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Testing the Effect of the School Library Media Center in a Block Scheduling Environment

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© 1999 Blanche Woolls and David V. loertscher Abrary media center in support of block scheduling through action research. This article discusses how to add to the evidence on the effects of changes because of block scheduling on teaching and learning in school buildings through testing the effects of block scheduling on use of the library media center.

Very little research has been reported testing the effectiveness of block scheduling and much that has been published is controversial.1 Furthermore, any reports that relate directly to school library media programs are most often just that-reports of activities or how we are implementing block scheduling or what we have heard someone else is doing. They have little research base. Yet this educational innovation provides an excellent opportunity for school library media specialists to exhibit leadership. Our recent article in Knowledge Quest asked library media specialists who were going to be involved or were teaching in schools with block scheduling to document impact in ways other than impressions or observations.2

This article provides some simple ways for conducting action research and comparing data to findings that have been previously published and that are beginning to show the effectiveness of the library media center program in support of block scheduling. Library media specialists who follow the directions, collect the data, and report their findings in their state association newsletters, at conferences, and in *Knowledge Quest* and other school library media journals will accomplish three goals: (1) to do action research; (2) to add to the body of information; and (3) to help other library media specialists assume a leadership role while participating in planning and execution of block scheduling in their schools.

To conduct your research study, you will need to know what action research can and cannot do, how to go about implementing a plan, what has been reported in the literature, and how you can use this to compare your results. Action research is designed "to develop new skills or new approaches and to solve problems with direct application to the classroom or other applied setting."³ Swisher and McClure compare action research to traditional research and common sense.⁴ The major differences among the goals of these methods are the following:

- Action research is designed "to obtain knowledge that can be directly applied to the local library/information center to increase organizational effectiveness."
- Traditional research is used "to obtain knowledge that is generalizable to a broad population and to develop and test theories.
- Common sense is used "to make changes in the current situation that appear likely to improve the library/information center."⁵

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It does not require an advanced degree to be able to conduct action research studies. In fact, the research must be conducted by the library media specialist and be directly related to the effectiveness of the library media center. Some ground rules do exist. For instance, the best approach is to have goals and objectives for your media center program. You will be testing how well you meet these goals and objectives, looking at your situation to see how well your services and the resources available to your students and teachers meet their needs. Steps to follow in conducting research include:

- Determine what you wish to "test."
- Find out if anyone else has tested this problem and how the study was conducted.
- Write your problem statement.
- Decide how you will study this problem.
- Consider what data you will collect.
 Decide how you will analyze this data.
- Choose how and to whom you will report your findings.
- Determine what you will do to make the changes found in the research.

The remainder of this article discusses action research for one specific use: testing the effects of block scheduling on use of the library media center. If you are in the process of planning or implementing a block scheduling program, you will need to collect base data immediately. If block scheduling has been implemented in your school, you will report differences based upon new projects you introduce, recognizing that it will be more difficult to attribute success to block scheduling for the changes you find.

Background Needed

Baseline data to be collected include the teaching styles of teachers, the pattern of block scheduling, the subject areas included, and the past pattern of usage of the library media center. It is impossible to credit differences unless you have a starting point.

What are the teaching styles of your teachers? Teachers who have spent the last twenty years lecturing to students for forty-five minutes, who rely almost exclusively on the textbook, who state with pride that they are on the same page in their plan book that they were on last year at the same time, and who assess student progress through paper and pencil tests will move reluctantly into a different pattern. Their learning style is your first measurement. While teachers never fit totally into a single style, they will exhibit one style more than another.

Many "tests" exist for analyzing the interpersonal behaviors of individuals. It is often difficult to get teachers to participate in what they consider personality tests. This author uses the teaching/learning styles of Gregoric: concrete sequential, abstract random, abstract sequential, and concrete random. They are easy to identify. One can observe classrooms and limited teaching and still place teachers within the categories, remembering that everyone has some traits of each category.

The concrete sequential teacher works step by step, carefully following directions. Lists are made and, one-by-one, the teacher moves steadily to complete each of the carefully developed plans. Students are seated in orderly rows in a quiet classroom. Concrete sequential teachers and students enjoy the order offered in computer programs.

Abstract sequential teachers are the inventive ones who thrive on abstract ideas, theories, and hypotheses. They are intellectual, logical, and rational, developing new ideas and inventions such as computers. They see the big picture and solve problems as a part of a system. Using an idea, they create blueprints demonstrating that they visualize the whole product.

Abstract random teachers think with their emotions. They are very interested in the ambiance of the classroom. Because they enjoy group work, student desks may be placed in groups of three or four. They may rebel against a structured environment. Compared to a concrete sequential teacher's classroom, the abstract random classroom appears chaotic.

Concrete random teachers want to know what makes things tick. They often cannot articulate the steps they follow to go from beginning to end, yet they solve problems easily. They do not think conventionally. Willing to dismantle the computer to see how it works, they make good technicians in schools.

It is this author's surmise that many teachers fall into the concrete sequential category. They enjoy the structure of the classroom, the format of the school day, and the safety of the textbook. They look askance at the disarray they perceive to exist in an abstract random teacher's classroom. They mistrust the concrete random teacher (or student) because they weren't shown how the problem was solved.

Concrete random teachers will enjoy seeing how things tick and will be helpful in testing new products for their use in the classroom. Your abstract sequential teacher, being better able to see the whole picture, will work more easily toward across-the-curriculum units of instruction.

By thinking through these teaching styles, you will be able to choose the best approach to help them change. Build a chart that shows each teacher and their primary teaching style. See table 1.

What is your pattern of block scheduling? Many patterns have been put into place. The 4x4 pattern includes four classes each semester in ninety-minute blocks, with four different classes in ninety-minute blocks for the second semester. Another pattern is the A/B schedule, with four classes in ninety-minute segments meeting every other day for the entire year. "A" classes meet one day and "B" classes meet the second day. These classes continue for the entire year. Other schools have combined the 4x4 and A/B classes into a "combination block schedule." Another pattern is the combination of 4x4 and A/B classes with the class length varying each day. That is, on three of every five days, each class is ninety minutes in length. On the other two days, classes are seventy-five minutes in length and a "resource hour" is in place for sixty minutes. Other permutations exist with changes in the number of minutes or the rotation.

If this has not yet been implemented, teachers could be asked to analyze in a three-week period how much time they spend lecturing in their classes, working in group-related activities, and giving time to begin homework. When teachers have begun block scheduling they could

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discuss their plan books for one 3-week period. If they happen to have kept their plan books from previous years, they could try to compare what they covered and how they spent the class periods. This cannot be a rigid review, so don't attempt precision. Rather, try to get a sense of the percentage of time in lecture and in other activities. See table 2.

Are all subject areas involved in block scheduling, or just some subject areas? Some research shows that science teachers are very happy with this schedule as it gives them time to prepare and conduct full experiments. Teachers in other subject areas seem to find it difficult to fill the time. Are teachers fighting the block schedule because they fear they will lose their ability to plan thoroughly for each minute of the class period? Scheduling small group activities may make them feel they will lose control of the classroom.

When some subjects are placed in the block schedule and others have not been, a record of the reasons this division was made would be helpful in planning future "tests" of any library media activity to be planned. See table 3.

What has been the pattern of usage of the library media center? This needs to be recorded *before* any changes are implemented. Fast change makes it easy to forget past patterns. Library media centers are heavily used only a small portion of the school year—during the annual research assignment for the junior or senior major paper and freshman research into careers. For the rest of the year, they are often a respite from the study hall. As you review your plan book, you can begin to analyze the number of classes using the library media center in proportion to the single students who come from a study hall or from classrooms. See table 4.

The shift to collaboration with teachers and integration of information literacy skills into every subject is worthwhile to record. Library media specialists will need this information to use as confirmation of the need for a larger budget and for more staff. Your record of collaboration will provide ideas both for repeating a unit and for "remembering" those tasks or materials that were less successful.

Table 1

Teacher Teaching Styles

Teacher	Teaching Style	Grade Level	Subject	Units of Instruction
Jones	Con/Seq	11	Social Studies	World History
Adams	Random/Abs	9-12	Art	20th c. Painters
Kryczansky	Con/Seq	7	Science	Machines
Kryczansky	Con/Seq	7	Social Studies	U.S. History

Table 2 Teacher Study Time

Teacher	Subject	Activity	Time (in min.)	% of Total Time	
lones	Social Studies	Lecture	30	60	
		Begin homework	15	40	
Peterson	Language Arts	Spelling	20	45	
		Lecture	15	40	
		Writing exercise	10	15	
Hu	Science	Lecture	20	45	
		Lab	25	55	
Al-Kabar	Math	Lecture	20	45	
		Computer practice	20	45	
		Begin homework	10	10	

Table 3

Foreign Languages

	Reasons for Omitting Co	Reasons for Omitting Courses from Block Scheduling					
	Subject .	Reason					
Health		While required by the state, this would not be considered a "core" subject. If this is to be placed into a block of time, it should be combined as a part of the physical education course.					
	Band/Orchestra/Choir	These should remain as extracurricular as they do not have 100% participation by students.					

Shorter time periods with regular classes would help students retain their skills.

Determining What to Test

Once you have your baseline data, you begin the design of your action research. Choosing what to test should be a partnership arrangement. You will need to find co-teacher(s) who want to work with you, although you need to remember that sometimes being a part of a study brings in a better performance simply because it is a study. For the beginning action researcher, starting small with a simple study will be better than a larger attempt with a longer time frame from beginning to completion.

Who else has tested this problem?

To base your research on a model from the field

is another way to reduce the amount of error you might encounter when starting from scratch. A recent article in *Knowledge Quest* provides you with some reports from the field that would be useful in finding out who else has studied this problem.⁶

To translate findings into the question you wish to have answered, Mistretta and Polansky found the following advantages to properly implemented block scheduling:

- Reduced number of class changes and transitions during any one school day;
- Reduced duplication and increased efficiency;
- Reduction in the number of students seen by each teacher daily;

Tab	le	4	

Student Numbers Using Media Center

	Entire class		Small groups				
Date	No. in Class	Teacher	No. of Groups	No. in Each Group	Teacher	Study Hall	Drop-ins
11/10	35	Jones	3	5	Jerrold	60	25
	22	Jones	2	7	Al-Kabar	-	-
	24	Jones	-	-	-	-	-
11/11	35	Jones		20		60	32
	22	Jones	-		-	-	-
	24	Jones	_	_		_	122

- Reduction in the number of teacher preparations per day;
- Reduced fragmentation;
- Flexible instructional environments; and
- Variation of time based on the content area.⁷

These advantages will be used to demonstrate how the action researcher can use someone else's findings to build a new study.

Writing Your Problem Statements

Beginning with the first bullet, your question might be, "How many reductions have occurred in the change to block scheduling?" It is a simple matter to record the number of class changes and transitions that occur with block scheduling. Students who have been assigned six or seven class periods in the six-hour school day will move six times, with a consequent loss of time spent going to lockers.

Other problem statements will be built around your objectives. One objective could be that your collaboration will increase by working with a certain number of teachers to build information literacy into their classroom assignments. Another might be that information literacy competencies of students will be increased. This one will be a more difficult one to assess, but it should be one for which you are constantly seeking evidence.

For Mistretta and Polansky's next bullet, your question is "How does the longer time in the library media center affect the way I teach information literacy?" Discovering the reduction in duplication and the increase in efficiency may take more time to record. When students are in the library media center to conduct research, the fact that you can give instructions and stu-

dents could practice them immediately reduces time spent compared to the alternative method of forty-five-minute classes. Shorter classes mean repeating much of the information at the beginning of the class. Students forget when they aren't able to put their learning into practice. Does the increased time allow them to generate their research question and test the resources for supporting evidence, or are they only able to do the first step? Have you planned reflection time? How could you "test" if their retention is higher? Could you compare the amount of time given to your lecture and match this to a tally sheet of the number of student questions related to your lecture? An increase in student learning time may be shown to result from the combination of teacher collaboration in planning and the longer time in the media center for putting instruction into practice. It will help you know if you have enough resources available.

How will you study these problems? What data will you collect?

Selecting the design defines what data you will collect. Because we have been placing our study within the framework of Mistretta and Polansky, some of the data to collect falls easily in place. Collecting data can accomplish two objectives: It can actually collect data; and it can become an awareness tool to encourage collaboration among teachers.

What if the research project in a junior English class covered a topic being taught in the junior social studies classroom? Results could point out that an arbitrary assignment of an extended research paper needs continual reteaching of information literacy skills while the application of a real topic increases interest in that topic, improves retention of research skills, and heads the student toward lifelong learning. Scheduling the research project as a joint project between two classrooms immerses students in the social studies topic and allows them to have their writing skills checked by a welltrained editor, the English teacher. Students also will have three critics for their papers—the English and social studies teachers and the library media specialist—each looking for both their major objectives, but also seeking to identify any writing or social studies content.

For this, one rubric would be built to assess student work and another to assess the value of teacher collaboration across the curriculum. The rubric to test the quality of student products would be developed by students, teachers, and library media specialist. The rubric for course development is created by teachers and library media specialist. See tables 5 & 6.

The reduction in the number of students seen by each teacher daily, the third bullet in the Mistretta and Polansky report, is an easily collected statistic. For the classroom teacher, collaboration with the library media specialist means that two adults are working with the students, resulting in an even smaller pupil/teacher ratio. While the number of students who come to the library media center may be the same for the library media specialist, the length of time spent with a single group lengthens even though others are in the center at the same time. Assess this by using the table for patterns of usage shown above (table 4) and adding a new column for length of time each group is in the library media center. See table 7.

The fourth bullet in Mistretta and Polansky suggests that the number of daily teacher preparations may decrease. However, it may not cut down on the amount of time a teacher needs to prepare. Further, implementing block scheduling means that teacher and library media specialist need time for collaboration, and this time may not have been factored into the teaching days in past years.

At this point, the library media specialist begins to collect data on collaboration with teachers. Probably the easiest way to do this is through an electronic plan book that records your calendar for the day, the teachers who come into the media center to consult, and the

Table 5

Student Product Assessment

10	Student has collected current resources.	
10	Student has drawn logical conclusions.	
10	Student has correct bibliographic format.	

Table 6

Course Development Assessment

100% of students received individual attention at all stages of the research process.	
The information literacy model was covered in more depth.	
Instruction time for teachers/librarian was sufficient.	

Use by Classes	No. of Minutes	Small Groups	No. of Minutes	Others			
35 (Jones)	90	3 (Jerrold)	20	25			
22		2 (Al-Kabar)	15				
35 (Jones)				20			
22 (Jones)							
	Use by Classes 35 (Jones) 22 35 (Jones) 22 (Jones)	Use by Classes No. of Minutes 35 (Jones) 90 22 35 (Jones) 22 (Jones)	Use by Classes No. of Minutes Small Groups 35 (Jones) 90 3 (Jerrold) 22 2 2 (Al-Kabar) 35 (Jones) 22 (Jones)	Use by Classes No. of Minutes Small Groups No. of Minutes 35 (Jones) 90 3 (Jerrold) 20 22 2 (Al-Kabar) 15 35 (Jones) 22 (Jones)			

name of the unit being discussed. As you begin to build units of instruction, your record of those actual units of instruction will be your evidence. While it is easier to save them on disk, keeping a hard copy in a notebook makes it readily available when someone comes into the media center.

Library Media Specialist as Instructional Designer

A recent RAND study was reported in "The Change Process and Alternative Scheduling."8 The study, which looked at successful urban schools, showed that external technical assistance was needed for coaching and strengthening staff skills through professional development. "New teaching strategies can require as much as fifty hours of instruction, practice, and coaching before teachers become comfortable with them."9

One suggestion for library media specialists who wish to move into a leadership role is to be an integral part of the planning for practice and coaching experiences. If skills in instructional design are sufficient and if library media specialists have the proper rapport with their

colleagues, providing the technical assistance may save the district money that would otherwise be needed to hire the appropriate consultant. In addition, the library media specialist now is well established as someone for a teacher to approach with education problems.

"Reduced fragmentation," the next bullet in the Mistretta and Polansky, has always been a keystone for library media specialists. In our role, we see all of the students and all of the teachers all of the time. We have worked with all curricular areas and we can help teachers further reduce the fragmentation of courses taught in isolation. It is a difficult battle to win when school district administrators, parents, and the news media wait for the next report of testing done within a state. However, if we are to prepare students for life and work after their basic education is completed, helping teachers join together to relate learning in one classroom to learning in the next becomes our battle cry.

A calendar of teachers, units, and what they teach is a simple beginning to the process of helping teach across the curriculum. If you return to the example of the English teacher, whose research report is based upon a topic

being covered in the social studies classroom, the model of collaboration across the curriculum begins. If one of your objectives for the year was to develop and implement at least one information literacy activity that would cross curriculum areas, you have met your objective.

Flexible instructional environments are challenges to the textbook/lecture teacher. Expanding lectures from fortyfive minutes to ninety minutes only increases the boredom of the audience. Library media specialists can help teachers build cooperative group activities and provide students time for reflection. Working together, library media specialist and teacher can see that every child in the class has assistance when questions arise. Modeling col-

laborative behavior in the media center with collaborative projects is one method of coaching teachers and demonstrating to students the value of working together. Collecting evidence of this adds to your growing stack of successful objective implementation.

How will you analyze your data?

Most of your data will result in numbers that you can add and subtract. Just report those numbers. Whenever possible, you can turn them into percentages. Most readers readily understand what an average score means, and they will understand percentages of time spent on projects. If you feel that more expertise is needed to analyze your data, see if someone in your district is available to help you, or turn to a nearby college or university and locate someone who might be interested in helping you with your project. For many faculty members, being able to help you with your research will help them with their own research agenda. Research is a requirement for tenure, promotion, and salary increases in many institutions of higher education.

Table 8

Assessing Impact			
Questions	Methodology	Analysis and Interpretation	Communication
What percentage of individual students were helped by the teacher? The library media specialist?	Teacher and library media specialist checklist of students, query, solution	Simple comparison to a 45-minute period; students were or were not helped by one or both	Longer period of time permits individual assistance with problems.
Do bibliographic citations improve?	Assess student bibliographies for quantity, quality of items chosen and for or less accurate	Students cited more or fewer items, and citations were more or less accurate	Longer period permits better choice of references and more accurate citation
Does information literacy instruction expand? Is meaningless repetition of instruction reduced?	What has been taught and reviewed previously? What is being taught and reviewed this year?	How many more aspects of information literacy have been covered?	Longer period of time decreases repetition of instruction and expands material covered
What changes have occurred in units of instruction?	Your plan book Teachers' plan book	Increase in collaboration across the curriculum Conclusions and	Level of improvement due to block scheduling

How and to whom will you report your findings?

The wonderful thing about action research is that it belongs to you. You share it with the persons of *your* choice. Obviously, if findings are very positive, you will want to share it with the entire school. When the findings are less positive, you and your teacher cohorts will need to assess how to make the managerial and educational changes that will bring better results the next time.

If the problem is lack of materials, that statistic is reported to administration. For years, many school library media centers have had severely reduced funding to purchase resources and equipment. Your research reported in terms of student achievement and curriculum needs should strengthen your position, particularly if an educational innovation is underway.

Findings are reported to teachers to help them understand the role of the media center in student progress. When teachers who have not made use of the media center learn the results of classes that have, they will be eager to join the library media specialist and other teachers in collaborating on units of instruction.

Giving parents examples of the progress of students who are conducting research can be made through presentations at parent-teacher

meetings, exhibits at open house for parents, newsletters sent home, and devices students themselves may create. With the attention being paid on parent participation in the education of their students, your information concerning increases in information literacy will be welcomed by all.

Providing your administrator(s) with evidence of research progress gives them the ammunition to request additional funds from the site-based management pool. Administrators could be given the words and a PowerPoint® presentation to encourage them to make presentations at their conferences and expand the attention given to the library media program as an integral part of the school curriculum.

The bottom line with this article is its context. It was to help you assess the impact of block scheduling on library media services. The chart above poses four questions and displays the methodology for "testing," the analysis and interpretation, ending with the conclusions you could draw and how you might communicate your findings. See table 8.

Your results need to be reported in your local area by sharing findings with your colleagues in your district. Next you should write short articles for your state association newsletter. Presenting a synopsis of what you have found on a list such as LM_NET can help you locate a colleague with similar interests with whom you might collaborate for an article in *Knowledge Quest*. Reporting to groups when opportunities arise allows you the opportunity to tell your audience about your research and to listen to their suggestions for improvements. Members of the audience often have success stories to relate that will expand the knowledge.

Adding to the skimpy research on the value of the library media center in block scheduling can be critical in the implementation of the innovation. It helps to establish the leadership role of the library media specialist and to create the need for additional resources. It allows the library media specialist to move teaching into a constructivist mode and it improves student attitudes about school, one of the findings of much of the research on block scheduling.

Comparing your data to other findings can confirm your present direction for resources and services. If, in the process of comparison, another way to implement appears to be more successful, it gives you an opportunity to try a new method. If what you are doing is confirmed in the literature, you have every support to continue to follow that path.

What will you do to make the changes found in the research?

When the results of your research show problems and no similar study is reported for you to see what another library media specialist tried, meet with your cooperating teachers and discuss the situation. See if common sense can help you try a different approach. Engage other teachers in the discussion. This may encourage them to join you in a future project. Again, you may wish to consult with someone in a local university or with staff at your state department of education to select new methods. Those who are accustomed to using an e-mail list could surely post their question to other library media specialists.

You are the key to successful change when block scheduling is implemented at your school. You need only engage the interest of your faculty and administration in leading the planning process. When you have collaborated with teachers, they become your best advocates for changes in scheduling, sharing of resources, reallocation of staff, and additional resources. As students recognize the use of information in their education, they build lifelong research skills. You must keep in mind that, as you change your role in the school and your program's services and resources to meet the changing needs of block scheduling, you will build on your base data. You will continue to add to your evidence of the effect of these changes on the teaching and learning in your building. When change shows improvement in student performance, or more collaboration between teachers and library media specialists or between teachers of different subjects or grade levels, you have demonstrated the positive effect of the library media center in a block scheduling environment.

Note

Block scheduling environments for this article include secondary and middle schools. While some of the research methodology may be applied to elementary schools, they are, by their very nature, self-contained classrooms where teachers assign subjects based upon their assessment of need rather than by a class schedule involving all the students. ●

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