Do School Library Media Programs Contribute to Academic Achievement? Consider the Evidence

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Increasing evidence shows that good school library media centers and library media programs are essential elements in an adequate education, particularly in the area of basic literacy (reading). In 1998, a major new study added documentation to that statement. But before we discuss this new report, we need to trace the accumulated evidence.

The first school libraries, which began in the late nineteenth century, principally provided reading materials for children. In the 1876 report of the status of all libraries in the United States, the school library chapter begins:

> Although the history of school libraries in the United States is marked by many changes and mishaps, it would be untrue to say that these libraries have entirely failed to accomplish the good expected of them. From first to last, their shelves have held millions of good books, affording amusement and instruction, and cultivating a taste for reading in millions of readers, young and old.[1]

No evidence supported the 1876 claim of "cultivating taste for reading"—indeed there is still little or none—yet the impact of "millions of books" is becoming very clear. The first real research about school libraries began during the era when the USSR launched Sputnik in 1958.

The National Defense Education Act concentrated on raising knowledge of science, but school library leaders and reading researchers succeeded in adding reading as a category for expending federal dollars. Mary Virginia Gaver, a professor teaching school library courses at Rutgers University, received a federal grant to study school libraries and, in 1963, published the first major evidence that children with libraries and librarians read more books than those in school libraries with no staff. And, children with no libraries at all read the least.[2]

Based on the Gaver evidence and other statistics gathered by the U.S. Office of Education, Congress enacted Title IIb of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act,

so that federal dollars bought large library collections for the nation's schools. These are the materials that are now being weeded from our collections after forty years.

These millions and millions of books had their impact as research studies began to document. In an early study, Stephen Krashen noted that more books made better readers, particularly with second language learners.[3] He pointed out the virtue of the library media center having a wide variety of interesting books on many reading levels.

Warwick Elley cited research concerning the value of flooding children with books as useful in raising literacy levels in developing countries.[4] His "book floods" follow one of several sound literacy models recommending "start young," "use many books," "choose books judiciously," "use shared reading methods," and "encourage children to read often." In his report of nine book-based programs, "all showed a positive impact."[5]

One of the most widely distributed research reports is Krashen's *The Power of Reading*, which details one hundred years of research. He concluded that young people who read a lot have improved comprehension, vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and writing style. That is, amount counts!

The most recent and powerful evidence is that of Jeff McQuillan's *The Literacy Crisis.*[6] Jim Trelease, the author of *The Read Aloud Handbook*, said of McQuillan's book: "Every school board member voting on a library issue should be forced to read this book before casting a vote." McQuillan confirms that print access has a powerful effect on reading achievement. In fact, the amount students read is one of the best predictors of the NAEP reading scores, which are used by educators all over the country as the basis for the national report card on reading.

McQuillan reports research showing that it is not the method used to teach reading that is the problem, but the access to reading materials.[7] He compares a statement by Holt in 1972 suggesting there is no point in teaching children how to read if they have nothing to read after they learn to read. In his 1992 study of two

million students in thirty-two countries, Elley found that:

> Acceptable levels of literacy are achieved by most pupils in most systems, despite a diversity of reading methods and traditions. In general, achievement is greatest when the educational systems are well endowed financially, when teachers are well educated, when students have ready access to good books, when they enjoy reading and do it often.[8]

McQuillan cites several studies that demonstrate the value of "print-rich" classrooms, quoting one in which the researcher found that the primary reason for students' reluctance to read was that they didn't have access at home to materials that interested them.[9]

Many school library media specialists have been responsible for encouraging rotating classroom collections, high numbers of circulated books to homes, programs for reading aloud, sustained silent reading, booktalking, and an array of other reading promotion activities that have contributed to the rise of basic literacy in their schools. The numbers succeeding at these efforts have been enough to make a contribution to the nation's children.

It is abundantly clear that school librarians have been making a difference in reading for a very long time—more years than we have dared to hope. Whether teachers were using phonics-based programs or whole language, or any method in between, if the school library media specialist and the teacher were pushing the amount read and trying to make reading an enjoyable habit, good things happened. The research results that show how school library media centers "cultivate a taste for reading in millions of readers, young and old" vindicate our hard work over the years.

Enter Technology and Information Literacy

Can we stay comfortable in library media programs providing reading guidance to the exclusion of everything else? After all, we know we

make a major difference. Why not leave well enough alone, particularly when the need for avid and capable readers remains the cornerstone of education now and in the foreseeable future?

It is obvious that the new *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* points to a changing role. Yes, there is lip service paid toward reading where "the library media program encourages and engages students in reading, viewing, and listening for understanding and enjoyment."[10] But information literacy in an information- and technology-rich world clearly has replaced reading at center stage in our national guidelines.

It would be wonderful to be able to report that research for the use of technology and the power of information literacy to enrich the process of learning were as strong a predictor of achievement as our efforts in reading have been. Sadly, the research is yet to be completed. So, as practitioners, we find ourselves in a quandary: Do we leave the comfort zone of reading promotion for uncharted waters? Is information literacy and technology just another fad that will fade as soon as the crushing budgetary implications of technology become apparent to the general public?

Certainly a division exists between those who still love encouraging readers and those in the profession who encourage technology. But a choice between one camp and another is unnecessary. In fact, it will be harmful and nearsighted.

We cannot continue to believe that the world of books is central. Neither can we believe that computers and the Internet have or will shortly replace books. We cannot abandon the notion that capable and avid readers are best prepared for the information-rich world, and we cannot assume that avid and capable readers will automatically succeed in the world of information smog and overload.

How will we set priorities for building readers and educating information-literate learners? Consider the following model, which presumes that elementary library media specialists will set their priorities higher in support of reading in the early school experience, although they will begin helping students become information literate when they enter school. This model suggests that students who are ready to leave high school still need to have encouragement to read as well as high levels of skill in information literacy and technology.

Library media specialists must assess individual situations carefully in order to plan programs appropriate to the needs of students. Faced with a limited budget and a choice between purchasing several computers, arguments to support spending funds for reading materials may be one of the most important
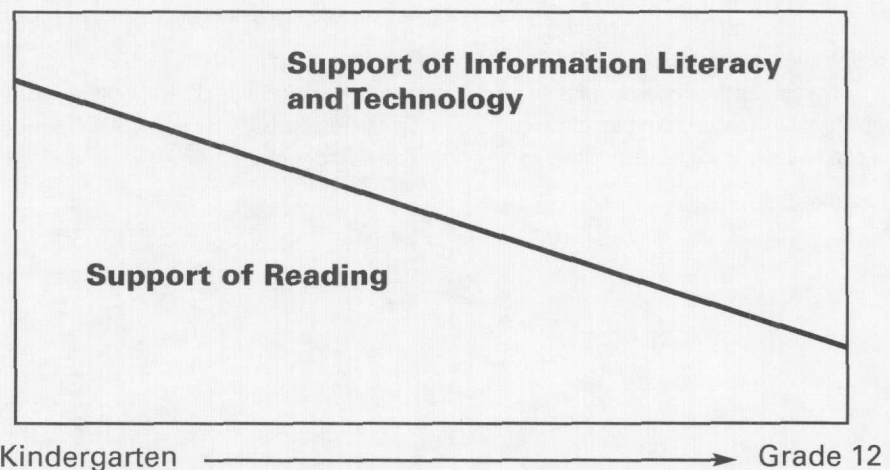

Figure 1. LMC Program Emphasis across the Grade Levels

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things schools can do. This is particularly true in a community with limited resources. Here "the responsibility for creating a literacy-enhanced environment need not be shouldered entirely by individual families. . . . Because many of these families cannot afford to purchase children's books, it becomes all the more important to make community resources . . . easily and readily available within disadvantaged communities."[11]

In the first three information literacy standards, *Information Power* describes the information literate student as one who:

- accesses information efficiently and effectively,
- evaluates information critically and competently, and
- uses information accurately and creatively.[12]

It would seem that the first step to reaching these goals is a student who can read. As students begin to search for resources in the wider information environment, more intensive efforts are placed on information literacy skills, and library media specialists should begin to track improvement in these areas based upon different interventions planned with teachers. The research will begin to show which interventions are most successful or the effect of the ratio of time spent planning with teachers to the perceived success of projects. Not only will researchers develop designs, but also library media specialists will begin to state their research questions to be tested.

Given the research evidence plus the doubling of our role, let us return to the question of how a single school library media specialist will maximize achievement. **We recommend that the only feasible solution is to spend less time doing and more time leading.** Library media specialists cannot accept the entire responsibility to see that every student is an avid reader, a skilled user of technology, and information literate. Others must help. We will not win the battle for information literacy by charging alone into the middle of it. When an army of parents, teachers, and children follow our lead, then victory is within our grasp.

We lead to see that:

- At home, every student has a bed lamp and place to pile numerous library books.
- Every teacher has a rotating classroom collection of library books.
- Every teacher at all grade levels reads aloud every day.
- Programs for sustained silent reading are implemented.
- Parents understand that amount counts and support their children in this endeavor.
- Every principal understands and promotes reading as well as technology.
- Every teacher knows and understands how to use information tools as their classrooms become wired.
- Every teacher recognizes when students understand content, not just that students know how to embellish their work with desktop publishing software.

We are not the first leaders in history to face an overwhelming challenge, yet we can fight to win the battle for information literacy. Plan—lead—charge! ●

References and Notes

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