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Of Special Interest

# School Library Media Specialists' Use of Time: A Review of the Research

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*Various research studies have attempted to categorize the tasks performed by school library media specialists and the time devoted to them. Since 1969, approximately a dozen studies have been conducted in the United States and one in the United Kingdom. The number of participants in these studies ranged from fewer than 10 per study to several hundred. Diverse methodologies have been employed to collect the data, including diaries, surveys, logs, work sampling, estimating, and observation. In some cases, researchers wanted to ascertain simple distributions of how school library media specialists spent their time, but others have focused on how outside influences such as automation, scheduling, and support staff affect time use. Still other investigations have addressed time use issues as part of research on other topics. An overview of time study research in school library media centers, implications of the findings, and suggestions for the future are presented in this article.*

## A Day in the Life ...

A day in the life of a school library media specialist is varied, complex, and consequential. Because of this, when attempting to recap all the activities that have occurred in a single day, a school library media specialist may have difficulty. But how about trying to measure systematically how a school library media specialist's time is spent in a typical week, month, or year? Various specific research studies, as well as components of other larger studies, have dealt with time measurement and task allocation in the school library media center. This review examines national inventories and time use studies conducted in the United States (and one in the United Kingdom) from 1969 to 1999. During this period, marked shifts occurred in the role of the school library media specialist. What may have been a school library operating in isolation, with the school librarian teaching regularly scheduled library skills classes about the card catalog and reference books, has evolved into the multifaceted school library media programs we see today. These changes are reflected in the studies described.

## Inventories of Tasks

A number of projects have attempted to categorize the many activities of the school library media specialist and have developed inventories and/or checklists of tasks. These task inventories have often been used as a basis for

gathering data on time use because of their universally agreed-on definitions of roles and responsibilities. Three important ones are the School Library Manpower Project (American Library Association, 1969), the Jobs in Instructional Media Study (Bernotavicz, 1970), and Liesener's (1976) *A Systematic Process for Planning School Media Programs.*

One of the instruments resulting from the School Library Manpower Project is the *School Library Personnel Task Analysis Survey* (American Library Association, 1969). A checklist of 300 task statements was developed in order to provide information on the differentiation of tasks performed in elementary and secondary library media centers by heads, assistant librarians, audiovisual specialists, technicians, clerks and aides, and district or contract personnel. Twelve standard categories were used in analyzing the responses. These categories were: development of the educational program, administration, instruction, special services to faculty and students, selection, acquisition, production, preparation of materials, organization, circulation, maintenance, and clerical and secretarial tasks.

The *Jobs in Instructional Media Study* (Bernotavicz, 1970) examined the tasks of audiovisual personnel by looking at them from two directions: "what gets done" and "what people do to get things done." Tasks were further classified according to their degree of complexity and according to the level of education required to perform them. A data bank of tasks was produced that allowed regrouping of the tasks into any number of job descriptions, based on difficulty of tasks or on function.

Liesener's (1976) inventory looked at services from the user's viewpoint, rather than from the operational viewpoint usually held by the practicing media specialist. Five service areas were identified: access to materials, equipment and space, reference, production, instruction, and consulting. Liesener provided detailed instructions on how to collect staff time data in each of these categories, using computing service output data. The data could then be used for program analysis and planning.

*Information Power* (American Association of School Librarians/Association for Educational Communications and Technology [AASL/AECT], 1988) provided categories for job activities in Chapter 2 "The School Library Media Specialist: Roles and Responsibilities." The overlapping roles of information specialist, teacher, and instructional consultant are further broken down into the following job activity categories: providing access to the media center, providing adequate resources, providing assistance in locating information, guiding users in the selection of appropriate resources, developing flexible policies for the use of resources, providing retrieval systems, instructing students, instructing educators and parents, curriculum development, instructional development, and use of technology.

The more recent version of *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* (ALA/AECT, 1998) revised these roles of the school library media specialist to: teacher, instructional partner, information specialist, and pro-

gram administrator. For each role, specific responsibilities are recommended based on the categories of collaboration, leadership, and technology.

Over the years, considerable thought and effort have gone into developing lists of tasks and roles for school library media specialists in the US. These agreed-on inventories can provide a uniform foundation for collecting and comparing time use data. In the studies that follow, some investigators have applied the inventories, but many have created their own.

## *Studies on Time Use*

Several researchers have attempted to calculate how time is spent in the school library media center. A variety of techniques including logs, diaries, direct observation, estimating, and work sampling have been employed. A summary that includes the date the study was conducted, name of the researcher, methodology, number of participants, location, and findings appears in Table 1.

Troutner (1978) conducted a study to develop a picture of the "typical" day in the school media center and how effectively each media specialist's working time was spent. Four professionals in one North Dakota high school completed log sheets on specified days. They were instructed to write down whatever they did and how many minutes they spent doing each task. The purpose of the study was to tabulate a percentage of time spent in 20 broad categories and determine how much time and money was spent in each area of service. The percentages calculated were applied to the school media specialists' salaries. About 35% of time was spent working with students and teachers. Although a figure was not given for the amount of time spent circulating materials, the author noted that this was an area that cost too much time and money. The data collected were presented to the administration as justification for purchasing a machine charging circulation system.

Pitts (1978) investigated the time devoted to tasks that made up the day of school library media specialists in Mississippi. A survey instrument that comprised 21 tasks gleaned from national and state guidelines was mailed to 300 school library media specialists throughout the state. They were asked to identify their time per task in percentage increments to reflect a total of 100% of their working day. The results revealed that, at the end of the 1970s, Mississippi school library media specialists spent most of their time in "keeping study hall" (19.28%) followed by "working with students or teachers in the instructional program" (10.27%).

Research by White (1982) focused on how 169 high school librarians in Colorado and Oregon expended time and energy in the materials selection process. Across the schools surveyed, most librarians carried out their selection and library management tasks in a similar fashion. The study group allocated 29% of their time and energy in assisting patrons. Selection of materials was second in importance, receiving 15% of their time and energy. The study respondents reported they would make only minimal changes,

Table 1
Summary of Research Studies on Time Use of School Library Media Specialists

| *Date* | *Researcher* | *Methodology* | *Number of Participants* | *Location* | *Key Findings* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1978 | Troutner | Log | 4 | North Dakota high school | 23.8% of time was spent helping students and 10.6% of time spent consulting with teachers. Percentages were applied to salaries for cost-benefit analyses. |
| 1978 | Pitts | Survey | 300 | Mississippi—all levels of schools | Spent most of time keeping study hall (19%) and working with students or teachers in the instructional program (10%). |
| 1982 | White | Survey | 169 | Colorado and Oregon high schools | Spent 29% of time assisting patrons and 15% of time selecting materials. Noted they would make only minimal changes in how they spend their time. |
| 1986 | Irving | Observation | 8 | United Kingdom | Spent greatest amount of time interacting with users. Not far behind was provision and maintenance of the collection. |
| 1986 | Everhart | Diary | 1 | Pennsylvania high school | Automated circulation was found to save time in the areas of, materials check-in, overdues and fines, reports, bibliographies, and inventory but not in check-out of materials. |
| 1989 | Edwards | Survey | 467 | Arizona—all levels of schools | Principals wanted school library media specialists to spend more time on instruction. School library media specialists wanted to spend more time on instruction, planning, and selection and less time on circulation and processing. |
| 1989 | Barrett & Schon | Survey | Not available | Arizona and Idaho high schools | Spent most time each day in direct service to students. No differences in the way Arizona and Idaho school library media specialists spent their time. |

Table 1 (continued)

| *Date* | *Researcher* | *Methodology* | *Number of Participants* | *Location* | *Key Findings* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1990 | Everhart | Work Sampling | 18 | Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and South Dakota high schools | Media specialists in schools with automated systems spent more time in development of the educational program, instructional development and use of technology. Those in schools without automated systems spent more time in circulation and production. |
| 1994 | Shontz | Survey | 11 | 9 high schools and 2 middle schools in North Carolina | The most frequently performed task related to curriculum planning was assisting with individual students and small groups working on a unit. The least performed task was discussion of an evaluation plan. |
| 1996 | Donham van Deusen | Log at 15-minute intervals and survey | 90 | Iowa elementary schools | Most time was spent on management (18.6%) and teaching (16.4%). Automation, scheduling, support staff, and number of buildings served had a significant impact on how time was used. |
| 1999 | Miller & Shontz | Survey | 537 | United States nationwide sample; all levels of schools | Flexible scheduling allowed for more planning time per week—an average of 3.54 hours. A combination of fixed and flexible scheduling had 2.71 hours planning time and fixed alone had 2.13 hours. |

indicating that high school librarians could generally determine their own time and energy allocations.

A British study (Irving, 1986) used observation to define a typical day in the life of a school librarian in terms of the allocation of time to the various tasks undertaken. Eight schools were observed over 32 days, collecting over 2,000 observations. Library school students observed librarians at intervals of five minutes. Categories used in the Irving study were rather broad: general

administration, personnel management, selection and withdrawal of material, public relations, lending, and curriculum development. The greatest amount of time was spent on interactions with users, including teachers, assistants, colleagues, and students. Not far behind was the time dedicated to the provision and maintenance of collections. Administrative tasks were relatively less time-consuming.

Everhart (1986) kept time data for technical services operations when developing a computerized model library for the state of Pennsylvania. The diary method was employed for one year before and one year after automation was in place. Time savings were found in virtually all areas studied (catalog card production, materials check-in, overdues and fines, reports, bibliographies, and inventory) with the exception of check out of materials.

Time study was included in an investigation into principals' perceptions of school library media specialists in Arizona (Edwards, 1989). Principals were surveyed as to their perceptions of how school library media specialists spent their time in specific job-related functions: instruction, planning, selection, reference, circulation, and processing. Principals also voiced their expectations of how school library media specialists should ideally be spending their time. These perceptions were compared with how the media specialists believed they spent their time and where they would ideally like to spend it. Principals believed the media specialists should be spending more time on instruction. Media specialists felt they would like to spend less time on circulation and processing and more time on instruction, planning, and selection.

Barrett and Schon (1989) asked secondary school library media specialists in Arizona and Idaho to rate which services they believed to be *most important* and how much time they spent on these services. Media specialists identified assistance in research assignments and teaching library skills as the most important services to students. The most important teacher services were identified as selecting materials followed by assisting teachers in planning a research unit and providing audiovisual assistance. When estimating how time was actually spent on various library activities, the media specialists in the Barrett and Schon study reported spending twice as much time each day in direct service to students as they spent with teachers or on any single library activity. Book selection tasks took about 12-13% of the media specialists' time, 15% of their time was spent on clerical activities, 10-11% in cataloging, and about 7-8% in supervising staff. A small percentage of the school day (4%) was spent in other activities ranging from attending curriculum meetings to sponsoring reading clubs. There were no differences in the way Arizona and Idaho media specialists spent their time.

A study of matched pairs of high school library media specialists in Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and South Dakota by Everhart (1990, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1997) sought to ascertain the proportions of time those with and without automated

circulation systems spent in various work activity categories. Percentages were used to determine: (a) if automating circulation activities made a difference in how a school library media specialist spent his or her time; (b) in what specific areas of a school library media specialist's workload automation made a difference; and (c) if by having an automated circulation system school library media specialists were better equipped to meet the challenges put forth in *Information Power* (ALA/AECT, 1988).

In the Everhart (1990) study, the percentage of time spent in various work activity categories was calculated using work sampling. Participants used random alarm mechanisms (RAMs) and preprinted forms with work categories listed to record the data. In response to a RAM, participants checked off the activity they were performing. Media specialists with automated circulation systems used their time differently than those who did not have them. Those with automated systems spent more time in development of the educational program, instructional development, and use of technology. Those without automated systems spent more time in circulation and production. No difference was found in administration, instruction, selection, processing, clerical, providing access, reference, organization, or personal time.

The findings of the Everhart (1990) study were compared with the estimates of time use by library media specialists that were provided by the Standards Writing Committee of *Information Power* (ALA/AECT, 1988). The estimates of the Standards Writing Committee did not coincide with how media specialists in either the automated or nonautomated settings spent their time. The Committee overestimated the devotion of the media specialists' time in both groups to curriculum and instructional development and underestimated the amount of time actually devoted to administration and personal time. They had also expected the automated group to spend more time than actually occurred in networking types of activities.

Shontz (1994) devised a form for collecting data on the amounts of time teachers and school library media specialists spent on curriculum planning tasks. Based on Turner's (1993) classified steps in the instructional design process, 26 curriculum planning tasks were identified. Data collected using this form were used to ascertain the mean number of hours per school day that school library media specialists in North Carolina were involved in planning and implementing units of instruction, as well as the number of times each task was performed. Nine high schools and two middle schools participated. Shontz found that the most frequently performed task related to curriculum planning was "assisting with individual students or small groups working on a unit," which was performed 65 times in a month and took an average of four and one half hours each time. The task completed the least number of times was "discussion of evaluation plan." This was engaged in only nine times, with an average of 25 minutes per occurrence.

One of the few time studies involving elementary school library media specialists was conducted by Donham van Deusen (1996) in Iowa. Ninety school library media specialists logged their time for two days at 15-minute intervals. Each activity reported was later coded into 15 categories by the researcher: electronic support, teaching, story time, assist individual student, reading guidance, consulting, student supervision, management, cataloging, professional development, lesson planning, selection of materials, clerical teaks, circulation tasks, and personal tasks. Participants also completed a questionnaire on various program and school characteristics. The combination of methods made it possible to investigate not only how the elementary school library media specialists allocated their time, but also the effects of automated circulation systems, scheduling, support staff, whole language, and number of buildings served on time. Results revealed that the largest amounts of time were spent on management (18.6%) and teaching (16.4%). The least amounts of time were spent on professional development (2.1%), cataloging (3%), and selection (2%). Automation, scheduling, support staff, and number of buildings served had a significant impact on how time was used.

Since the Donham van Deusen (1996) study, little has been reported in the literature on how school library media specialists spend their time. One small exception is a component of the biennial expenditures surveys of Miller and Shontz (1997, 1999) that reports on the time that school library media specialists across the US say they spend collaborating with teachers. The 1999 findings revealed that the mean number of hours spent planning per week for school library media specialists with flexible scheduling was 3.54 hours. Of that, 1.33 hours were spent in formal planning and 2.33 hours in informal planning. For school library media specialists with a combination of flexible and fixed scheduling, the mean number of hours spent planning was 2.71 hours—88 formal planning and 1.83 informal planning. Fixed scheduling allowed the least opportunity for planning time—35 formal planning and 1.78 informal planning—for a total of 2.13 hours planning per week. A breakdown by grade level showed that, on average, junior high or middle school library media specialists reported the most planning time per week—3.74 hours. This was followed by high school library media specialists (3.54 hours), other library media specialists, mainly in K-12 schools (2.83 hours) and elementary library media specialists (2.64 hours).

The issue of planning and consulting time is an overriding theme in several of the studies, especially the more recent ones of Everhart (1990), Donham van Deusen (1996), and Miller and Shontz (1997, 1999). All four report similar findings. That is, school library media specialists spend roughly two to four hours per week planning and consulting, which is less than 10% of their total workload. Because of the continued and increasing emphasis on this role in both editions of *Information Power* (AASL/AECT, 1988, 1998), this is a concern. At the 1991 American Association of School

Librarians' Research Forum, Carol Kroll (1992), Director of the Nassau School Library System, New York, responded to Everhart's findings:

> Perhaps the image of the library media specialist who spends lunchtime reaching out to teachers to encourage library usage and who works cooperatively with teachers and with school, public, academic, and other librarians is an erroneous one. How true is the old image of the librarian content in clerical and administrative tasks? Library leaders and educators may be influencing fewer in the profession than we suspect ... AASL and statewide agencies should be supported in their efforts to design continuing education needed by practitioners to implement *Information Power*. (p. 99)

The responses of the participants in the Everhart (1990) study differed from the predictions on time use for the groups of school library media specialists in automated and nonautomated schools made by the Standards Writing Committee of *Information Power* (AASL/AECT, 1988). The differences between the predictions versus the time actually spent were most extreme for the category of *development of the educational program* (which included instructional and curriculum development). The Committee predicted the automated schools group would spend about 22% of their time in this role, and that the nonautomated schools group would spend less than half of that time (9.8%) in development of the educational program. In reality, the automated schools group spent only about 6% of their time in this role, and the nonautomated schools group spent a little less than half of that time (2.3%). These results show that practicing media specialists were not "buying into" these recommended roles as much as leaders in the field would like. The implications of this finding and other findings from time use studies are considered below.

## *Implications of the Research on Time Use*

1. More time use studies are needed. Not only are there a limited number of studies, but Daniel (1976) provides an important reason that research in the area of time use needs to go forward:

> Time measurement can lead to quality inferences or the "goodness" of a library ... The most important resource of the librarian is time. Financial resources are important, but the school library is a labor-intensive activity. The choice of where and how the librarian spends his time will affect the overall direction of the program more than anything else. Time spent on planning will ultimately have a bigger impact than time spent on repetitive clerical tasks. (p. 37)

The school library media specialist can be one of the most influential people in the entire school if he or she is spending his or her time in curricular and instructional roles. Research has substantiated the importance of library media programs and personnel on student achievement (Mancall, 1985). Studies have shown that schools with library media specialists having substantial curricular and instructional roles are related

to students' overall academic ability and performance on standardized tests (Hamilton-Pennell, Lance, Rodney, & Hainer, 2000). More time studies could add to the limited base of research that links student achievement to school media specialists' time expenditures so that more hard data can be shared with administrators and the community.

2. Time use studies can contribute to the preservice and continuing education of school library media specialists. For example, in planning library school curriculum, instructors could compare the findings on time use by library media specialists with the time allocated to various aspects of curriculum content presented in school library education. In doing so, school library instructors might redirect the focus of the curriculum to areas where media specialists actually spend their time. The information on how time was spent at each school level can be used to counsel library school students when they are unsure at which level they might like to work. Knowledge of time allocations can also aid those planning continuing education activities. Where there are obvious discrepancies of how time is actually spent as compared with foci of state and national guidelines, continuing education opportunities can be offered to practitioners to support them in realizing new initiatives.
3. The percentages calculated in the individual work categories of time use studies can be applied to library media specialists' salaries, as in the Troutner (1978) study, in order to obtain the costs of performing particular tasks. This information could be used as part of more thorough cost-benefit analyses of school library media centers and the results shared with administrators. The data on time use might be used to help justify the purchase of automated systems or the hiring of support staff to free the media specialist for more important and cost-effective roles. Armed with hard data, a school media specialist could have increased credibility in this age of accountability and cost-effectiveness. This is important as educational budgets continue to shrink and the school library media program competes with myriad other school programs and activities.
4. Time use studies can serve as a basis from which school library media specialists might examine and adjust their own time use patterns. School library media specialists reading the time use research literature need to look carefully at the school context of particular time use studies. Obvious differences were noted between how time was spent in high school library media centers in the Everhart (1990) study and elementary school library media centers in the Donham van Deusen (1996) study. Studies need to be completed at the middle school level to determine how middle schools compare with elementary and high schools in time allocations. And, because roles and responsibilities are changing rapidly in this profession, new studies are needed to reflect current tasks and time

devoted to them. Standardized lists of tasks that would be useful for comparisons across types of schools need to reflect these changes also.

## *Suggestions for the Future*

Why have more time use studies not been conducted in the school media field? Perhaps researchers believe it to be "too simple" a subject for serious study. However, the issues raised above affirm that it is not. Task allocation is at the core of all we do. It may be that some find it too confusing to categorize the many activities that are performed in all types of school media centers. Professional organizations could assist both researchers and practitioners by developing standardized lists of tasks on a regular basis and making them available via printed guidelines or a Web site.

Because there are numerous techniques for gathering data on time use, selecting a methodology might be intimidating. As someone who has studied this topic extensively, this writer recommends self-reporting at either random or fixed intervals using a standardized list of tasks. There are serious drawbacks to estimating, surveying, and time diaries. Allowing the participants to make estimates of how they think they spend their time has been found to be inaccurate in other educational areas. For example, where principals' use of time was estimated by themselves and then compared with actual measurement by observation, disparities arose in many areas where principals either over- or underestimated how they thought they were spending their time (Ghosey, 1987; Burke, 1980). The most serious limitations of the diary method are that it breaks down when the work day is fragmented into many activities, it suffers from the problem of generous interpretation and there is a tendency to reconstruct entries some time after the activities were completed (Divilibiss, 1981).

Researchers may also be intimidated by the amount of time needed for time studies. However, in order to get an accurate picture of time expenditures, only a relatively short period of study need be used if that period is representative of the overall workload of the school library media specialist. An average month, or even week, could be extrapolated to predict time use over an entire school year. A variation of this methodology would be to have a large sample of school library media specialists record their time use for a day and combine the results. IASL might even consider choosing one day per year and have members worldwide record their time use for an international "Day in the Life." It is to be hoped that research in this area will continue and expand. The findings can be used extensively.

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