
The Library Media Centers in American Schools*

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I HAVE been working as a Library Media Specialist for the last 12 years and I am currently employed in that capacity by the American International School-Lisbon. I have a Master of Education degree from Portland State University in Portland, Oregon and I am licensed as a Library Media Specialist (for kindergarten through grade 12) by the state of Oregon. I entered this field because it appeared to me to be the most dynamic area of both education and library sciences. That dynamic quality has, in fact, produced dramatic changes in school libraries during the 12 years I have been involved with them and as we move further into the information Age all signs indicate that this trend will continue.

School libraries media center

School libraries have a long history in the United States and a century of growth and development have produced the current model of a Library Media Center, the information center of the school, playing an integral role in the educational process.

They began in the 1800s as the simple collections of books held by some schools then moved into the 20th century with the hiring of the first school

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librarian in 1900.¹ As early as 1915 the purpose of the library was seen as «educational and the general function as the provision of materials for class work and cultural reading».² In the 1920s accrediting agencies encouraged high schools to develop their libraries by requiring a trained librarian for any school seeking accreditation.³ For the next twenty to thirty years though little else encouraged the addition of libraries in schools that did not have them or growth in those libraries already in existence, especially at the elementary level.

The 1950s saw numerous changes in US education along with a tremendous impetus for excellence. Modernization of teaching methods began the move away from complete dependency on textbooks and to the requirement for students «to do preparatory and supplementary reading». This type of change led to increased use of library resources.⁴ Extensive financial support from the federal government during the 50's and 60's enable schools to purchase materials and equipment which accelerated the need for library systems and programs.⁵

A series of national standards and guidelines for school libraries were published in 1960, 1969, and 1975 and these led to unprecedented development and growth. During this era the focus of the school library was also expanded to incorporate increasingly available non-print materials and libraries became Library Media Centers (LMC). Their role was «to provide essential resources and services for the improvement of teaching and learning».⁶

The current set of standards are outlined in the document *Information Power: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs* which was published in 1988 by the American Association of School Librarians and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology. These are already undergoing revision due to rapid changes rendered, in information services, by technology. Meanwhile, the ideal of «a rich collection and a full staff of professional, technical and clerical personnel... contributing to the planning of a curriculum» remains the goal of every school — one that has not been fully reached in most.⁷

Role of the library media specialist

Throughout the last thirty years the job description of the school librarian expanded and altered as the libraries and programs changed. Their job title was similarly expanded to Library Media Specialist which more accurately reflected this broadened role. «Rather than emphasizing technical

aspects of librarianship, school librarians began to work cooperatively with teachers to form a more unified educational program.»⁸

According to the 1969 standards Library Media Specialists were to «work with classroom teachers in the analysis of instructional needs, the design of learning activities using existing and new technologies, and the production of needed materials to support the classroom curriculum». They also played a role in «helping students develop competence in listening, viewing and reading skills».⁹

The standards published in 1975 continued to emphasize the Library Media Specialist's cooperation with the classroom teacher «in the instructional design process». Through this set of guidelines the role of the library media program finally grew from that of a support service to «an integral part of the total instructional program of the school».¹⁰

Information Power now highlights three roles for the Library Media Specialist which «link the information resources and services of the library media program to the information needs and interests of the school's students and staff: information specialist, teacher, instructional consultant.»

Library media specialist training

School Library Media Specialists are trained through programs which are part of University Schools of Education. Universities work closely with State Departments of Education, the organizations which handle teacher licensing or certification, to plan a program that combines «academic and professional preparation».¹¹ Exact requirements vary in each of the 50 states but generally include: a master's degree or equivalent course work beyond the undergraduate degree along with directed field experience. Many states also require a program of continuing education along with current teaching experience to maintain certification.

Academic preparation usually involves a liberal arts background and the standard courses in educational philosophy, psychology and techniques required of all education majors. Specialized course work in the library field includes management skills (personnel, budgeting, purchasing), library specialization (evaluation and selection, cataloging and classification, research and information skills), literature (children's and young adult literature, reading promotion programs), information technology (AV materials and equipment, computers, electronic communication), library philosophy and issues (right to read, intellectual freedom, censorship).

Role of the library media center

Information Power opens with a mission for the library media program. This mission is: to ensure that students and staff are effective users of ideas and information. It states that the mission is to be accomplished by:

- providing intellectual and physical access to materials in all formats,
- providing instruction to foster competence and stimulate interest in reading, viewing, and using information and ideas,
- working with other educators to design learning strategies to meet the needs of individual students.

Physical access to materials is provided by the development of a collection of resources designed to fit the particular needs of the staff and students of the school. The selection policy considers factors such as: curriculum and program requirements, user abilities and disabilities, learning styles, freedom of access to ideas, timeliness, authority of source, etc.. The collection must have the scope to support educational needs as well as the interests of students.

Collections should represent a wide variety of communication formats and can include: books, periodicals, kits, slides, filmstrips, videos, audio cassettes, realia, posters, pamphlets, microfiche, CDs, computer software, etc. Locally produced resources may be important for meeting specialized needs. Access to materials which are not part of the schools collection is facilitated whenever possible.

Intellectual access to information is provided by teaching students and staff information skills. Problem solving strategies which include: the definition of information needs, location and retrieval of information, application and synthesis of information, evaluation of the process; are skills that are valuable throughout life. «In immediate terms, they provide a means of achieving learning objectives within the curriculum. In the long term, information skills have a direct impact on an individual's ability with a changing environment.»¹²

A curriculum of information skills. for kindergarten through grade 12, allows all students the opportunity for adequate instruction and mastery of skills. Planning and teaching cooperatively with content area teachers integrates the information skills into the curriculum, the most effective method for teaching them, and strengthens the content area lessons.

The LMC with its information resources and promotion of information skills plays a critical role in «students' intellectual development, promoting

the love of learning and conveying the importance of using and evaluating information and ideas throughout life. Developing the ability to think clearly, critically, and creatively depends on a steady flow of information... Critical thinking skills are also fostered when students are provided with opportunities to learn how to locate, analyze, evaluate, interpret, and communicate information and ideas.»¹³

Library media centers and reading

During the 1980s educators began to look critically at reading comprehension skills and their need for improvement. Several reports and studies have shown that Library Media Centers are in ideal positions to significantly promote reading and positively impact literacy levels.

Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading, a major report issued in 1984, «emphasizes the importance of student motivation, imaginative, and flexible teaching, and encourages home and schools environments that stimulate and support literacy». LMC programs are seen as «vital for motivating young people to select and read printed materials with pleasure, to reach for more complex levels of expression and comprehension, and to evaluate these experiences critically».¹⁴

In 1987 What Works: Research about Teaching and Learning, published by the US Department of Education, again emphasized the need for programs which encouraged reading for pleasure because they lead to the development of skills comprehension skills.¹⁵

Two different studies in 1933 examined the relationship between LMCs, student achievement and the value of free reading.^{16, 17} Their findings provide invaluable arguments for the importance of the role played by a LMC.

- The size of a LMC's staff and collection is the best predictor of academic achievement.
- Among school and community predictors, the size of LMC staff and collection is second only to the absence of at-risk conditions, particularly poverty and low educational attainment among adults.
- Students who score higher on standardized tests tend to come from schools with more LMC staff and more books, periodicals, and videos — regardless of other factors, including economic ones.
- The instructional role of the school library media specialist shapes the collection and, in turn, academic achievement.¹⁸

The Power of Reading by Stephen Krashen supports the following conclusions about the relationship between reading and LMC resources:

- Voluntary reading is the best predictor of reading comprehension, vocabulary growth, spelling ability, grammatical usage, and writing style.
- Access to LMCs result in more voluntary reading by students
- Having a school library media specialist makes a difference in the amount of voluntary reading done.¹⁹

Evidence repeatedly supports «strong library media programs as an essential component in every school. Adequate LMC budgets, materials, and staffing, as well as techniques that encourage the effective use of library resources, lead to higher student achievement.»²⁰

Cooperation between libraries

District and state educational systems have traditionally been the main routes for school library cooperation. Individual schools are usually part of a school district which encompasses a rural area, town, or portion of a city. They share curriculum, funding-budgeting, staffing and support systems. In larger districts a district level Library Media Specialist may supervise school level staff and be responsible for aspects of training, budgeting, purchasing and/or processing of materials.

Local School Districts frequently join together into Educational Service Districts which coordinate cooperative efforts like: the development of specialized collections, purchase of expensive and infrequently used materials and equipment, training and/or service programs, etc.

The use of electronic networks is now facilitating extensive cooperation between school level libraries and many other systems. More and more frequently, state and regional educational programs are making their resources accessible through the internet. Students can access other libraries including university libraries nationwide as well as museums, government agencies, and many other national and international resources.

Electronic technology

Electronic technology is revolutionizing the information business. From computerized card catalogs to resources on CD's — Library Media Centers

will never be the same. In this Information Age the quantity of available information is exploding and «an individual's success in the next century will depend, to a large extent, upon the ability to access, evaluate, and use information.»²¹

Students will need to deal effectively with information because they will face such massive quantities and mixed qualities of it. The Internet, which has been described as a mile wide and an inch deep, can be daunting to experienced researchers. Students need very effective information skills to utilize large and complex resources as tools. It is critical that schools and Library Media Specialists incorporate current technology as it becomes available and educate students for the real world they will face after graduation.

Statistics show that employees who are computer literate already earn 10 to 15% more than those who are not. Schools in the U.S. are struggling to provide adequate technology resources for all students, trying to ensure that they do not contribute to the information gap — the imbalance in society between those who have access to computers and those who do not.²²

Telecommunications technology is providing schools with a wide range of applications including: provision of timely information services and the sharing of «material and human resources».²³

AIS-L library media center

The American International School-Lisbon is an illustrative example of an American style school and Library Media Center. It serves 240 students in prekindergarten through grades 12.

Development of the collection, which is now at 16 000 items, has taken place over the past 8 years and has been influenced by some of the following:

- We offer a Portuguese Equivalencia program so the collection includes newspapers, magazines, fiction and non-fiction materials in Portuguese;
- We subscribe to over 30 professional magazines and maintain a collection of professional resources to support a faculty that is somewhat isolated from their usual support materials;
- The need for resources in English led us to develop an extensive Vertical File system where we collect materials on about 500 different subjects;
- The collection includes over 1000 items which are Audio Visual format: video, audio cassette, slides, sound filmstrips, kits, posters, etc.

Our search for resources to meet student and staff needs has led us to the generous support and cooperation of other local libraries including: Abraham Lincoln Resource Center, the British Library, the United Nations Library and the Instituto Alemão.

We have incorporated technology as a means to maximize access to information and minimize use of our limited space.

- We have developed a computerized card catalog, which includes all print and non-print resources, that can be accessed by users outside the school through a modem and telecommunications.
- Set of 3 CDs now provide us with a five year collection of the full text of 125 magazines. The set is updated quarterly and provides an excellent selection of materials and alleviates some of our storage space problems.
- A modem and telecommunications connection have recently given us access to Dialog and the Internet.
- We are in the process of networking the LMC and the computer lab together so resources like the card catalog can be accessed from any computer.

Information skills are being taught and reinforced at all levels and content area teachers make extensive use of the LMC resources on a regular basis.

The LMC and resources are used by an average of 5 classes per day and an average of 20 individual students (out of class or during their own time) per day.

- Teachers from every content area — math, science, English, social studies, languages, EFL, Equivalencia — have incorporated information skills and use of LMC resources into at least one project during the last school quarter.

Like the majority of other LMCs we are in a constant state of change and adaptation as we try to match resources to student and staff needs.

Conclusion

When people visit the AIS-L Library Media Center I often tell them that I believe they are visiting the heart of the school. The skills learned there are those that prepare students to become lifelong learners; the skills which

allow them to access and explore content area learning; the skills which allow them to adapt education to fit their own personal interests and needs. David Carr said it very well: «Far better than classrooms, libraries — especially those in schools — address the lifespan messages about learning. The existence of a library in a school implies a message about the cultural value of information, its usefulness in the solving of problems, and its vitality in the conduct of a life.»²⁴

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