

# **SMQ** Current **SMQ** Research

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*A major step was taken at the ALA Dallas Conference by the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) to encourage the much-needed research in the school media area. School library media specialists and other professionals in the field came together for a two-day preconference institute on Improving School Library Media Programs through Action Research. David V. Loertscher, institute coordinator, has prepared this report of the preconference in which he has posed some very important challenges for school library media specialists who are striving to maximize their unique contributions to the instructional program in the school.*

## **THE DALLAS ACTION RESEARCH PRECONFERENCE—A REPORT**

It has been gratifying over the past five years to watch school library media specialists become more interested in research and evaluation. As a group, school library media specialists are better educated and demand better answers than "We've always done it this way." They are turning to research results to make more rational decisions and to determine systematically which activities or services hold promise of building the best school media program.

Reacting to this increased research interest, the AASL Research Committee has offered a number of research forums at the Annual Conference where persons, mostly new Ph.D.'s, have presented the findings of research projects. The committee, looking for other types of presenters, has made an effort to find practitioners who are doing research projects in actual building or district situations but has found few who would admit to conducting research or who had the courage to have their homegrown efforts put to the scrutiny of a national audience.

The dominant message from the field has been that research skills held by practitioners are minimal and that a lack of direction on how to proceed is present. Knowing this, the Research Committee decided to plan a preconference for AASL that would address the problem.

On Friday and Saturday, June 22-23, 1979, 111 school library media specialists, district-level supervisors, state department personnel, and library school educators gathered at the new Hyatt Regency Hotel in Dallas to explore the topic of action research.

Action research is defined as studies that can be conducted by building- and district-level media specialists that do not require an extensive background in research methodology or statistics yet do employ enough rigor so that results and conclusions have validity for specific programs in specific school library media centers.

During the preconference, each group of nine persons, guided by a table leader, planned a sample action research project, and a number of individuals planned studies to conduct during the next school year.

The institute participants were taught by Richard Englert from the School of Education, Temple University. His thorough organization and flawless presentation skill guided everyone through a challenging process in a minimum amount of time. The response by the participants to Englert and the many other presenters was overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic.

It is instructive to categorize the studies that were prepared at the eleven tables to see what was on the collective mind of the group. What topics captured their attention as urgent? Four of the studies prepared concentrated on discovering how much learning resulted from various types of school library media center activities. For example, one group was interested in increasing a child's sequencing ability through the use of storytelling and follow-up activities.

The seven remaining studies concentrated on testing various ways of changing the image of the school library media center by demonstrating some form of curricular involvement. For example, one group wanted to study teacher attitude change when the school library media specialist began a new program of cooperative unit planning.

Another group wished to test improved total unit involvement if the school library media specialist participated in writing curriculum guides. A third group wanted to test various ways of heightening the principal's awareness of the role of the school library media center, and a fourth wished to work on techniques of involving students in more independent use of the school library media center.

As one reflects on the preconference, it was as if the group was admitting that many school library media specialists are still on the outside of the learning environment but surely would make a difference if the power structure (administration and teachers) would just let them get their feet in the door. It was apparent that the entire group was concerned that we measure the contribution of the school library media program to the educational process.

One of the most frustrating experiences of the conference and the most instructive was the narrowing of the above broad generalized problems into actual action research study that was doable in the real world. Many people got caught up in trying to do a "chain" study. The pattern was:

- the school library media specialist performs a service;
- that service causes something to happen,
- which causes something else to happen,
- which causes something else to happen,
- which raises children's scores on standardized tests.

For example, the school library media specialist plans a unit of instruction with a teacher. This planning causes the teacher to involve the library media center more in the unit, which causes more materials to be used, which causes children to be more interested in learning, which causes them to learn more, which causes them to score higher on standardized tests. Englert reminded us all that chain reasoning is very poor; i.e., if there is a single weak link in the chain, then the outcome is never attained. Secondly, the probability that a single library media service will have a dramatic and "causal" impact on test scores is improbable. He taught that we should be doing many, many studies that are narrow in topic and precise in concept. These studies would look at immediate results and

serve as intermediate steps to broader objectives.

An example of a narrow study drawn from the conference may help to illustrate the contribution of action research. Jane Klasing, a high school library media specialist from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, presented the results of an action research project done under her direction in the preceding year. Knowing that book losses were very high, she persuaded school officials to expend the necessary funds to install a security system in the school library media center. Naturally, officials were interested and required her to provide figures on loss rate reduction as evidence of a sound investment. Klasing found that the loss rate was reduced by 80 percent. We might be tempted to state that the security system "caused" the students to stop stealing books. That may or may not be true. The system may instead have served as a constant *reminder* to the students that the rule of "no stealing" should be taken seriously.

In another study presented at the conference, Nita Sides and Mary Szorcik from Evansville, Indiana, described their "Project MISS," which illustrates more of a chain study. Two schools were used in their action research. One school received money to organize a centralized library media center and to hire a very competent professional who worked intensively with teachers and students in a "prescriptive-style" library media program; the other school continued with its classroom library program. Student gains on standardized tests in the experimental school were significant.

Neither Sides nor Szorcik claimed that the project "caused" the rise in scores—nor could critics deny that the program might have caused it. Let us assume that something else (X) actually caused the rise. If the continuation of Project MISS is associated with high scores (X still being present), then it should be worth the investment in MISS to guarantee that X's influence continues.

The exciting aspect of the conference was that if everyone there would go home and do many of these action research studies there would be all kinds of building blocks to look at as we constructed our programs. Like Klasing, we would all like to know the best and most inexpensive ways of reminding users that stealing materials is not acceptable behavior. If many school library media specialists tried a variety of tech-

niques to teach this concept and reported their results, the profession would then be able to draw some conclusions and prepare some prescriptions: "If you are in a given type of situation, method A is applicable. If you are in another situation, method B is likely to be successful."

The reader may protest—but we already do this. We try things and talk shop at conference, sharing what works and what doesn't. The Dallas Conference taught us that a more structured approach to our experiment at home, a more systematic data collection plan, and building confidence in our decisions would push the field faster toward a sounder theoretical base.

Readers of the education research literature, particularly the work of Gene Glass, will recognize that his concept of meta-analysis is precisely this: that if the results of study after study in many differing situations point toward the same conclusion, then we are getting much closer to the truth.

As institute director, I was very pleased with the intense interest and enthusiasm of the 111 participants at the Dallas Conference, but I also reflect that the cost of that conference (assuming that it cost \$300 per person to attend, for a total of \$33,300) is no small sum. If that money is not wasted, then some imperative challenges lie ahead for conference participants and other researchers interested in the school library media center:

1. We need more serious researchers doing studies after the doctoral dissertation. No profession can sustain theoretical structure building upon dissertation "first attempts". An excellent example of this type of research is the three-phase school-public library study conducted by Shirley Aaron (Florida State University) that was reported at the conference. In the face of new tax proposals to save money by combining school and public libraries, Aaron has contributed a landmark study that not only surveyed school-public libraries in various parts of the United States but also studied them in depth. Aaron's guidelines for communities facing this type of decision are invaluable and vastly superior to decisions made via heated rhetoric and personal opinion.

2. Formal research studies being done

need to be reported to practitioners in understandable language. Those persons who have presented material at an AASL research forum have had to condense their studies into fifteen-minute "down-to-earth" capsules. Generally, they have succeeded and the audience has both understood and enjoyed. This could be done in print. A sample candidate for a publication is a dissertation case study done at the University of Pittsburgh and reported by Margaret Tassia in Dallas. Tassia studied the effectiveness of a games workshop by analyzing its structure and following the participants' response to that workshop over time. In doing the study, Tassia was able to develop a recommended design for a workshop. Her experience and guiding principles are very worthwhile but will rarely be used if *Dissertation Abstracts* is the only access point.

3. School library media specialists need to apply and test the results of formal research studies in real-life situations. This process is known as research replication and is vital if we are to discern valid advances in the field. One conference presenter, Jan Stroud, from Purdue University, reported a dissertation replication by Anne Deppe, a school library media specialist from Franklin, Indiana. Stroud and Deppe's replication resulted in different conclusions. This does not mean that conclusions should be declared invalid at this point, but that more researchers need to probe in the same target area. The author wishes that someone would replicate part of the Indiana study<sup>1</sup> concerning the effectiveness of the part-time professional school library media specialist. Any study done in the field of the social sciences needs the support of additional scrutiny. The scrutiny can often be done at the building or district level with the necessary rigor to make results meaningful in practical situations.
4. Most school library media specialists are smart enough to learn the rudiments of action research procedures. They need to be taught; and the attendance at the Dallas Conference and the enthusiasm of the participants indicate that they are ready for it.

(That's a hint, conference planners, in-service leaders, and library educators.)

5. School library media specialists need to find ways to report their research studies to the profession. There are several channels available, but they're not being used enough (ERIC, state journals, national journals, conference, etc.).
6. Finally, we need to scrutinize the success of the action research process as it becomes a tool of school library media specialists. Do practitioners carry out meaningful studies? Do the results help them solve practical problems in more rational ways? Are researchers who are removed from contact with school library media centers listening to those doing action research studies as they construct a theoretical lattice?

June Level, a school library media specialist in Fayetteville, Arkansas, is a prime example of what happens as action research studies become a part of a program. Asked to conduct a study specifically to report to the Dallas group, she chose two groups of students—book talking one group regularly and not the other. After analyzing reading records of both groups, she learned that her power to influence children's reading was considerable and was not that difficult to document. Level found that 72 percent of all the books read by her "book talked" group were ones she had recommended. Not only will her future program reflect the direct results of her study, but in the process of collecting the data she also discovered a number of related questions to explore and several unexpected spin-off results that were fascinating.

We are still a young profession (remember, the majority of school library media centers did not exist twenty years ago), but we are beginning to mature, and it does appear that the Dallas Conference was a step in that progression.—*David V. Loertscher, Faculty Member, College of Education, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville.*

#### REFERENCE

1. David V. Loertscher and Phyllis Land, "An Empirical Study of Media Services in Indiana Elementary Schools," *School Media Quarterly* 4:8-18 (Fall 1975).

#### ERIC DOCUMENTS

Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development. *Dissemination Networks: Information Resources for Education*. San Francisco, Calif.: U.S. Off. of Education (DHEW), 1978. 82p. ED 162 633. MF \$0.83, HC \$4.67 plus postage.

Descriptive information is provided on twenty-two networks sponsored by the National Institute of Education (NIE) or the United States Office of Education (USOE) for the dissemination of educational information. The directory is arranged alphabetically by network title, followed by its acronym, sponsoring bureau/office, major functions, network members, target audience, description, available publications, support contractors, date established, and central contact person. The appendixes include a State Locator Chart showing which network components now function in each state and address lists for key participants in many of the networks. This directory and the two companion volumes listed as related documents provide reference tools for individuals and agencies involved in education dissemination activities. (Author/JPF)

Galey, Minaruth and Grady, William F. *Guidelines for Certification of Media Specialists*. Washington, D.C.: Assn. for Educational Communications and Technology, April 1977. 86p. ED 164 009. MF \$0.83 plus postage, HC not available from EDRS.

This certification model, which is a refined version of the 1974 AECT Certification Model, is directed to the needs of educational media specialists, their employers and educators, and to certifying and accrediting agencies that approve programs preparing educational media specialists. Included in the document are reports on accreditation and certification of audiovisual, educational media, and library personnel. Appendixes detail guidelines for the certification of personnel in education communications and technology, including a list of competencies for specialists and technicians in media management, media project development, and instructional program development. This report is designed to serve the professional needs of all educators concerned with the effective utilization of instructional resources. (JEG)