



The Impact of the School Media Specialist

on the Development of Literacy Skills

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A Publication of *Central EXPRESS*
(EXceptional People Renewing Education for Students and Schools)

Introduction

The Impact of the School Media Specialist on the Development of Literacy Skills is the first in a series of monographs to be published by Central EXPRESS. Central EXPRESS is a school improvement effort in the 11 schools of the Miami Central Senior High School feeder pattern, now in its third year of implementation. Its mission is to improve the academic performance of the 14,000 students enrolled in the schools in order to increase the number of high school graduates who move successfully into employment, college, or technical training. Funded primarily by the Ford Foundation and the South Florida Annenberg Challenge, the project has four lead partners: the Greater Miami Urban Education Pact at Florida International University, the University of Miami, The Education Fund, and Miami-Dade County Public Schools. Project leaders are hopeful that the monographs that emerge from the work will be useful in shaping policies that affect not only the Central EXPRESS schools, but also other schools in similar contexts.

We are particularly pleased to have as our first publication a paper written by Lois Magnus. Ms. Magnus is a charter member of the Central EXPRESS Steering Committee and the Instructional Leadership Cadre. She is tireless in her efforts to develop the potential of students in the Miami Central Senior High feeder pattern. She is also an effective library media specialist; last year she was recognized for her outstanding contributions to the profession by being named the Miami-Dade Library Media Specialist of the Year by the Dade County Media Specialists' Association. We believe that Ms. Magnus' findings and recommendations are essential knowledge for school leaders who want to increase the level of literacy in their schools.

Copies of this monograph or more information about Central EXPRESS are available from Dr. Robert Vos, Executive Director, Florida International University, Biscayne Bay Campus, ACI-248, North Miami, Florida 33181.

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Acknowledgments

The Education Fund, working in conjunction with the Ford funded Central EXPRESS (EXceptional People Renewing Education for Students and Schools) initiative in Miami-Dade County Public Schools, was the impetus for conducting the research reported in *The Impact of the Media Specialist on the Development of Literacy Skills*. This study, and the dissemination of the policy recommendations contained within, were made possible by a number of organizations and individuals. The author wishes to express sincere gratitude to The Education Fund for its financial support; the Ford funded Central EXPRESS initiative for leadership and professional development opportunities; and Thelma Davis, Billy Birnie and Catherine Raymond for their dedication to public education and the support and encouragement they offer teachers on a continual basis.

Abstract

The percentages of eighth-grade students scoring at “Level 2 and Above” and “Level 3 and Above” on a standardized measure of literacy development -- Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test, Reading subtest -- were compared, for a two-year period spanning 1998-2000, at six school sites with similar populations of economically disadvantaged students.

This study examines the author’s contention that policies and practices implemented by a school media specialist have a direct impact on the development of literacy skills. Specific policies and practices are highlighted, their effect on literacy development is discussed, and recommendations for educational policy are offered for consideration.

Research Question:

Can policies and practices implemented by a school media specialist have a direct impact on the development of literacy skills for economically disadvantaged middle school students?

Purpose/Rationale:

Endeavoring to provide school-related opportunities to mitigate the factors that cause economically disadvantaged children to fall significantly behind their more affluent peers in informational literacy, the author sought to increase individual visits to the library, address the presence of reading material in the home, stimulate an aesthetic appreciation of books and pleasurable reading experiences, provide information technology, and foster collaboration between teachers and the library media specialist. It is the author's contention that policies and practices implemented by a school media specialist can mediate influences from the home and increase achievement by economically disadvantaged students on standardized tests of reading comprehension.

Review of the Literature:

Literacy is defined by Lee and Croninger (1994) as a general set of skills, useful in all contexts and as a more refined set of competencies connected to the context in which people engage in print. For the purposes of this study, the form of literacy on which the author concentrates is what Resnick (1991) labels informational literacy (using print to acquire and convey new knowledge). Reading comprehension is an important component of this form of literacy because it determines the extent to which print is accessible to students. Variations in the home environments of poor and middle-income children affect their literacy development, which leads to substantial differences in reading ability. (Lee and Croninger, 1994). Family poverty is related to children's school performance particularly in reading and literacy. (Allington 1990; Natriello *et al.* 1990). Important in the context of this research are the findings of Chall, Snow, and their colleagues (Chall *et al.* 1990; Snow *et al.* 1991) that the development of literacy skills by economically disadvantaged students is especially dependent on school-related opportunities. In terms of literacy development, economically disadvantaged children fall significantly behind their more affluent peers around fourth grade, with the

deficit increasing through the eighth grade as students make the transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn" (Chall *et al.* 1990; Snow *et al.* 1991). Humphrey (1992) documents that 66% of fourth graders use the library at least weekly, compared to 24% of eighth graders and that eighth-grade students spend an average of only 1.8 hours per week reading non-school materials.

Snow *et al.* (1991) found that the presence of reading material in the home -- whether borrowed from the library or owned -- is directly associated with children's literacy development in terms of their reading comprehension. Lee and Croninger (1994) suggest that when students are exposed to more books, whether obligatory (in school) or optional (at home), they are likely to better comprehend what they have read. Beers (1997) stresses the importance of personal choice in the selection of reading material by middle school students.

In a survey of the status of reading in middle, junior, and senior high schools in one state, Humphrey (1992) reported that on average middle grade schools spend \$1.92 per student per year on reading materials other than textbooks and do not provide programs that allow them to stress the value of reading books.

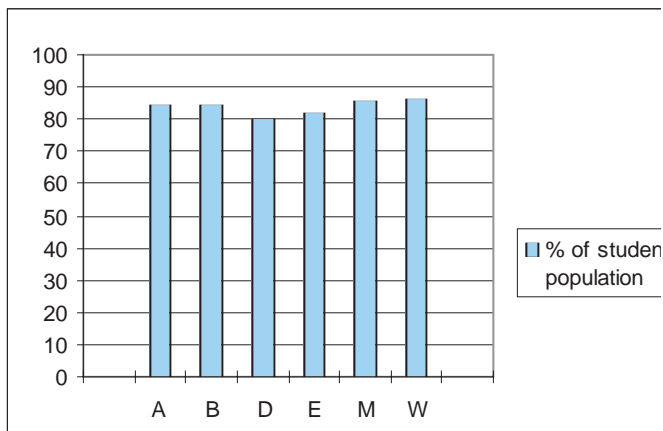
An aesthetic appreciation of books and pleasurable reading experiences stimulates literacy development (Sanacore 1997). Economically disadvantaged students display negative attitudes toward reading that are the result of poor home supports for literacy (use of the public library by the child and/or parent and literacy resources available in the home). Additionally, a lack of participation in enjoyable reading-related activities, such as owning a library card, membership in a group that focused on reading activities or joining a reading club, was seen in students who did not value reading and perceived it only as a functional skill (Beers 1997). Central findings of the second Colorado study, *How School Librarians Help Kids Achieve Standards*, indicate that reading scores on standardized tests increase with increases in the following characteristics of library media programs: individual visits to the library media center, information technology, and teacher/library media specialist collaboration, (Lance *et al.* 1993).

Study: Background

An analysis of the district profiles compiled for the six schools studied revealed that a similar percentage of the student population at each of the school sites qualified for free or reduced lunch status and could be considered as having come from economically disadvantaged homes (see Table I for percentages). The frequency of school transfers by disadvantaged students is regularly cited as an impediment to academic progress. A comparison of the District's Mobility Index for students at each of the six schools revealed a similar pattern of transience (see Table II for a comparison of mobility). The percentage of eighth-grade students scoring at "Level 2 and Above" and "Level 3 and Above" on the reading portion of the 1998 administration of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) demonstrates that the development of informational literacy at each of the school sites was significantly below Florida Department of Education minimum performance criteria (see Tables III and IV for percentages). Given the commonality of student populations, a district-mandated standardized curriculum, emphasis on FCAT reading strategies in all subject areas, and relatively comparable administrative and faculty expertise at each of the six school sites, student performance on the reading portion of the 2000 administration of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) should reveal a similar rate of academic growth.

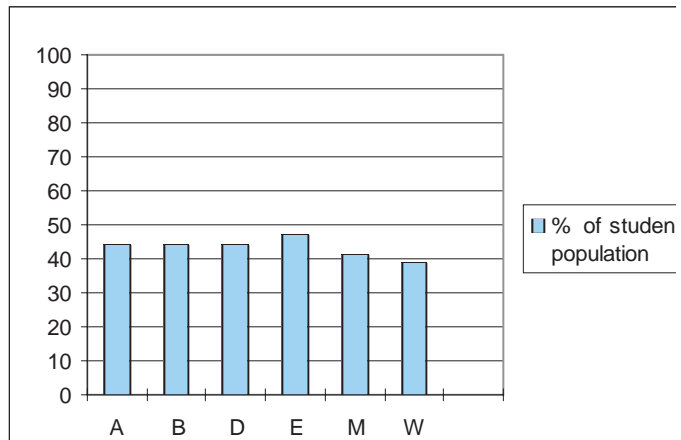
School Free/Reduced Lunch 1998

Table I



School Mobility Index 1998

[Table II](#)



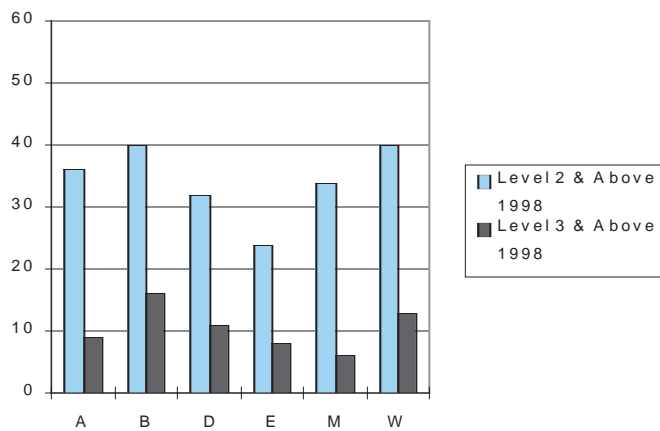
Florida Department of Education 1999-2000 FCAT Reading - Middle School Performance Criteria

[Table III](#)

<p><u>High Performing Criteria</u></p> <p>50% score Level 3 and above</p>	<p><u>Minimum Performing Criteria</u></p> <p>60% score Level 2 and above</p>
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FCAT Reading Scores - Grade 8 1998

[Table IV](#)



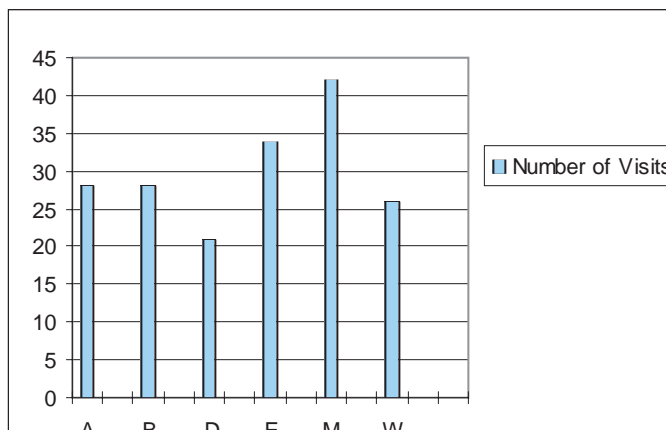
Objectives:

Exposure to Print Material

Unwritten district policy and practice strongly suggest that middle school students independently initiate visits to the school media center before and after school hours and/or during the school day with a pass from a classroom teacher. An examination of 1996 circulation figures for eighth-grade students at School M indicated that more than two-thirds of the students had never checked out a book from the library media center during three years of attendance. At the start of the 1997-1998 school year, after collaboration with school administration and language arts instructional personnel, the author instituted a policy of mandatory bimonthly book checkout for all students. Implemented as part of the language arts curriculum, this policy change provided 16 additional opportunities for student visits to the school media center during the year. An analysis of the District's Annual Library Media Center Inventory Statistics for 1999 provides documentation that students at School M visited the media center more times than students at the other five school sites (see Table V for attendance figures). The practice of scheduled book checkout eliminated a long-standing and significant causal factor of inadequate exposure to print materials which hindered the progress of literacy development.

Media Center Attendance Per Pupil
1999 Inventory Statistics

[Table V](#)



Individual Visits to the Library/Media Center

The results of an informal survey revealed that 92% of the students at School M did not use the resources of the neighborhood public library for recreational reading or school assignments. The author utilized federal grant funds during the 1999-2000 school year to extend the media center's hours of operation, remaining open from 3:45 PM to 5:45 PM, Monday through Thursday. Sign-in sheets document a daily average of 60 students in attendance with a core group of 40 students present each day (see Table VI for sample sign-in sheet). Areas of student activities included completing short-term homework assignments, using technology for research and word processing to meet the requirements of long-term class projects, practicing keyboarding skills, checking out books, taking Accelerated Reader tests, and recreational reading. Responding to student suggestions, two areas of the media center were furnished with bean-bag chairs to provide a comfortable and inviting atmosphere for recreational reading. Individual visits to the library media center, which are directly associated with children's literacy development, were significantly increased by extending the hours of operation.

[Table VI](#)

Date _____			
AFTER-SCHOOL MEDIA CENTER STUDENT SIGN-IN SHEET			
Codes: H = Homework R = Reading T = Technology B = Book Checkout			
<u>Name</u>	<u>Grade</u>	<u>Code(s)</u>	<u>Assistance Needed</u> (Y or N)
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

Presence of Reading Materials in the Home

The practice of paperback book distributions was implemented by the author to increase the presence of reading material in the home environment. During the 1997-1998 and 1998-1999 school years, funding was solicited from the Education Excellence School Advisory Committee (EESAC) to provide each student at School M with opportunities to select books at appropriate lexile levels, to start or add to an existing home library. A contract to operate a Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) program was finalized during the 1999-2000 school year and resulted in three book distributions. Since the 1997-1998 school year, a total of \$18,800, or \$12.84 per student, has been expended to fund six book distributions. More than 200 titles, encompassing reading levels from primer to 10.0 and addressing student ethnicity, cultural heritage, and interests, were made available for student selection (see Table VII for book titles). Book distributions at School M increased the presence of reading material in the home and provided occasions for middle school students to exercise personal choice in the selection of reading material.

Table VII

<u>Lexile Level 200</u>	The Drinking Gourd	The Hot and Cold Summer
Dinosaurs Before Dark	Sixth Grade Secrets	Scorpions
The Sword in the Stone	A Shocker on Shock Street	M. C. Higgins, the Great
I Love Spiders	Superfudge	The Boyfriend
The Chalk Box Kid	Horrible Harry in Room 2B	Leprechauns Don't Play Basketball
Bremen Town Musicians		The Secret Soldier
Mouse Soup	<u>Lexile Level 500</u>	Shadow of the Red Moon
Freight Train	Finding Buck McHenry	The Life & Words of Martin Luther King
Dinosaur Who Lived in My Backyard	Help! I'm Trapped in My Teacher's Body	House of Dries Drier
Dinosaurs Before Dark	Arthur for the Very First Time	The Bridesmaids
Fox and His Friends	Vampires Don't Wear Polka Dots	
<u>Lexile Level 300</u>	The Hitchhiker	<u>Lexile Level 700</u>
Frederick Douglas Fights	Cousins	Emergency Room
Happy Birthday Martin Luther King	Hit and Run	Where the Red Fern Grows
Karen's Carnival	Logan Likes Mary Ann	Koya Delaney and the Good Girl Blues
Mike's Mystery	Ghosts Don't Eat Potato Chips	Secret of NIMH
Mystery of the Stolen Music	Deadly Secrets	More Tales From the Midnight Hour
The Frog Prince	Attack of the Mutant	Glory Field
Owl Moon	Wanted Dead or Alive	Catwings
The Magic Fish		The Truth About Stacy
Gym Teacher from the Black Lagoon	<u>Lexile Level 600</u>	Steal Away
Karen's Baby	Nothings Fair in Fifth Grade	Hercules
Fourth Grade Rats	Great Black Heroes	Mary Ann and the Mystery
	SOS Titanic	Four Against the Odds
	Kid Power	Bridge to Terabithia
<u>Lexile Level 400</u>	Sixth Grade Can Really Kill You	Jessie and the Dance School
Mystery of the Missing Dog	Henry Huggins	Pacific Crossing
Karen's Magician	Class President	The Star Fisher
It Came From Beneath the Sink	The Broccoli Tapes	Report to the Principal's Office
		Phoebe the Spy

Table VII (continued)

<u>Lexile Level 800</u>	Ghost Cadet	Rascal
Charlotte's Web	Grey King	Sports Bloopers
California Blue	Morning Girl	Get On Board
Chocolate Covered Ants	Adventures of Ulysses	Around the World in 80 Days
Tales for the Midnight Hour	Anne of Green Gables	Get on Board
Stacy and the Missing Ring	The Mouse and the Motorcycle	Yo! Millard Fillmore
Greenwich	The Flunking of Joshua T. Bates	The Wind in the Willows
Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry	<u>Lexile Level 1000</u>	The First Woman Doctor
Titanic/Long Night	Sojourner Truth	<u>Lexile Level 1200</u>
Heroes and Monsters of Greek Myths	The Golden Fleece	A Place to Hide
The Dark Is Rising	Tales Mummies Tell	Forgotten Tales
The Lemonade Trick	Armies of Ants	Book of Enchantments
Ancient Egypt	Beacons of Light	Poetry of Langston Hughes
James and the Giant Peach	The Midnight Fox	Surprising Stores by Saki
Dancing on Dark Water	The Wizard of Oz	Poetry of Robert Frost
A Solitary Blue	Malcom X	Romeo and Juliet
Hiroshima	Standing Tall	Nelson Mandela
Encyclopedia Brown's Books of	The Black Pearl	Velveteen Rabbit
Strange but True Crimes	The Jungle Book	General Collin Powell
<u>Lexile Level 900</u>	To Be A Slave	Maya Angelou "Poems"
Souder	Is the Blue Whale the Biggest Thing	
Silver on the Tree	There Is?	<u>Lexile Level 1300</u>
This Strange New Feeling	One More River to Cross	Little Women
Favorite Greek Myths	I am Fifteen and I Don't Want to Die	Hunchback of Notre Dame
Bonanza Girl	Great Women in the Struggle	100 Famous Poems
Lost Star	Homer Price	Treasure Island
Pigs Might Fly	Robin Hood of Sherwood	The Call of the Wild
Rosa Parks	The Phantom Tollbooth	Tale of Two Cities
The Secret Garden	<u>Lexile Level 1100</u>	Tales of O'Henry
Claudia and the Great Search	The Dove and the Sword	Sonnets of Shakespeare
Adam of the Road	Forgotten Heroes	Silas Marner
Freak the Mighty	Black Eagles	Poetry USA

Aesthetic Appreciation and Pleasurable Experiences

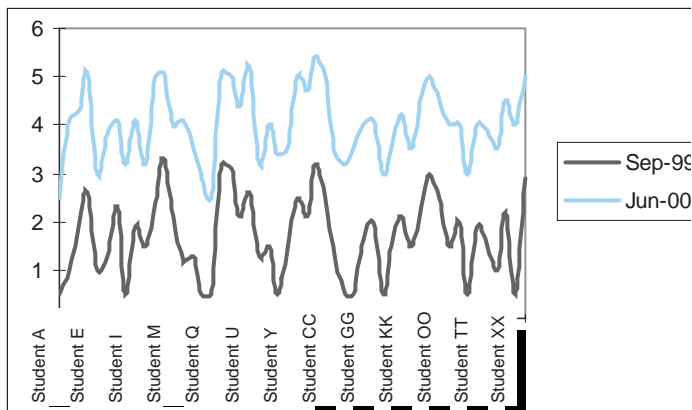
The author established a policy of utilizing books as tangible rewards for exceptional academic and citizenship achievements to stimulate an aesthetic appreciation of books and create opportunities for pleasurable reading experiences. Honor roll students, those with perfect attendance, science fair participants, and essay contest entrants were provided with opportunities to select paperback books for ownership. Titles available for selection spanned a wide range of reading levels, interests, and genres.

A school-wide Accelerated Reader (AR) program was implemented by the author in 1997, two years prior to a District mandate that this program be utilized in all middle schools. As a component of the program, an Accelerated Reader Club was established to provide opportunities for student participation in an enjoyable reading-related activity. Student successes were publicly acknowledged and materially rewarded. Deviating from traditional AR guidelines, which awards points based on the

reading levels of specific titles, School M's media specialist used comprehension tests mastered as the criteria for awards. The result of this policy innovation was the recognition of student success at all levels of achievement. Students enrolled in Exceptional Student Education (ESE) and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs, as well as students reading significantly below or above grade level, demonstrated the most enthusiasm for Accelerated Reader. Significant progress in acquiring literacy skills was most evident in students whose independent reading levels were three or more years below grade placement and in students learning English. Accelerated Reader student reading records reveal a minimum gain of two grade levels in reading comprehension ability by the above referenced students (see Table VIII). The purchase of high interest/low level Accelerated Reader books, reading levels 1.0 to 4.0, not only provided print materials for less proficient readers, but it also welcomed them as media center patrons for the first time. Students reading above grade level achieved at least 90% mastery on an average of 35 Accelerated Reader tests during a school year time period. An increase in print circulation and individual library media center visits was observed as a result of student participation in School M's Accelerated Reader program activities. Most significantly, students who had previously expressed a negative attitude toward reading became eager participants in a group that focused on reading as an enjoyable activity.

Reading Comprehension Grade Levels of ESE & ESOL Students Using Accelerated Reader

Table VIII

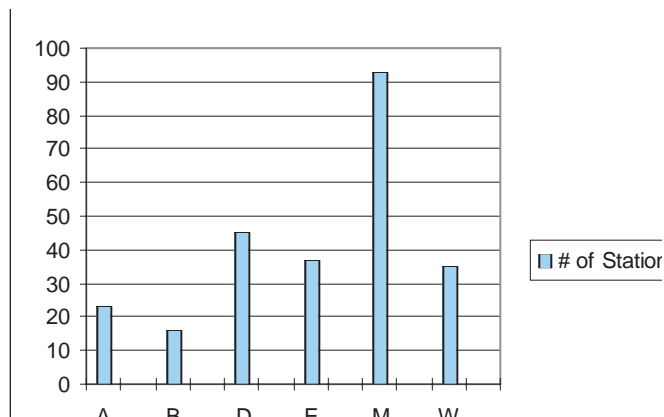


Information Technology

Serving in the capacity of technology coordinator, in 1998 the author developed a five-year plan to provide school-related opportunities for student access to information technology. Utilizing funding from sources such as Title I, District Retrofit grants, E-Rate programs and technology grants, the school purchased computer hardware and software and audio-visual equipment and materials. Computers dedicated to utilization by students for instructional purposes increased from 58 in 1996-1997 to 350 in 1999-2000, while the number of computers providing Internet access increased from four in the media center to 350 throughout the school. In addition to equipping all classrooms with a minimum of four computers and appropriate academic software, the author procured 47 laptop computers to provide students with exposure to cutting-edge technology. The establishment of a 36-station computer lab in the media center allowed for whole-class instruction in the acquisition of library/information literacy skills and utilization after school by individual students for daily homework and long-term projects. An examination of the District's Annual Library Media Center Inventory Statistics for 1999 revealed that, of the six school sites included in this study, School M had a greater number of student computer work stations in the media center (see Table IX). Additionally, these statistics disclosed that School M had a significantly greater circulation of non-print material including computer software (see Table X). The author's five-year plan was based on research findings which indicate that an increase in the provision of information technology resources directly correlates with an increase in reading scores on standardized tests.

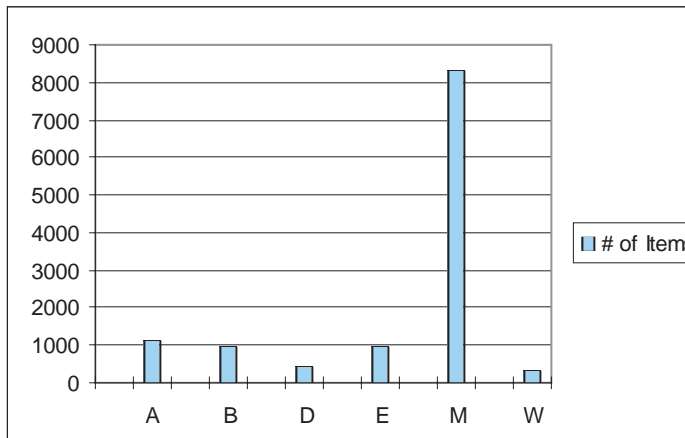
[Table IX](#)

**Number of Student Computer Work Stations
In School Media Center**



Media Center Non-Print Circulation 1999

Table X



Collaboration

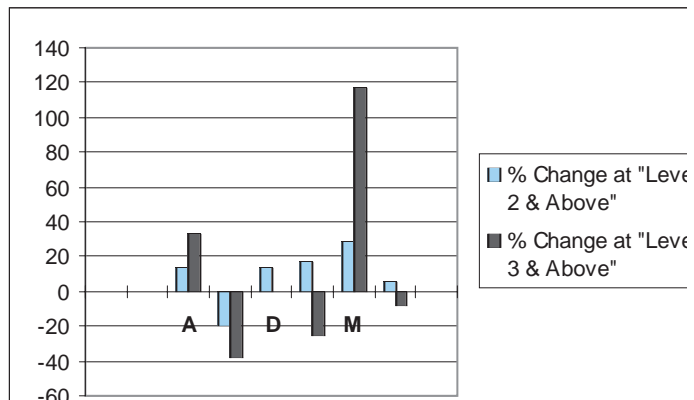
Collaboration between the library media specialist and instructional personnel at School M occurred on a regular basis through departmental, grade level, and individual faculty member planning sessions. Media center policy required faculty members to plan collaboratively with the library media specialist prior to bringing a class or sending small groups of students to the media center for independent study. With administrative support, this policy was instituted during the 1997-1998 school year after the author received intensive training provided by the DeWitt Wallace Readers Digest Fund's National Library Power initiative administered locally by The Education Fund. As practiced at School M, collaborative planning has been the impetus for the acquisition of media center resources to enhance instructional delivery; the provision of print and non-print materials at appropriate academic and English language proficiency levels to meet the needs of all students; the development of units of study that combine state benchmarks and district competencies with library/information literacy skills; the lowering of the student/teacher ratio through team teaching activities in the media center; the infusion of information technology throughout the curriculum; and the continuous training of instructional personnel to keep them current with the rapidly changing world of technology. Additionally, teacher/library media specialist collaboration enhanced the focus of instructional personnel on the mission of increasing student achievement.

Results

An examination of the percentage of students scoring at "Level 2 and Above" and "Level 3 and Above", for the two-year period 1998-2000, revealed that only School A and School M had positive increases at both levels. School M's 29% increase at "Level 2 and Above" was more than twice the increase of School A's 14%, while School M's 117% increase at "Level 3 and Above" was more than 3 1/2 times the increase of School A's 33% (see Table XI).

FCAT Reading Scores Grade 8 - Percent Change 1998-2000

[Table XI](#)



Conclusion

The policies and practices implemented at School M by the author were developed to reflect current research theories on the factors affecting the development of literacy skills in economically disadvantaged middle school students. Specific factors addressed in this study included:

- the presence of reading material in the home
- exposure to books
- participation in enjoyable reading-related activities
- personal choice in the selection of reading material
- individual visits to the library media center
- the availability of information technology
- teacher/library media specialist collaboration

The policies and practices described in this study were an observable variable unique to School M, the only school to show a consistent increase over a two-year period in the number of students scoring "Level 2 and Above" and "Level 3 and Above" on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test, Reading Subtest. Therefore, the author concludes that this study underscores the impact of the school media specialist on the development of literacy skills in economically disadvantaged middle school students.

Implications For Policy:

In Middle Schools With A Large Population of Economically Disadvantaged Students

National Recommendations

Public Schools must provide the opportunities to promote literacy development that are currently absent in the home environments of economically disadvantaged middle school students.

These opportunities can best be provided through:

1. resource-rich media centers staffed by certified library media specialists;
2. media centers that serve families and the community through extended hours of operation;
3. media centers whose collections represent the ethnic makeup of communities, the achievement levels of students, and a wide variety of interests for children and adults;
4. media centers that provide current technology and instruction in its utilization;
5. media centers that promote recreational reading activities designed to foster a love for books and establish personal libraries in the home;
6. media centers that encourage classroom teachers and library media specialists to collaborate on lesson design and instructional techniques, to maximize resources and talents and incorporate informational literacy skills throughout the basic curriculum

District Level Recommendations

1. Consideration should be given to establishing a policy of mandatory scheduled library book checkout to increase exposure to and availability of print materials.
2. Consideration should be given to funding extended hours of operation for media centers to increase individual library visits and access to information technology for students and the community at large.

School Level Recommendations

1. Consideration should be given to funding paperback book distributions to increase the presence of reading material in the home environment. Suggested sources of funding include Reading Is Fundamental (R.I.F.) grants, Educational Excellence School Advisory Committee, principal's discretionary funding, proceeds from book fairs.
2. Consideration should be given to utilizing books as material rewards for student achievement in all areas of the school program, to validate the intrinsic value of books and stimulate an aesthetic appreciation for the pleasures of reading.
3. Consideration should be given to the establishment of a school-wide Accelerated Reader (AR) program, with print materials at all levels, to promote pleasurable reading experiences and the inclusion of all students in the media center. Recognition and awards, rather than accumulated points, for comprehension tests mastered should be considered in schools with students who display significant differences in reading achievement.
4. Consideration should be given to the acquisition of a sufficient number of computers with Internet access to allow for whole group library/information literacy instruction in the school media center.
5. Consideration should be given to the acquisition of a sufficient number of classroom computers and appropriate academic software to promote the inclusion of instructional technology in all areas of the curriculum.
6. Consideration should be given to training and empowering library media specialists through exposure to the philosophy and practices that were an integral part of the DeWitt Wallace Readers Digest Fund's National Library Power initiative.
7. Consideration should be given to the implementation of collaborative planning between classroom teachers and library media specialists. It is recommended that a cadre of administrators, faculty, and library media specialists who are currently participating in successful collaborative planning activities, serve as trainers and mentors for colleagues unfamiliar with the collaborative process.

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