
4-1-1993

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Recommended Citation

Piersma, M. L., & Allen, D. D. (1993). A Revitalized Role for Library Media Specialists in School Reading Programs. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 33 (4). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol33/iss4/6

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A Revitalized Role for Library Media Specialists in School Reading Programs

**Mary L. Piersma
Diane D. Allen**

At 8:00 a.m., while children are arriving at school, Mrs. Beasley, the elementary school library media specialist, is busy shelving the books returned yesterday. She has new books to catalog, newspaper and magazines to display and audio visual equipment to distribute to teachers. Before she completes any of this, her first group of children arrives for their regularly scheduled 30 minutes library visit. Mrs. Beasley attempts to help a few children in their selection of appropriate books, but finds that she spends most of her time checking books in and out. To Mrs. Beasley's dismay, there is little time to share her love of books and reading with the children who visit her at the library. As this class leaves, another group of children arrives at the library, and the same scenario continues throughout the day.

Mrs. Beasley's day is typical of most public school library media specialists. Even library media specialists at the secondary level report that much of their time is devoted to administrative tasks in the library/media center comparable to those described for Mrs. Beasley (Edwards, 1989). Secondary students sometimes are restricted to specific time periods for library use similar to the short library times for elementary students. Unfortunately, such views of a library media specialist's role prevent the library media specialist from assuming a major role in the promotion of schoolwide literacy.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress reported (1985) that while 99 percent of seventeen year olds had basic reading skills, only 39 percent of them could perform higher level reading skills. Only five percent of this group could perform such critical skills as the synthesis of information from a reading source. In order to build a nation of readers (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott and Wilkiinson, 1985) who have the skills to function in the real world, schools must instill in children a love of reading. This can only be accomplished when the responsibility for reading development is shared by all school professionals.

For years the classroom teacher has been solely responsible for reading instruction. Today the classroom teacher is only one part of the educational team who are all concerned about the development of reading strategies. Among those who should be instrumental and play a key role in the total reading program are the school library media specialists (Montgomery, 1987). However, the research literature does not indicate that library media specialists play such a vital role in the reading programs of today's schools (Baldrige and Broadway, 1987; Edwards, 1989). The research literature does suggest that working with teachers to plan curricula and instruction is an appropriate role for today's library media specialists. Rebecca Bingham (1989) reminds us that the library media specialist "is the only professional... who is in day-to-day contact with every teacher and administrator and who teaches each pupil every year that the pupil is in the school" (p. 87).

With the renewed emphasis on reading today, the role of library media specialists becomes more important. They may serve as a major resource for the reading program, provide actual instruction in reading strategies and/or foster

recreational reading. When investigating the importance of a professionally staffed library, Baldrige and Broadway (1987) determined that when library media specialists become actively involved in the instructional process, children make significant gains. Among the gains they reported were overall improvement in oral language for language deficient first graders and improvement in research and critical thinking skills required in content area subjects.

The study

With this in mind, a study was designed to examine the role of school media specialists (elementary and secondary) in a southeastern state. A survey was conducted specifically to determine the role of library media specialists in 1) promoting reading growth; 2) assisting classroom teachers; 3) teaching reading skills and strategies. The specific questions addressed in the study included: 1) in what way(s) does the library media specialist contribute to the total reading program within the school; 2) in what way(s) would the library media specialist like to contribute to the total reading program within the school; and 3) what academic preparation do library media specialists have in the area of reading?

A total of 1257 surveys were sent to all public school library media specialists in one state. Of these surveys, 43 percent (546) were returned by the library media specialists. Respondents were asked questions regarding their roles in the reading program. For example, the library media specialists were asked the types of reading skills they taught; the frequency of instruction; and in what other ways they promoted literacy development in their students. Demographic information was also requested, allowing comparisons between urban and rural schools and between various sizes of schools.

Results

The results presented in this paper represent conclusions based on 535 surveys from the library media specialists. Of the 535 library media specialist surveys analyzed for this paper, 251 were received from elementary schools (K-6); 103 from middle and junior high schools (7-8); 181 from high schools (9-12). Schools surveyed represented student populations of 100-1000 with the majority of all responses indicating student populations of 400-500 students. Of the library media specialists responding, 458 had full time positions. Thirty-five even reported having two full time library positions at their schools. Library media specialists also indicated some use of part time library media specialists and volunteers or paid aides. Student aides were utilized in about 50 percent of the libraries of library media specialists surveyed. Forty-two schools had no full time library media specialist.

Academic preparation of library media specialists in the area of reading was encouraging. All but a small percent had at least one course in reading methods, as Table 1 indicates. Library media specialists in this study are as well prepared in reading as many elementary classroom teachers in this particular state. Research indicates that this is true of library media specialists across the country. Lynn Myers (1990) observed that library media specialists have in depth knowledge of children's literature and an awareness of the elementary school curriculum.

Real vs. ideal

The main focus of this paper is to compare the actual and ideal responsibilities of school library media specialists with special emphasis on those activities related to reading. An average percent of time spent in each activity was

calculated to determine how library media specialists actually spend their time and how they would ideally spend their time.

| Courses | Librarians (N=535) |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Children's literature | 94.01% |
| Elementary reading methods | 61.68% |
| Secondary reading methods | 33.08% |
| Diagnosis of reading difficulties | 28.22% |
| Content area reading methods | 48.97% |
| None | 0.01% |
| Other courses | 31.40% |

The first comparisons between real and ideal responsibilities were calculated across levels (K-12) for all respondents. These comparisons of the library media specialists' perceptions of their actual and ideal responsibilities directly related to reading (Table 2) revealed the following. 1) Library media specialists would like to be more involved in planning with teachers for the coordination of reading programs; for the use of content area resources; and for the selection of basal reading materials. 2) Library media specialists indicated a need to devote more time to the promotion of recreational reading. 3) Library media specialists also thought more time should be spent reading to children. 4) Library media specialists want to spend less time checking books in and out and managing audio visual equipment. 5) Library media specialists expressed a desire to devote more time to the young readers' choice awards in the state.

The first set of comparisons of real versus ideal were analyzed for all respondents. We also wanted to know if there were differences in perceptions for elementary library

media specialists and for those at the secondary level. So, for the second group of comparisons, respondents were divided into groups according to the grade level of student(s) with which they worked.

In this analysis comparisons were made among library media specialists for grade levels K-6, 7-8, and 9-12 (refer to Tables 3, 4 and 5 for specific comparisons). As in the previous comparisons across levels, library media specialists who responded to this survey, even when grouped only with others at specific levels, expressed significant differences between their perceptions of their actual roles and what they would like to accomplish in tasks related to reading. These comparisons revealed that regardless of level, library media specialists would like to spend more time with the following activities.

Table 2
Comparisons of Real and Ideal Responsibilities
Grades K-12

| <i>Activities</i> | <i>% of time (N=535)</i> | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------|
| | <i>Real</i> | <i>Ideal</i> |
| 1. Reads to students | 23.5 | 30.1* |
| 2. Plans with teachers for the coordination of reading programs | 17.3 | 34.0* |
| 3. Plans with teachers for use of content area resources | 22.9 | 36.4* |
| 4. Assists in evaluation and selection of basal reading materials | 12.2 | 24.9* |
| 5. Motivates and encourages recreational reading | 41.0 | 48.6* |
| 6. Participates in state young readers' choice award | 7.9 | 23.2* |
| 7. Instructs children in reading related skills | 50.2 | 60.0 |

*significant differences p. <0.001

Increased reading time. All library media specialists would increase time devoted to reading to students. For

the researchers, this was an unexpected finding at the secondary level. Elementary library media specialists indicated that they already spend a large proportion of time reading to children but would like to increase this amount. Secondary library media specialists recognize that little of their time is spent sharing the reading of books with their students, but they would also like to increase this amount of time.

Planning time. All levels of library media specialists would augment time spent planning with teachers for the use of library and media materials in reading programs and across the curriculum. All levels indicated that about one-third of their time should be devoted to working directly with classroom teachers in the planning of instruction.

Recreational reading. The majority of respondents to this survey indicated they were spending large portions of time supporting the recreational reading of students. Across all levels, however, there was indicated a need to increase this involvement.

The only item in which there was not consistent significant differences between real and ideal roles was in the area of instruction of specific reading skills. For library media specialists at K-6 and 7-8 (see Tables 3 and 4) there was not a significant difference between the amount of time actually spent on reading instruction and the amount of time that library media specialists felt they should ideally spend on instruction. The amount of time they were presently spending in the instruction of specific reading skills was viewed as appropriate. However, library media specialists at the 9-12 (see Table 5) level wanted to spend more reading instructional time with students than they reported spending at the time of the survey.

Table 3
Comparisons of Real and Ideal Responses
Grades K-6

| <i>Activities</i> | <i>% of time (N=251)</i> | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------|
| | <i>Real</i> | <i>Ideal</i> |
| 1. Reads to students | 35.3 | 40.6* |
| 2. Plans with teachers for the coordination of reading programs | 16.2 | 33.9* |
| 3. Plans with teachers for use of content area resources | 20.1 | 35.0* |
| 4. Assists in evaluation and selection of basal reading materials | 9.8 | 23.1* |
| 5. Motivates and encourages recreational reading | 44.9 | 50.1* |
| 6. Participates in state young readers' choice award | 46.7 | 45.0* |
| 7. Instructs children in reading related skills | 43.9 | 45.0* |

*significant differences $p. < 0.001$

Results of the study suggest that library media specialists not only want to be more involved in school reading programs; they have the training to be a valuable asset in the planning, evaluation and support of reading and language arts curricula. Our research indicated that the library media specialists have more background in basic reading courses and literature selection than many classroom teachers. They also have the knowledge of new literature and audio visual materials available for use in the classroom. Moreover, they see the need to become part of a total reading instructional team.

Needed changes

If the school library media specialist is to assume a legitimate role in the promotion of reading as suggested by this research and the American Association of School

Librarians, the American Library Association and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (1988) and other research (Jay, 1986), several changes need to occur.

Table 4
Comparisons of Real and Ideal Responses
Grades 7-8

| <i>Activities</i> | <i>% of time (N=103)</i> | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------|
| | <i>Real</i> | <i>Ideal</i> |
| 1. Reads to students | 20.2 | 26.2* |
| 2. Plans with teachers for the coordination of reading programs | 20.6 | 37.7* |
| 3. Plans with teachers for use of content area resources | 24.7 | 39.3* |
| 4. Assists in evaluation and selection of basal reading materials | 10.8 | 27.1* |
| 5. Motivates and encourages recreational reading | 45.1 | 52.2* |
| 6. Participates in state young readers' choice award | 8.3 | 25.3* |
| 7. Instructs children in reading related skills | 43.9 | 45.3 |

*significant differences $p. < 0.001$

Administrators. Library media specialists must first enlist the support of administrators. Library media specialists should initiate communication with the building principal and with other central office administrators. Notifying the administration of the fundamental and supplemental services offered by the library should be a regular responsibility of the library media specialist. Administrators could be invited to directly participate in library activities such as reading to children or providing book talks. Additionally, library media specialists should not only document the needs of the library center but also provide suggestions for alternative solutions to meet these needs.

Table 5
Comparisons of Real and Ideal Responses
Grades 9-12

| <i>Activities</i> | <i>% of time (N=181)</i> | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------|
| | <i>Real</i> | <i>Ideal</i> |
| 1. Reads to students | 9.1 | 17.8* |
| 2. Plans with teachers for the coordination of reading programs | 17.0 | 32.3* |
| 3. Plans with teachers for use of content area resources | 25.7 | 36.7* |
| 4. Assists in evaluation and selection of basal reading materials | 16.2 | 26.2* |
| 5. Motivates and encourages recreational reading | 33.3 | 44.4* |
| 6. Participates in state young readers' choice award | 3.3 | 21.3* |
| 7. Instructs children in reading related skills | 33.0 | 40.0* |

*significant differences $p. < 0.001$

Teachers and students. Karlene Edwards (1989) suggests teacher and student perceptions of the library media specialists' role need to be expanded. First, lines of communication between teachers and library media specialists need to be strengthened. Library media specialists need to familiarize themselves with curriculum materials in the school to more easily integrate library resources with curriculum materials and to share their expertise with classroom teachers. Monthly newsletters could be used to notify teachers of new materials available and to highlight materials relevant to units of instruction being planned. At the beginning of the school year the library media specialist should survey teachers in the school to determine planned topics and their needs for time and services. To expand the image of the library media specialists' role from the perspective of children several suggestions are appropriate. Children's access to the library must be reevaluated to

provide more opportunities to use the library for research or recreational reading. Flexible scheduling is one alternative currently used by some school districts (Houff, 1990; Hughes, 1990). Additionally, the library media specialist might investigate the possibility of opening the library at non-traditional times — one evening a week, before and after school or during the weekend. Secondly, children need to view the library media specialist as part of the larger faculty. To accomplish this goal, library media specialists need to move away from the confines of the library media center and participate in classroom and school activities. This might be accomplished by giving book talks in the classroom or by assisting students in initial stages of research, such as brainstorming and defining research questions before they go to the library.

Library aides. Finally, resources should be sought to provide aides to assist the library media specialist in clerical duties. Suggested resources are parent/teacher organizations, local businesses, senior citizen groups, and volunteers from students within the school system. If schools are to continue to move toward a more holistic view of education, it is important that the library media specialist's ideal perception becomes a reality and the library media specialist becomes a partner in the instructional process. If this happens, Mrs. Beasley's day would be quite different.

At 8:00 a.m., as the children are arriving at school, Mrs. Beasley is in the hall. She greets the children and occasionally stops a child to tell him/her about a book that has just arrived in the library. Children, too, are eager to tell Mrs. Beasley about books they have completed. When Mrs. Beasley returns to the library, volunteers are busy reshelving books. Mrs. Beasley begins to set up a display of books about space exploration. The display includes not only books by well-known authors but also books written by children in the school. This display is just one of the exciting things she has planned for the week. Other activities planned for the children

include: 1) giving book talks to third and fifth graders; 2) reading books about space to all children who visit the library; 3) having a tasting fair for second grade; 4) helping plan a puppet show for kindergarten and first grade; 5) showing a film to fourth grade; 6) assisting children as they come to the library to work on individual reports and projects. She has begun a monthly newsletter to inform teachers about new arrivals that would enrich the reading program. She has also scheduled time each week to assist teachers in locating resources for their upcoming units. She and the teachers are making plans for an exciting school-wide literature festival as a culmination.

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