

SCHOOL MEDIA CENTER SERVICES: THE VIEW FROM BOTH SIDES OF THE DESK

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ABSTRACT

The authors have recently engaged in a series of research studies designed to measure the perceptions of media staff, teachers, and students concerning the services received from or provided by the school media center. All three studies measured the variety of media services being offered, the frequency with which those services were offered, and their dispersal among the students and teachers.

A number of interesting trends and developments emerged concerning the utilization of library services by specific segments of the school population, reasons for disuse of services, the types of library services offered most and least frequently by media specialists, the services with which teachers expressed the most and least satisfaction, and agreement on the variety and frequency of services offered.

The school library media center is the focus of more research today than at any other period in its history and one of the most rapidly growing areas of research involves evaluation of media center services. There are many ways in which a school media center can be evaluated and many facets of a media program to be considered. This diversity leads to widely varying opinions as to who should have input into the evaluative process, what aspects of the school media program most clearly reveal its effectiveness and quality, and how one actually does go about evaluating those aspects deemed most important. In spite of these differences of opinion, most would concur that school media centers should attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs, justify program offerings, and find ways to enable potential

“customers” to convey their needs and desires to those responsible for the media program.

Studies

In an effort to measure the perceptions of media staff, teachers, and students concerning the services provided by or received from the school media center, the authors have engaged in a series of three studies; the first, performed in 1973, examined the perceptions of media staff and teachers in forty-two senior high schools [1];¹ and second [2], performed in 1975, in thirty-two elementary schools [2]; and the third was performed in 1976 [3], in twenty-four middle and junior high schools.

PURPOSE

Basically, all three studies measured the variety of media center services offered, the frequency with which these services were offered, and their dispersal among the students and teachers. The first also compared services media specialists offered most and least frequently with the services judged by teachers to be most and least satisfactory. The third study focused specifically on the areas of utilization, planning, production, and evaluation with emphasis on the media specialist's involvement in curriculum planning and instructional development and the equal dispersal of services to students and teachers.

INSTRUMENTATION USED

Initially, a comprehensive list of items was compiled and organized into nine service categories. With each new study the list was modified and refined, culminating finally in the publication of the “Purdue Self-Evaluation System for School Media Centers.” [4]² The Purdue Self-Evaluation System (PSES) enables media specialists to select from a service list of over 200 items, only those items upon which they wish their program to be evaluated. An instrument of this type allows schools to “tailor-make” their own evaluations and in doing so, eliminate the disadvantage of having to cope with items that are inappropriate or irrelevant to their own individual situations.

A system such as PSES, which allows media specialists to select the items they want, gives rise to conjecture that they will select only those items which are expected to reflect favorably upon their services. However, this possibility did not materialize in the 1976 study in which the researcher preselected items in four of the nine service areas but allowed the media specialists to

¹ Phase one of this study involved 199 schools and measured only media staff perceptions of services.

² Separate versions for the elementary and secondary levels are available.

select any items in the other five areas as well. Responses to the items pre-selected by the researcher and to the items selected by the media specialists were compared and there was no significant difference between the two groups of responses.

With the exception of the elementary students who used a frequency scale of:

- | | |
|---------------|----------------|
| 1. no; | 3. yes; and |
| 2. sometimes; | 4. don't know, |

all respondent groups answered with a frequency scale of:

- | | |
|------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. regularly; | 3. rarely or never; and |
| 2. occasionally; | 4. don't know, |

which were defined for the respondent groups so as to minimize misunderstandings or differences in interpretation. The elementary student scale was initially constructed with the positive answer first. However, because of the students' desire to please, they were responding "yes" because of the positive nature of the questions. The scale is now a negative-to-positive scale.

SERVICES PROVIDED

Agreement about the services offered and the frequency with which they were offered differed between teachers and media staff on all three studies. The lowest level of agreement between teachers and media staff concerning the frequency of media center services was found at the high school level; the highest level of agreement was found at the elementary level. Possibly, the difference in nature between elementary and secondary schools could be responsible for this difference. In an elementary school the media specialist and teacher might be more attuned to what the other is doing. At the secondary level, the curriculum is more diverse and contact with teachers and students more diffuse.

Services provided most often were the accessibility services, acquisition of new materials, lists of new materials, the provision of reserve collections and assistance in the location of materials. Other commonly offered services included gathering materials and suggesting materials of various interest levels. Media staff at all grade levels gave priority to supply-distribution-type services. Purchasing materials and equipment, making their location known to teachers, and distributing them as needed were the services considered most important and offered the most frequently. This block of services could be referred to as basic or "foundation" services—the ordinary services that most school media programs provide.

Services offered least often were in the areas of instructional design, evaluation and professional services. These items clustered around the media staff's direct involvement in the instructional program of the school. One service in

the "least offered" group was symptomatic of many of the media staff's most pressing problems: "Participates in curriculum planning as a member of a curriculum committee." The percentage of media specialists who were members of the curriculum committee or who regularly consulted with the curriculum committee ranged from 10 per cent at the high school level in 1973, to 23 per cent at the elementary school level, and to 29 per cent at the junior high school level in 1976. It would be difficult to judge whether increased participation on the curriculum committee was a result of the different grade levels involved or of a three-year time difference but it is hoped that these figures are indicative of a trend toward increased participation of media specialists in curriculum planning.

All three studies found that the media staff's involvement in evaluation activities was less than might be desired. It was not surprising that few schools were engaged in formal evaluation procedures; after all, the emphasis on accountability in the education field is relatively new. Furthermore, few schools have been required to implement evaluation procedures unless they were using federal monies which required them to do so. What was more surprising perhaps was the infrequent use of informal evaluation procedures. It would seem that as long as complaints are not voiced the assumption is made that everyone is satisfied with the services that are being provided.

In follow-up interviews at the high school level, the following question was posed: "Suppose a teacher brings in his or her class for a media center project. At the conclusion of the visit, do you ever say to the teacher: 'Were your students able to find what they needed?' Or, 'How good were the written reports from your students after their media center project last week? Did we have enough of the right kinds of materials?' And suppose the teacher answers 'no' to either question. Do you make plans to order more materials if the teacher wishes to teach the same unit again next year?" As earlier implied, it was found that evaluation was a service performed only occasionally.

Users of Media Center Services

To ascertain the more dominant media center users, utilization by subject area teachers and utilization by more and less experienced teachers were examined. Utilization of media center services by subject area teachers has been the focus of several research efforts in the past, two of which deserve mention here. Both Ducat [5] and the NEA [6] found that English, social studies, and science teachers were the major users of media center resources. The secondary Indiana studies examined this facet of media center usage and concluded that these three subject areas no longer represent the most dominant users of the media center. In the high school study, all subject areas (except physical education and health) reported a similar number of services indicating

that there was relatively even diffusion of media center services to all curricular areas. The conclusion was drawn that individual differences among teachers accounted for as much variation in their utilization patterns of media center services as did membership in a particular subject department.

Junior high teachers were asked to categorize themselves as media center users (several times a week, once a week, once a month, etc.). Using the teachers' assessments of themselves as media center users, it was determined that the areas of language arts, social studies, and science could no longer be considered the only major users of media center services. There were several possible reasons advanced for these findings:

1. changed formats in certain curricular areas could have influenced media center utilization one way or another;
2. the proliferation of audiovisual materials available for all subject areas in recent years has altered the utilization possibilities for every subject area in the school; and
3. federal monies have made it possible to attain materials for many departments served inadequately in the past.

Whatever the reasons, there are implications for educators and media specialists relative to these findings:

1. library and audiovisual educators should not slight any areas of the curriculum in their training programs in preference for the traditional few; and
2. graduate programs for medial specialists should continue to require broad undergraduate degrees so that prospective media specialists will have a working knowledge of the many disciplines that they will be required to serve each day.

When teaching experience and media center usage was examined at the junior high level, it was found that teachers who had over fifteen years of teaching experience did utilize a larger variety of media center services on a regular basis than did other teachers. Presumably, a teacher with more years of teaching experience would be aware of and consequently utilize more types of media center services. It is quite possible that this finding indicates a need for more extensive orientation for incoming teachers, for increased in-service efforts, and concentration on the needs of the new or younger teacher.

SERVICES PROVIDED TO USERS

To assess the question of whether or not students and teachers were given equal use of and information about facilities, equipment, and materials, teacher responses on individual items were compared against student responses; both were then compared against media staff responses. In almost every

instance, teacher ratings exceeded student ratings. Teachers were receiving more services more frequently.

Optimally, services should be provided equally for teachers and students. However, the traditional pattern in school media centers has been to give teachers more latitude with circulation procedures than students, to allow greater accessibility to audiovisual materials and equipment to teachers than to students, and to purchase materials more readily at the teacher's recommendation than at the student's. Perhaps media specialists have felt that teachers were more responsible than youngsters, less apt to damage or break costly equipment, and more in need of materials. Too, it should be pointed out that teachers who are media center users are more likely to encourage their students to use the media center. Therefore, many media specialists concentrate their efforts on influencing teachers to use the media center in the hope that they will in turn influence their students' utilization of the media center.

All three groups—students, teachers, and media staff—were in relative agreement upon the production services offered most and least frequently. Facilities and equipment for the production of audiovisual materials were provided more often than supplies and help from the media staff. And although both teachers and students had some access to facilities, equipment, and supplies for “do-it-yourself” projects, a marked decrease was seen in both groups when asked how often they received the finished product from the media staff. The small number of persons (30 per cent of the teachers and 8 per cent of the students) receiving the finished product from the media staff could be attributed to several factors: lack of money, limited facilities, and inadequate support staff.

EXAMINATION OF NONUSERS

After striving diligently to offer new services each school year, it is very discouraging at the end of the year to find that some of the teachers and students are not taking advantage of them. The question is usually raised then as to whether they are fully aware of those services but for some reason are not using them or whether they are basically unaware of those services. Responses of the two junior high user groups, students and teachers, were examined. Specifically, the responses “rarely or never” and “don't know” were examined assuming that any person answering “rarely or never” was indicating nonuse of services he knew existed while the response of “don't know” would indicate a lack of awareness on the part of the respondent. Judging from the responses generated by this questionnaire, students were often aware of services the media center had to offer but they weren't taking advantage of them. The opposite was found when teacher responses were examined; teachers were exhibiting lack of awareness rather than an indifference to services being offered.

Both observations are disturbing but the fact that some teachers are unaware of media center offerings has some rather far-reaching implications, not the least of which is a definite need for more intensive orientation and/or in-service education to acquaint teachers with services available in the media center. If teachers are exhibiting a lack of awareness, those same teachers are not likely to be using the media center themselves nor will they be encouraging the students to use it.

Follow-up interviews revealed a wide range of reasons for student nonuse of media center services. Of course, there were a few situations where the media specialist's personality and restrictive policies were judged to be deterrents to media center utilization. By far more prevalent though, were situations where students seemed to be scheduled out of the media center instead of into it. The majority of students, even those in suburban areas, were bused which in most cases precluded use of the media center either before or after school. Many students did not have any "free" periods during the school day during which they could come to the media center. Because of discipline problems, many schools had abandoned study halls, home rooms, and long lunch periods which would normally give students the opportunity to come to the media center.

One school in the study was surprised to find that they had a group of student nonusers and immediately began to assess possible causes. School scheduling was found to be the culprit. Once recognizing the inflexibility of their school schedule, though, the media staff, administrative staff, and teachers joined efforts to alleviate the situation. Would that all schools acted so quickly to eliminate problem areas. Too frequently heard in the follow-up interviews: "If good students want to bad enough, they'll find some way to get to the media center."

Conclusions

Agreement between the media staff and users about the variety and frequency of services offered differed with the grade levels examined with the highest level of agreement reached at the elementary level. Unfortunately, agreement can be rather evasive in the media center situation and that lack of agreement could be a result of the problems inherent in the media center situation. The media specialist can quite legitimately report that he or she does indeed give book talks, for example, on a regular basis. However, the social studies teacher, when asked how often this same service is received, just as legitimately replies that it is received only occasionally. And then there are the services that are offered only to segments of the teachers and students which need to be examined from time to time. Who are the unserved? Should we or can we extend the services?

Services that were being provided most frequently were still in the areas of acquisition, accessibility, and utilization. These are the more traditional

offerings and perhaps because they are, they were also the services teachers rated as being most satisfactory. Definite progress was noted in the production, evaluation, and instructional design areas but they were still ranked as the least frequently provided and rated by the teachers as being the least satisfactory services.

A profile of utilization patterns pointed out the following:

1. language arts, social studies, and science teachers could no longer be considered the media center's most dominant users; and
2. teachers who had over fifteen years of experience utilized a larger variety of media center services than did other teachers.

All schools examined were judged to be more teacher-oriented than student-oriented. In all service areas, teachers were receiving more services than the students; the area in which discrepancy was most apparent was the production area. Most schools were beginning to offer some services in the audiovisual production area—either supplies, facilities, or equipment. However, not many had reached the stage of development where they were able to offer a full range of production services including full-time professionally trained audiovisual staff.

When reasons for disuse of media center services were examined, it was found that teachers were too often unaware of existing media center services and that students, while seemingly more aware of available services, were taking less advantage of the same services. Again, the need for a program to orient teachers to available media center services must be emphasized. Each media center should also be charged with the responsibility of determining why students are not taking advantage of the services available to them.

WHERE NEXT?

Measuring the users' perceptions of services received has been useful in documenting what services are received and who receives them. The authors are aware of other research efforts in the measurement of school media center services which are either underway or near completion in other states; these other studies should provide a few more puzzle pieces which will strengthen and bring into perspective the results of these three studies.

Measuring the services of randomly selected schools provides the broad picture of where we are at a given time; it does, however, compromise the best and inflate the worst of what media specialists are doing. A definite need exists to measure services in some of the best media centers in the nation in order to document the who, what, and how of services offered. More importantly, these studies need to document how the school media center services in exemplary situations developed.

Each of us has our own list of factors which we feel are conducive to a school media center's success but these factors need careful documentation. A few media specialists in the country are following Liesener's method of collecting extensive time data on media services as part of a total planning strategy for media programs [7]. Case studies documenting this method and its impact on priorities and decision making would also be helpful.

Still lacking is an assessment of which services hold the best potential for lasting impact on children and young adults. Today's media specialists are flooded with theoretical ideas of what they should and could be doing. However, with the hundreds of demands on their time and attention each day, media specialists find themselves simply *reacting* rather than *acting* assertively and positively to bring about needed change. The fact that this situation is understandable makes it no less unacceptable. Simply reacting to daily circumstances is inherent in any job setting where your time is not your own or where your energies and efforts are subjected to external pressures and demands. However, we must begin to more diligently assess the ways in which we spend our time, to examine the services deemed most beneficial as verbalized by the users, and then move decisively and without delay to assign priorities to those services and follow them through to fruition.

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