



Evidence Summary

School Libraries: Are they Places to Learn or Places to Socialize?

A review of:

Tallaksen Rafste, Elisabeth. "A Place to Learn or a Place for Leisure? Students' Use of the School Library in Norway." *School Libraries Worldwide* 11.1 (2005): 1-16.

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Abstract

Objectives – To explore how students use the school library in their daily activities, who visits the school library, what activities occur during these visits, and how students value the school library.

Design – Comparative, multi-case study.

Setting – Two Norwegian senior high schools in two different counties.

Subjects – Students in year one, two, and three at two high schools; and teachers, principals, and school librarians at each of the two schools.

Methods – Data was collected from interviews, observations, documents, and

questionnaires during the first five months of 1998. Most data was gathered from 25 observations in the school library (each observation was 3-4 hours in length). Observations were made in three specific areas of each library: work tables, the computer site, and a reading hall quiet area. In addition, seventeen 45-minute observations were made in various classrooms. To gain student perspectives and to learn how and why students valued the school library, in-depth interviews were conducted with 28 students, consisting of 2 boys and 2 girls from each of years 1, 2, and 3 at each school, plus 2 boys and 2 girls from the International Baccalaureate classes at one school. Four teachers from each school, the school librarians, and the principals from each school were also interviewed to explore attitudes about the school library,

how they valued it and what instructional role they believed the library played in students' daily lives. Sixty students completed questionnaires that asked when and for what reason students used the library, what locations in the library they used, and what the library meant to them in both their schoolwork and free time. Documents such as class schedules and curricula, and school policies and rules were also considered.

Main Results – Data analysis indicated students had a lot of appreciation for the school library, but mainly for its role as a “social meeting place,” rather than as resource center for information. Students were aware of the function, purpose, and importance of the school library, but rarely used it for projects or research. The library was most appreciated for the fact that users went there to meet friends and talk. One observed group did not borrow books or bring work to do, clearly demonstrating that their purpose in the library was strictly social. There were students who used the library for research and information retrieval, but these students were the minority. Most of the students who did instruction-related activities in the library did homework from textbooks they brought to the library. There was no indication that teachers or the school librarians made any efforts to alter the attitudes of students or their use of the library as a social club. Based on observations, the researcher offered several possible reasons for her findings: weak rules and few sanctions, invisibility of the school librarians, failure of teachers to use the library or make assignments that required information seeking, and lack of a cafeteria in School A (which may have also contributed to the value of the library as a “meeting place”). Leisure-related activities in the quiet reading hall were highest among the girls, and highest among the boys at the work tables and computer sites. Daily users

(occupants) of the library at School A were second and third year boys and girls. Only boys from first, second and third year vocational classes were “occupants” at School B. The occupants at both schools influenced the activities of new users.

Conclusion – The findings of this study reveal a “gap between the rhetoric on instruction and school library use and actual practice” (12). Students were rarely given assignments that required use of the library and there was no collaboration between the classroom teachers and the school librarian. The library was not perceived as a resource center and was not viewed as an integral part of daily instruction. Weak rules, few sanctions, misperceptions, and inadequate instructional leadership by the school librarian appeared to contribute to the observed behaviors related to library use in the two schools. The author suggests the need for organization, leadership, and the proper training of students on the use of the library. She mentions the need for principals, teachers, librarians, students, and teacher preparatory colleges to work hand-in-hand to bring about a change of attitude about – and usage of – the school library.

Commentary

The topic of this research is of significant value to teachers, principals, and school librarians. If retraining or special in-service training is needed to better develop an understanding of the efforts needed to ensure collaboration between teachers and librarians, it should be pursued. A chart was included that summarized observed activities. An extensive review of related literature was examined throughout the paper. This research was very limited in the fact that only two schools were subjects of the study. The data that was collected was almost ten years old and may or may not reflect practices at these two schools today. Future research might include more schools

to determine if these findings are typical or unique at these two particular schools. It might also be interesting to determine if similar attitudes and behaviors are prevalent among elementary-age students as well.