and make a recommendation to the faculty as a whole at the end of the trial. They might recommend further experimentation with modifications, a full implementation, or an end to the experiment based on their experience. The worst-case scenario would be to return to the original schedule.

Evaluating the Plan

Each part of the plan needs to be documented for its success with a combination of data gathering, both observational and interview data. Here are a few simple measures upon which to judge local success:

LSSR Time

- Children have become accustomed to the reading time and require little supervision (an observational measure done by any adult in the library for each group each week).
- Facilities have been arranged in such a way that readers are comfortable and have the fewest distractions possible (an observation of an adult at random times).

LLL Time

- The library calendar will be summarized once a month for statistics on teachers utilizing the library for research (a simple quantitative chart extracted from the calendar).
- A collaboration log of each unit that had been jointly planned, executed, and evaluated would be kept. If both the teacher and the librarian agreed at the end of the experience that students had had a quality learning experience, that unit would be counted as One. That means it would be charted on a simple list that would become a transparency or PowerPoint visual to show to an appropriate audience. Such a chart might list topic, grade level, and teacher name.
- A list of information literacy and technology skills integrated into the above-charted units would be kept and another visual created showing the unit and the integrated skill. At the end of each semester, the resulting evaluative report would be presented to the library advisory committee, the principal, or any other interested group.
- Follow-up interviews of listed units could be done to ascertain attitudes of teachers, evidence of contribution to learning, degree of willingness to engage in future projects, and to hear suggestions for making the LLL program more effective. Interviews could include students who had completed projects during LLL Time.

Evaluating Flex Time

- For a typical week, have flex time students sign in when they come to the library. The sheet should state the name or group, teacher, and purpose. An analysis and simple chart should be made showing how many, who, and the types of activities pursued.
- Individual students visiting the library could be interviewed to see how and why their teacher let them come to the library, their purpose, and their success.
- A lunchroom test could be done by doing short interviews at random tables during student lunch times. Are students aware of flex time? Will their teachers let them come?

Who among the students gets to utilize flex time?

What recommendations do they have for improving upon the idea of flex time?

As stated at the beginning of this article, there is nothing to lose by experimenting with new methods to replace rigid scheduling. And while the solution in various schools might be different, any successful move toward flexible access time would be worth reporting to the profession at large. School libraries are just too important and too expensive to waste. •