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A Comment on Media Center-Directed Leisure Reading Guidance in the Secondary School

Rozella Lister Stull
University of Northern Iowa

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A Comment on Media Center-Directed Leisure Reading Guidance in the Secondary School

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Abstract

Today's media specialist faces a great many demands upon her expertise. There can be no distinction made between the toils of selection to the rigors of cataloging. Nor may one emphasize the importance of bibliographic work over the necessity of film previewing. Media specialists are constantly bombarded with newer and more difficult tasks as services are expanded to meet the needs of the youth of the 70's. The media center has become in many cases an all encompassing unit with little differentiation among its services. The question then being how can one service be singled out as particularly significant. It would be presumptuous to suggest that the amount of time, energy or students affected serve as the basis for this selection. Instead one must realize that each media specialist sees the greater significance on the basis of her individual situation.

Therefore, this author has chosen to reflect upon the significance of the service of reading guidance for the leisure reader. This service has presented many problems and rewards and thereby merits extensive consideration. The following writings will attempt to place reading guidance in perspective.

A COMMENT ON MEDIA CENTER-DIRECTED
LEISURE READING GUIDANCE
IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

An Independent Writing Project
Presented to the
Faculty of the Library Science Department

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Rozella Lister Stull

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Read and approved by

Charles Adams

Leah Heland

Accepted by Department
Elizabeth Martin

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PURPOSE

Today's media specialist faces a great many demands upon her expertise. There can be no distinction made between the toils of selection to the rigors of cataloging. Nor may one emphasize the importance of bibliographic work over the necessity of film previewing. Media specialists are constantly bombarded with newer and more difficult tasks as services are expanded to meet the needs of the youth of the 70's. The media center has become in many cases an all encompassing unit with little differentiation among its services. The question then being how can one service be singled out as particularly significant. It would be presumptuous to suggest that the amount of time, energy or students affected serve as the basis for this selection. Instead one must realize that each media specialist sees the greater significance on the basis of her individual situation.

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DEFINITION OF TERMS

An advantageous exercise before this study begins would be to submit definitions of the key terms involved in this work. As this paper progresses one may assume these terms are understood in the context in which they are placed in these definitions.

- Media Center - the central location of the print and non-print collection
- Media Specialist - that person who organizes, administers and coordinates the activities of the media center
- Youth of the 70's - those persons between the ages of twelve and eighteen presently attending secondary school
- Leisure reading - that reading which is attempted solely for pleasure and is in no way related to a curricular assignment
- Media Center-Directed
- Reading Guidance - that program which strives to attain a high level of achievement of the art and skills of reading and utilization of reading materials

BACKGROUND AND STATISTICAL INFORMATION

As this study on media center-directed reading guidance begins the first task is to bring forth a few facts. The purpose of these facts being to fully illustrate the need for intensive study of the topic. This author's experience has been to realize the necessity of the service discussed. However, the extreme importance of reading guidance has escaped this media specialist. One could venture many more media personnel may fall in this pattern. The intended purpose of the following information is also to initiate some sort of retrospection. Thereby media personnel may come to terms with the significant task reading guidance presents.

Statistics are a great indicator to one about what has been done in the past. One study tells the reader that seventy per cent of the adult American population can read but do not.¹ In a recent Gallup Poll a sampling of the population was asked, "Are you reading a book now?" Eighty-three per cent of those replying answered "no".² The general response to surveys indicates people attach a great deal of prestige to reading. Yet their actions are quite to the

¹Florence Damon Cleary, Blueprints for Better Reading (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1972), p. 14.

²Cleary, p. 14.

contrary if only seventeen per cent of the United States' adult population chooses to read. More shocking is that fact that one half of the world's population cannot read.³

Obviously the media specialist may respond that these statistics are not an accurate representation of what is being done today as they deal with the adult population. Unfortunately, the status of the school student offers little consolation. Granted thousands of high school graduates read with skill and comprehension. Yet sixty per cent of high school seniors responded to a survey that they had not read one single book in that year.⁴ And one finds fifteen to twenty per cent of our high school students with reading habits which are seriously retarded.⁵ In terms of actual numbers five million students are what educators undemonstratively classify as "underachievers".⁶ All this reveals that our schools are producing those adults which reply so negatively to Gallup's questions. One of the glaring weaknesses of American education is the high degree of functional illiteracy it manufactures. In point of explanation, a functional illiterate is one who can read words but has no idea what they mean.⁷

³Jean Spealman Kujoth, ed., Librarians, Readers and Book Selection (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1969), p. 226.

⁴Kujoth, p. 228.

⁵Cleary, p. 8.

⁶Cleary, p. 156.

⁷American Library Association, Student Use of Libraries (Chicago: American Library Association, 1964), p. 123.

Some may counter that as long as the student can read educational goals have been achieved. But if someone is looking at printed material of which he understands only a few words can one say he is reading? Marguerite de Angeli, author of many juvenile books, creatively describes the rewards of reading, "Reading is a source of information, comfort and enjoyment; a channel for new ideas, a means of stretching the mind as one stretches the muscles to keep them supple. It might even teach one common sense, the most uncommon attribute of man."⁸ Do media specialists want to deprive students of the information, comfort and enjoyment that comes to the skilled leisure reader?

The personal development, comprehension of values, appreciations and experiences otherwise unattainable cannot be denied of the skilled reader. Marie Behymer illuminates those experiences when she states, "reading is a process. . . . A writer gives something to a reader and there must be an interaction between the writer and the reader for the materials to be meaningful. . . . The reader understands the vocabulary of the writer and relives the experience he is writing about."⁹ This interaction comes only when the reader realizes his full potential as a skilled, discriminate observer of materials.

⁸ David H. Hunt, Libraries and Reading (Philadelphia: Drexel Press, 1964), p. 1.

⁹ Marie Behymer, "Books Alone Won't Create Interest" (Illinois Libraries, Sept., 1971). p. 490-493.

There is practicality in reading also. How can one ever hope to keep in touch with the world around him if the skills of reading have not been developed? How can the complexities of the world be comprehended if the printed word is not understood? How can one relish in the joy of life if the delights of reading are negated? Here one speaks of the essence of communication. The need to communicate has a definite basis in the need structure of individuals. One needs to explore and satisfy our many curiosities and interests. One needs to pursue many self-directed activities. Only then may one come to understand the many selves which compose the spirit. The supposition then is that this may be accomplished through reading. Reading is truly the one sure safeguard against the diminishment of man.

Yet the youth of the 70's are not reading. How then is he realizing his self? How is he keeping up with the world around him? With what is he occupying his time? The Department of Commerce recently compiled a study of American's leisure time habits. The following results indicate the percentage of time spent at each leisure activity:¹⁰

Radio and television	19.8%
Spectator Sports	18
Magazines and Newspapers	12
Nondurable toys	11
Books	5
Gambling	3

¹⁰Cleary, p. 15.

There must be some sort of reflection on our schools when Americans spend only two per cent more of their time on reading than gambling. When they spend almost fifteen per cent more time on television than reading. Besides being the "Pepsi generation" our students seem likely to become the "post-literate generation".

What then is left for the media specialist? Have media personnel reached an impasse? Should the reading guidance program be abandoned in complete favor of television, movies, radio, magazines? Not so, contends Daniel Melcher. Now is the time "for librarians (media specialists) to fight back against the enemies of books who have something more expensive to sell. They need to consider books as an original data bank. The way we like to read books is the right way to read books. We like to browse, put down, move ahead, refer back, ponder, skip and now they tell us this is definitely in line with the way the brain actually works."¹¹

Reading does not stand in danger of becoming obsolete. Although people are increasingly entertained by television, movies, radio, picture magazines, etc. Reading can never be replaced in its role as an instrument for private reflection. One may surmise that reading guidance has been practically non-existent in our media centers in the past. The conjecture now would be for media specialists to rise to the occasion and bring a full program of reading guidance into the schools.

¹¹Cleary, p. 131.

INDIRECT READING GUIDANCE

The years that fall within the secondary educational experience are in many respects the most important in the reader's career. He enters junior high school just at the end of the period when one can normally assume he wants to read. "The golden age of reading as a leisure activity falls between the ages of eight to thirteen."¹² Before he leaves high school his adult attitudes and interests in respect to reading will have been clearly formulated. The task of the media specialist is to see that students' experiences with printed material will lead them to become avid, knowledgeable, discerning readers as adults.

Guidance of the reader in choosing the materials which are most suited to his needs take^s two forms - indirect guidance and direct guidance. Generally speaking indirect guidance is that action which takes place behind the scenes. Direct guidance involves interaction with the students, an attempt to place the right book in the hands of the right student.

¹²Cleary, p. 16.

Here one begins this study of how the media specialist approaches a program of media center-directed leisure reading guidance. As has been earlier mentioned the indirect approach is what is done before the student requires face-to-face direction. Therefore, this approach should be studied first.

The Standards for School Library Programs listed ten objectives for reading guidance.¹³ These are worthy objectives and the intention here is not to take anything away from them. But, unfortunately, they are too general for the novice media specialist or even an experienced one who is beginning an in-depth program. Therefore the media specialist must establish some guidelines of her own.

Student-Media Specialist Relationship

One main concern of the media specialist is student development. This development is dependent largely upon the student-media specialist relationship. Obviously any attempt at guidance will be ineffective unless the relationship between the media specialist and the student is meaningful. How then is this meaningful relationship created? One begins by gathering background information on the students. It is imperative to realize the various influences on potential readers.

¹³American Association of School Librarians, Standards for School Library Programs (Chicago: American Library Association, 1960), p. 15-17.

The first and probably the most important influence will be the student's reading achievement. The media center could and should be the one setting in the educational atmosphere where the student is guaranteed a great measure of success. No reader should ever be directed to material which he will be unable to comprehend and thus fully enjoy. One may feel the classics are significant in developing human values. However, one must first consider their insignificance to the person who cannot translate those printed symbols into meaningful experiences. A classic pitfall of the media specialist has been to assume that because students have reached the secondary level they can read. Hence they need no further guidance.

The next influence to be considered shall be the reader's interest - not always an inherent quality of the teen years. As was stated earlier the golden age of reading as a leisure activity normally expires with the coming of the teens. Perhaps one should make a careful examination of this phenomenon. Why do students turn off to reading when they are thirteen? One suggestion might be the bombardment of other types of media. However, earlier this study mentioned that books can never be replaced by these media as books allow for private reflection. One might consider that the curriculum at this age requires a greater amount of reference work, mandatory book reports, etc. So much may be required that the

student loses sight of the book as a source of pleasure. Finally one can examine the personal interests of this age of readers. Perhaps at times their interests have been a little too controversial for the media specialist. Teenagers are attempting to come to terms with such issues as sex, drugs, alcohol, marriage, emotional instability, parents, etc. Topics which scarcely grace book stacks. To assume students will develop interests in books just because they are readily accessible is no longer feasible. If materials have no relevance to the teenage experience they will have no readers.

Another important influence upon the reader will be intelligence. This point should be self explanatory as everyone recognizes the effect intelligence has on personal evolution. But again one cautions the media specialist from rash generalizations. The highest IQ may have the most mundane reading interests. Likewise the slower child may have found such success and joy in reading to spur him beyond his natural limitations. Here one must be careful not to judge too quickly and allow each individual their idiosyncracies.

The fourth influence to consider is the age of the reader. This matter has been discussed in earlier influences. Though they span a time of only six years a teenager

may undergo sixteen personality changes. The conjecture then is every age from thirteen to nineteen has its unique characteristics. Thus the media specialist benefits from considering the ages and the problems and rewards each presents.

The final influence to examine in the gathering of information about the students is an obvious one, sex. The youth of the 70's have been immersed in a sea of literature dealing with their sexuality. Today more than ever they are being called upon to define their sexual identity. The implications of this are varied. One can no longer count on the fact that girls would rather read about nurses than doctors. Nor may one assume boys would rather read sports stories over romance novels. As was evidenced earlier all these factors are intertwining and age can play a major role in our consideration of the reader's sex. Feminists have not yet convinced the majority of thirteen year old boys that Jane Addams' life was as exciting as Jackie Robinson's. Perhaps by the time they become seniors there will be no differentiation in their reading interests. Again the media specialist must be aware of the current trends and their effect on the school.

Of course, there are other influences one must consider but the author believes the above five to be of major concern.

The list could extend to such factors as disability, emotional, reluctance, physical, social, educational, genetic, environmental, financial, etc. All are outgrowths of the individual and need to be considered. The media specialist is left with no alternative but to use everything she knows about how her students grow. Thus discovering as much as she can about each individual. This will aid in fostering a meaningful relationship between the student and the media specialist.

Maintenance of the Media Center's Collection

Continuing this examination of the forms of indirect guidance the maintenance of the media center's collection will be considered. An examination of the influences that play upon the reader has just been completed. Now one must interpret how those influences affect the collection. Obviously one desires that the media center's materials be utilized. Therefore, a collection must be established which is conducive to full utilization. Exploring the makeup of the students allows for the selection of a collection which will meet their needs and interests. One may call upon standard selection aids, ask teachers for recommendations, ask students what materials they recommend, observe the best-seller list, read reviews and read, read, read. These are all basics. The media specialist wants to think about her

students - what are they like, what do they like, what they have read in the past, what interest they indicate to one on a daily basis, etc. Secondary people are interested in drugs, sex, divorce, marriage, sports, mental illness. So one must give them books that deal with these issues. One cannot overlook material that has been taboo in the past. Include Elliott's Listen to the Silence¹⁴ so teens may take a look at mental illness. Other relevant titles include Zindel's My Darling, My Hamburger,¹⁵ a story of an unwanted teenage pregnancy and the resulting abortion; or Sterling's You Would If You Loved Me,¹⁶ another outlook on teenage sex. Present all sides of the issue including the unpleasant, The Teenager and V.D.¹⁷ Unfortunately the answers teens seek so earnestly are not readily available from the school or parents. So they come to the library where a certain degree of anonymity is available. How tragic it is to see a seventeen year old struggling with the torments of drugs. He is too young to know the terrors he has experienced and as a result too old to lose himself in adventure novels. One must be prepared for him - building a collection

¹⁴David Elliott, Listen to the Silence (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969).

¹⁵Paul Zindel, My Darling, My Hamburger (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

¹⁶Nora Stirling, You Would If You Loved Me (New York: Evans, 1969).

¹⁷Celia Deschin, The Teenager and V.D. (New York: R. Rosen Press, 1969).

that will answer his needs. The idea that accessibility of books fosters reading is no longer valid. Media specialists must continue their efforts to provide materials which are relevant to their reader's experience, materials which will provide learning experiences, materials that will meet their needs and interests.

Media Specialist-Teacher Relationship

The media specialist has realized the makeup of her students. She has developed a collection which meets their needs and interests. Now she must concentrate on her relationship with the teachers. No assumption should ever be made that a media center-directed reading guidance program can be planned and carried on in isolation. The teachers in all curricular areas must be involved. Granted, many teachers believe that leisure reading is just an easy way to kill half an hour on Friday. Others place too great an emphasis on reading for work assignments and reference. Because of this discouragement of browsing and recreational reading students have missed the library as a place to go for personal satisfaction. Thus the difficult task of combatting the idea that reading is to be done three times every nine weeks for a book report results. However, perseverance and dedication to the idea that leisure reading and informational reading are not mutually exclusive of each other will often sway the most avid encyclopedia using teacher.

Generally speaking all of us have gone through a period of fascination with books and can remember the enjoyment that resulted. One might call this to the attention of the teacher and ask if they wish to deprive their students of that experience. If the informational services they hold so dear are continued it is highly unlikely they will argue against anything that is so beneficial to so many of the students.

Public Relations

Finally indirect activities will come to a close with a little publicity. What good does it do to have the best collection of juvenile novels in the state if no one is aware they exist? One must sell the program and put the media center in front of the readers so they cannot ignore it. Many have an aversion to selling books like toothpaste and advertising guidance services as if they were a rent-a-car agency. Of those one can only wonder if they wish to benefit students or to bury themselves in abandoned stacks? The youth of the 70's are living in an era of Madison Avenue images, sales are "where it's at!". Media specialists are repeatedly urged to keep in step with the current trends. Public relations is one trend presently enjoying a great deal of popularity. So the media specialist is asked to advertise the reading guidance services. One may

begin by explaining to the administration one's concern that students experience the rewards of leisure reading. One should inform fellow teachers that this service exists and suggest they refer students from their classes to the media center. A relevant collection has been established and it needs to be before the public. The publicity program can include topical displays of books, displays of high-interest books. One might present a feature film to encourage the reading of a particular novel or to introduce a subject that is dealt with in several selections. If one is fortunate there might be people of the community interested in promoting reading who would offer their services as a resource person. The list is endless, the important fact is that students realize you care and that you are willing to put forth an effort to help them gain new experiences.

DIRECT READING GUIDANCE

Now is the time of reckoning, no matter how skillfully one's indirect guidance was implemented it will be of little value if direct guidance does not follow. Direct leisure reading guidance takes the form of two activities: a planned leisure reading guidance program of activities and the actual face-to-face contact with the student.

Planned Leisure Reading Guidance Program

*R*In advising the planned reading guidance program one is striking out against many images the media specialist has acquired to date. The first of these being the image as an observer of education, not an actual participant. Doubters may query the media specialists as they have no papers to correct, no grades to turn in and no lesson plans to make. One must counter that the media specialist is fortunate that she has no papers or grades. But she may lay claim to participation if she assumes the leadership position which is hers in media center-directed reading guidance. The image of the watchdog of the stacks and the dispenser of fines may be easier to hold fast to but that image is no longer workable. One must have a guidance program of substance,

a planned sequence of events which follow a developmental line. Now one can say the media specialist plans the curriculum as carefully as the teacher. One must be careful to avoid former methods whereby the reading class trooped into the library. The media specialist displayed several books, gave a brief synopsis of their content and retreated to the circulation desk. This required no planning and provided for no follow up activities. The success of one's program has to be in direct proportion to the care of one's efforts in planning it.

To begin the planning one first naturally establishes instructional objectives. For example one might wish "To introduce students to twentieth century American authors", an objective which could stimulate leisure reading. Most average collections will be well-stocked with American writers. One might conclude that it is most practical to center the first activity on one author and proceed with a different group of plans for each individual. Keeping in mind that the objective is to introduce all students to authors one might direct the activities for general appeal. Again to illustrate the point the author has chosen to plan a course of activities to introduce John Steinbeck. The media specialist can choose to effect these activities in the media center or the classroom. For the purpose of this

paper the activities will be directed in the media center.

To begin the introduction of Steinbeck a film festival will be held. One should interject at this point that although books seem to be in competition with other forms of media, this same media can be used to the advantage of books. Many of Steinbeck's novels have been portrayed in films. An advantage of today is that the country is riding high on a wave of nostalgia so the older films will be well-received. This planned program will schedule the festival for three days. On the fourth day of the week one may attempt to reach the television champions by viewing the recent television presentation of "The Red Pony"¹⁸ on videotape. This activity indicates the advance planning that is necessary for a program of continuity. During these visual experiences discussion will be encouraged. Students should be urged to share their thoughts and explore the views of others. There is no mystery to the fact that enthusiasm is contagious. The students will be fostering each other's interests.

By now interest should be running high on Steinbeck and it is time to display one's collection of his works. To reenforce the visual experience and continue the emphasis a slide-tape presentation of the author's life and works will be in constant operation near the book display. The sequence

¹⁸"The Red Pony" is used only as an example. The presentation did appear in the spring of 1974. Other occasional television specials are available and would be sufficient for a unit of this sort. Careful observation of the "TV Guide" or the "IEBN" schedule would be an advisable practice for the media specialist.

of activities for this portion of the objective is complete. The students have just been exposed to a massive attack of John Steinbeck. Now the media specialist must call upon her powers of perception. At this point one must perceive if the students are responding to the stimulus or if more and different exposure is necessary. To insure the developmental lines of the program one must always be prepared to advance to the next activity and quick to abandon those which are inconsequential.

Naturally one desires an evaluation of the guidance program. Here caution must be implemented by the media specialist. Guidance is not the same as instruction, thus evaluation will be dissimilar to that which one is most familiar. In guidance the evaluation will take the form of constant appraisal. Keeping in mind the overall goal is to encourage leisure reading one approaches the evaluation simply. First one might observe if the students are reading to evaluate the response to the planned activities. Next one observes how they are reading as it is important to keep a constant check on their reading achievement. Finally one checks how students are reacting to their reading in an effort to determine the influence reading has on each individual. This simplistic approach allows for changes in one's program to meet the needs of the students and yet provides a checklist for their personal development.

Face-to-face Contact with the Student

The dye has been cast. Students are flocking into the media center desirous of materials to while away their leisure hours. In this situation the media specialist meets the student face-to-face and a few problems may result. Hopefully, due to the careful planning that has taken place, the problems will not be numerous. The most repetitive problem may be the reader's reluctance to discuss what it is he wants in leisure reading material. All too frequently the media specialist is at fault by also being reluctant in offering what is not specifically requested. This should never be the case. Today's media specialist brings to the reader interview a confidence in her knowledge of the student, in the relevance of the collection and in the substance of the reading program. The collection and program serve as a background for the interview. The media specialist's knowledge is actively applied when trying to bring the right book to the right reader.

First and foremost in the guidance interview one must consider the student as an individual, never thinking of students en masse. The factors which influence the reader have previously been discussed at length. The interview is where one applies this knowledge. When a student requests "something to read" one must give major consideration to reading achievement, outside interests, intelligence, sex and age. The author does not wish to belabor the point

but always remember the significance of reading in the personal development of the child. The youth of the 70's faces an identity crisis that ranges from their place in the home to their place in society. One must deal directly with their concerns and aid the student in placing these issues in perspective.

The thought that reading guidance will be totally ineffective if a meaningful relationship does not exist between the media specialist and the student was earlier called to thought. So one now has the media specialist bringing to the interview previous knowledge of and rapport with the individual. What more can be done to achieve success in this endeavor? The main concern remaining is to maintain the interview on a very personal level. The student should realize you are involved with his interests alone. This may be accomplished by a few, well-directed questions. One may ask the student about books he has read recently. This is an opportune time to encourage thinking. Frequently students have come to believe that thinking is not necessary in leisure reading. Once this pattern of actually thinking about materials read has been established a free exchange of ideas can result.

One should take a moment to consider the student who does not specifically request guidance for a book. This student often appears to loiter in the media center. He may

come to the media center and spend hours leafing through magazines. Again one calls upon the powers of perception and observes what type of magazines are chosen. One should also take into account what articles are read. In some cases one must check on what advertisements are studied. These will be the reference points in suggesting book materials in which they might be interested.

Finally one has reached the point of realization of what the student wants to read. After calling upon one's knowledge of the collection the media specialist should suggest several titles of interest. At this point one should leave them and allow the student the final decision. By recommending several books one is helping them become more independent in student media center usage. Thus, this action promotes selective, discerning, mature readers - a major goal of any reading guidance program.

CONCLUSION

It was the intent of this study to comment on the rationalizations for reading guidance and methods which could be implemented to attain this guidance. Hopefully these methods and rationalizations have been placed in proper perspective and the media specialist is left with an understanding of the vital service of leisure reading guidance. In closing the author would like to share the thoughts of Elizabeth Nesbitt which were written thirty years ago but are timely still. "Librarians educate in the art of reading, not in the act of reading. The art of reading consists of the ability to read the literature of power with such sympathy and understanding that one is educated for living."¹⁹

¹⁹Cleary, p. 167.

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