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The Effects of Flexible Versus Fixed Schedules on Circulation and Attendance in an Elementary School Library Media Program

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The Effects of Flexible Versus Fixed Schedules on Circulation and Attendance in an Elementary School Library Media Program

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Abstract

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The Effects of Flexible Versus Fixed Schedules
on Circulation and Attendance
in an Elementary School Library Media Program

A Graduate Research Paper

Submitted to the

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by

Sandy Weldon

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Chapter 1

Introduction

A trend in elementary school library media center programs is the move away from fixed schedules toward flexible scheduling. With fixed schedules each class visits the library media center at the same time each week for a prescribed period of time. Flexible use of the library media center is dependent upon the current informational, instructional, personal, and recreational needs of an individual student, small group, or entire class (Van Deusen, 1993, p. 173). With the publication of Information Power " (American Association of School Librarians..., 1988), flexible scheduling was recommended to schools across the nation as a way of better serving students and teachers. Since then many state guidelines have also called for flexible scheduling (e.g., Keenan, 1994; Dishnow, 1994). No matter how scheduling is done in the elementary school library media center, the media specialist must still accommodate individual student and staff needs, as well as those of small groups and whole classes. The question is not only when to schedule students but how to schedule them and for what length of time. Either fixed or flexible schedules are most commonly used in elementary school library media centers.

Reasons for the more traditional scheduling of fixed library media classes vary from one school to another. Contracts may require a set amount of time per week that a class must spend in the library. Classroom teachers may be given this time as a scheduled planning time. Library media and classroom schedules may be easier to follow when they are planned in a fixed pattern. Each student is

ensured at least one weekly opportunity to go to the library. Finally, administrators may use a fixed schedule as a means of ensuring accountability of the library media specialist (Toor, 1987, p. 46).

Mary Louise Mills' interviews with principals included the response that the advantage of fixed schedule classes was to "encourage and facilitate the borrowing of resources, and to guarantee that every child in every class has equal access to the library" (Mills, 1991, p. 26). Mills' interviews with principals thus point out dependence on both attendance and circulation as established administrative measures of program effectiveness.

Flexible scheduling, on the other hand, offers each student more potential opportunity throughout the day to access the library media center (Toor, 1987, p. 46). It encourages the student to come to the library either individually, in small groups, or with the class "to facilitate use at the point of need" (American Association of School Librarians..., 1991, p. 28). Students gain information skills through immediate hands-on experience and reinforcement, while teachers begin to view the library as an extension of their own classrooms (Buchanan, 1991).

A primary responsibility of the school library media center is to facilitate access to information through a variety of materials (American Association of School Librarians..., 1991, p. 28). To provide improved access to the collection by students, Howe Elementary library in Des Moines, Iowa, implemented a schedule change. This library media program had previously offered thirty or forty-five minute fixed class schedules. Flexible class schedules were implemented at Howe for use with second, third, fourth, and fifth grade

classes. Kindergarten and first grade classes have continued to use a specific library time. Jody L. Magers (1986) provided a rationale that, as newcomers to the school and library, kindergarten and first grade students would benefit more by being together as a group. Marilyn Oswald (1994) surveyed members of LM_NET and found that of those respondents, flexible scheduling was used significantly more in higher grade levels. Therefore, Howe chose to implement flexible schedules only at the second through fifth grade levels.

Purpose of Study

While much research has been done on the effects of scheduling on consulting and curriculum (Van Deusen and Tallman, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c), there is none on the effects of flexible scheduling on the traditional measurements of school library program effectiveness as measured by circulation and attendance. This study describes the change in these two traditional measures in the first two years of flexible scheduling at Howe Elementary School.

Research questions for this study were:

1. How will flexible scheduling affect circulation?
2. How will flexible scheduling affect attendance?

Assumptions

This study was based on the following conceptual assumptions:

1. The library media staff understands the processes involved in implementation of schedule changes from fixed to flexible.
2. Classroom teachers are supportive of this change, will work collaboratively with the library media staff, and will encourage students to use

library materials at their points of need.

3. Circulation is one determinate of use.
4. Attendance is one determinate of use.

Limitations

This study was limited to the 215 students enrolled in second through fifth grades at Howe Elementary School, Des Moines, Iowa. Rather than using a sample, full library media circulation and attendance statistics for these grade levels were used from the school years 1992-93 and 1993-94 using fixed schedules; 1994-95 and 1995-96 statistics were used with flexible schedules. All four school years included circulation and attendance statistics recorded during the fall semesters, September through January. No effort was made to trace any other variables as measures of the effects of the shift from a fixed to a flexible schedule.

Definitions

Attendance statistics are the cumulative record of the number of students who visited the media center.

Circulation statistics are the "cumulative record of materials lent by a library which may include analyses by time period and categories or classification of materials and borrowers, and related statistics, such as number of overdues, renewals and recalls" (Young, 1983, p. 43).

Fixed schedules limit student opportunity to visit the library only during scheduled class periods.

Flexible schedules offer students opportunities to visit the library any time

throughout the day, either individually, with a small group, or with their entire class.

The school library media center is the physical setting within Howe Elementary School which holds materials to meet its media needs. Inclusive in this definition are all references in this paper to the library, the media center, or the library media center.

The school library media specialist is defined as "a person with appropriate certification under state requirements and broad professional preparation, both in education and media, with competencies to carry out a media program. The media specialist is the basic media professional in the school media program"

(Young, 1983, p. 143)

School library media staff refer to people who carry out all phases of the school library media program. Plan for Progress in the Library Media Center PK-12, prepared by the Iowa Department of Education, provides guidelines for staffing a school library media center. School library media staff may include professional licensed specialists and support staff, including library aides or associates, technicians, and volunteers (Buckingham, 1992). In this study, a non-licensed library associate is the full-time media staff resource person.

Significance

If the change from fixed to flexible schedules results in shifts of traditional accountability statistics used to determine the significance of media programs, specialists and administrators need to be prepared to consider other evaluation measures.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Library media specialists have only recently published their experiences with flexibly scheduled library programs. However, there is no current information on the effects of fixed or flexible scheduling on circulation and attendance. This literature review will describe four research studies about flexible scheduling and two studies about the use of circulation data.

Use of Fixed and Flexible Schedules

Although brief definitions of fixed and flexible schedules have been mentioned earlier, Emanuel T. Prozano (1970) offered detailed descriptions in School Media Programs: Case Studies in Management. Written over two decades ago, the descriptions are still appropriate for the purpose of this research. His definition of "formal scheduling," implies "a permanent or 'fixed' schedule created in the beginning of the school year and continuing until the end of the year....An example would be to schedule each class in a school for one forty minute period each week" (p. 185). On the other hand, flexible scheduling implies "that many alternatives are available to students and staff in a school. Individual and small group use is encouraged, while classes may be scheduled at the convenience of teachers and media staff when there is an instructional need for this type of use" (p. 185-6).

In his case study Prozano cites advantages and disadvantages to each type of schedule, as well as their related problems and alternative solutions. He

concludes that "library literature strongly favors a flexibly scheduled media center because of the broad educational opportunities provided by teachers and students" (p. 190).

Implementation and Maintenance of Flexible Schedules

A naturalistic case study by Donna M. Shannon, "Tracking the Transition to a Flexible Access Library Program in Two Library Power Elementary Schools" (1966), concentrated on first-year implementation experiences in two elementary schools in rural central Kentucky. The researcher stressed change as an evolutionary process, underscoring the need to provide communication, support, professional development, adequate resources, and awareness of the school climate. With the realization that these are all interrelated themes, a successful shift to flexible scheduling is more plausible (p. 155, 159-60).

Shannon's qualitative approach to research predetermined the purpose, focus, and boundaries of her study while allowing flexibility in the actual research design "in order to accommodate and take advantage of knowledge gained and opportunities suggested during field work" (p. 158). The intent of her study was "to provide information and insights related to the implementation of a flexible access library program that will encourage elementary schools to adopt successful strategies as they experience the change process" (p. 158). Data gathered over a three-month period included teacher, media specialist, and administrator interviews, notes from site observations, and documents collected at both sites.

Her findings reported challenges related to teacher planning time,

concerns over circulation of materials, overdue library books, and acquisition of library skills. Reassurance was provided by participating teachers stating that "literature enrichment and lessons in information literacy skills remain at the heart of their library programs, and that a flexible schedule enhances their opportunities to integrate such activities into the curriculum in ways that result in more effective instruction (p. 159, 160).

Flexible Scheduling and the Roles of the School Library Media Specialist

An ex post facto study, "The Effects of Fixed versus Flexible Scheduling on Curriculum Involvement and Skills Integration in Elementary School Library Media Programs," was developed by Jean Donham van Deusen (1993) to allow investigation of cause-and-effect relationships through observation of existing consequences. Research questions for this study were: "Do library media programs with flexible scheduling provide more curriculum involvement than those with fixed schedules? Do library media programs with flexible scheduling provide more integration of library media skills instruction into curricular content than those with fixed schedules? (p.173) Data collected by surveying the library media specialists and fifth-grade teachers from nine Iowa school districts with enrollment exceeding 3,000 were analyzed to determine relationships between curriculum involvement variables and scheduling pattern to test the hypothesis that flexible scheduling enhanced curriculum involvement. Further data were analyzed to determine the relationships between integration of skills and schedule to test the hypothesis that flexible scheduling would enhance skills integration (p.175).

Library media specialists in the flexible schedule group were found to evaluate units significantly more frequently than library media specialists in the fixed schedule group. A statistically significant interaction effect was found to exist when scheduling pattern and the planning style of the teachers were analyzed together. The combination of flexible schedule and team planning produced significantly more curriculum involvement activity than at least one other combination of schedule and planning, when curriculum involvement variables were measured. Of five curriculum involvement tasks studied, evaluation of units of instruction was the only one found to be statistically significant in relationship to scheduling patterns (p. 178).

Although the researcher's emphasis was the effect on curriculum involvement, her findings suggest recommendations for further study in the area of scheduling. Some of these guidelines can be expanded to a circulation research study.

A three-part study by Jean van Deusen and Julie I. Tallman (1994) focused on specific aspects of consultation and teaching by the media specialist and classroom teacher using the school library media center through flexible scheduling. For each part, questionnaires were sent to a random sample of 1,500 elementary school media specialists in schools with at least three grades and including third or fourth grades.

The primary purpose of Part One, "The Impact of Scheduling on Curriculum Consultation and Information Skills Instruction" (1994a), was to investigate differences in curriculum involvement, including consultation and

teaching information skills, between schools using flexible scheduling and schools using fixed scheduling. Research questions relating to schedules were:

“Do library media specialists in schools with flexible scheduling engage in more consultative tasks than those who work in schools with fixed schedules?”

“Are more information skills taught in connection with classroom units in schools with flexible scheduling as compared with schools with fixed scheduling?”

“Do library media specialists participate in the assessment of student work more frequently in schools with flexible scheduling than in schools with fixed scheduling?” (p. 18)

One finding of this study supported the use of flexible scheduling to improve curriculum consultation between teacher and library media specialist. Another consideration offered a blend between fixed and flexible schedules for integration of skills (p. 24).

Part Two, “External Conditions as They Relate to Curriculum Consultation and Information Skills Instruction by School Library Media Specialists” (1994b), focused on provision of teacher planning time, full-time or part-time status library media position, and employment requirement for state certification as a professional library media specialist (p. 27). Findings suggested that under ideal circumstances there would be support for both consultation and teaching roles using flexible or mixed scheduling, a full-time media specialist who is not responsible to provide teacher planning time, and certification requirements to be a library media specialist (p. 31).

The third part of this study, “Collaborative Unit Planning—Schedule, Time, and Participants” (1994c), focused on collaboratively planned units with the school library media specialist and the classroom teacher sharing responsibility

for planning content and process goals (p. 33).

The research question in this study was: "What relationship was there between scheduling method (i.e., fixed or flexible) and consultation and teaching activities and specific aspects of the planning...? (p. 33)" In conclusion, the researchers suggested that flexible schedules allowed more planning for collaboration which was further increased by planning with a teaching team (p. 37).

Circulation Statistics as Program Measures

A comparative analysis study by Matthew S. Moore (1992) defined formulas for calculating circulation rates and their applications as measurement tools for individual public libraries, systems, and categories of materials.

According to Moore in Measuring and Managing Circulation Activity Using Circulation Rates,

to calculate the average daily rate over a month for a single library open the same hours each day, one needs the number of items circulated in the month and the number of days opened that month:

$R=V/T$, Circ Rate equals Volume divided by Time in days

....Essentially, the calculation of the circulation rate is straightforward, plugging the volume and number of days open into the formula. But those rates may have variable meanings to the "day," whether 8 hours, 10 hours, or whatever. It is important to be consistent. (p. 199, 201)

He further states that circulation "rates can be used to produce practical information, usually by comparing and contrasting. A simple and productive use for rates is to create graphs of items/day for each month throughout the year...Such knowledge allows possible collection development [for specific needs]" (p. 205-6).

Another focus on circulation rates can allow comparisons of libraries with different opening hours and days to determine the comparative rates for the purpose of staff allocation (p. 212). Moore concluded his study with the following description:

The kind of very large social activities that affect circulation rates are beyond the control of librarians--seasons, school terms, population trends...Only very large trends affect circulation rates -- to increase a rate by one book/day means either one new person must check out twenty-five books or more once during the month, or twenty-five new patrons must check out one book each day. (And no prior patron may cease using the library or take less than usual). It is extremely difficult for librarians to do anything that would create such a situation -- and to increase a circulation rate by ten books/day calls for one new or current patron to check out 250 books, or 250 new or current patrons to each check out oneCirculation rates demonstrate that only large sustained changes in patterns affect overall circulation. (p. 215)

"Circulation Sampling as a Technique for Library Media Program Management" by Kathleen Garland (1992) offered a way for the library media specialist to use circulation statistics to demonstrate the degree to which the collection supports the curriculum, rather than merely providing circulation figures in an annual report.

The evaluation of collection usage as measured by circulation can be a program management tool as well as a collection development tool. This evaluation can serve as a measure of the impact of the library media program on the educational program of the school and, thus, is useful for both internal and external purposes. Internally, the evaluation can identify fruitful areas for future joint planning and consulting with teachers. Externally, the evaluation can be used to communicate needs for additional funds required for resources and to justify expenditures that have already been made. When budgets are limited and there is strong competition for funds, it is especially important to document the centrality of the library media program to the school's curriculum. (p. 73)

She further discussed the benefits of such statistical support. "By making informed management decisions based in part on observation of circulation

patterns, the library media specialist is acting to ensure that the library media program is an integrated part of the school's larger educational program" (p.78).

Based on her knowledge of the curriculum, teachers, and students, Garland selected purposive sampling techniques for her study (p.75). With the implementation of flexible schedules, a greater degree of interaction will be necessary between library media staff and teachers. "If the library media specialist is successful in the roles of instructional consultant, information specialist, and teacher as described in Information Power, curricular-related materials will be used in relationship to their curricular emphasis by teachers in the school" (p. 77). Garland further suggested that collection-use statistics may be helpful

in identifying fruitful areas for future joint planning and consulting with teachers. Usage statistics can illustrate how extensively the various ranges of the Dewey classification are utilized. The library media specialist can target teachers responsible for courses or units corresponding to the more extensively used ranges for initial or additional cooperative efforts. (p. 77-8)

In conclusion, Garland supported the use of analytical reporting of statistics. While circulation records may be collected for personal use or to meet building or district guidelines, statistics by themselves mean nothing. (p. 78)

The analytical reporting of statistics, on the other hand, can influence decisions made by school administrators concerning program support and budget allocation and can guide the selection and weeding of materials. By making informed decisions based in part on observation of circulation patterns, the library media specialist is acting to ensure that the library media program is an integrated part of the school's larger educational program....Thus, purposive sampling can be a valuable tool for managing the library media program. (p. 78)

These data provided insight into the major variables of the effects of

moving from fixed to flexible schedules. Use of flexible schedules may produce a transformation in circulation and attendance patterns. Moore and Garland's studies showed that circulation statistics can provide a valuable program management tool.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Implementing a flexible schedule may affect traditional measures of school library media program effectiveness. This study documented the changes in circulation and attendance in the Howe Elementary School library media center for the first two years of the scheduling change.

This study was a statistical analysis of circulation and attendance data. As a basis for tracking changes in the measurements from fixed to flexible schedules, monthly circulation and attendance results were collected from monthly reports for the first semesters of the 1992-93 and 1993-94 school years while fixed schedules were being enforced. These figures were taken from data on the checkout cards themselves. During these years of fixed schedules, teachers expected students to check out two books per weekly library visit. As students checked out their books, the library staff placed the checkout cards in one stack if they had two books. For exceptions of one book or more than two books, cards were placed in a separate stack. Cards from students with two books were manually counted for circulation. This figure was divided by two and recorded on a class list to indicate attendance. Student cards with one book or more than two books were counted separately and added to the circulation figure. Tallies were made next to each student's name on class lists. When combined, these attendance figures indicated daily totals. Daily figures were added together at the end of each week; weekly totals provided monthly circulation and

attendance records.

Monthly circulation and attendance statistics were collected and tabulated for first semesters of the 1994-95 and 1995-96 school years following implementation of flexible schedules. The data were manually recorded on a data gathering form (see Appendix A) using a student sign-out sheet at the circulation desk. Circulation and attendance figures were both taken from this form and were tallied daily, weekly, and monthly. Data from all four years were collected, tabulated, and kept by the media staff.

Finally, the new data was compared with the older records. Results indicated attendance and circulation patterns while using a flexible media center schedule. Although attendance and circulation results alone may not be a significant indicator of access to materials, they offered a means of measuring change in activity within the school library media center.

First semester circulation and attendance records for an average of 197 students were collected for grades two through five over four years. Both the number of students in these grades and the number of school days remained stable within the years of this study. Records for the months of August through January from the school years 1992-93 and 1993-94 documented circulation of 15,704 and attendance of 8729 for the final two years of fixed schedules at Howe School. Records for the months of August through January from the school years 1994-95 and 1995-96 documented circulation of 10,685 and attendance of 5115 for the first two years of flexible schedule implementation. This data was first recorded onto report forms (see Appendix A) on a daily basis. Monthly totals

were next tabulated. Finally, semester figures were totaled.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

Circulation and attendance figures for the last two years of fixed schedules and the first two years of flexible schedules at Howe Elementary School were collected. Data were collected from the first semesters of those four years. The researcher tabulated and compared the statistical data for circulation and attendance to determine if there was any effect on circulation and attendance because of the move from fixed to flexible schedules.

Research question number one was "How will flexible scheduling affect circulation?"

Circulation data collected is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Circulation Data from Fixed and Flexible Schedules

	Fixed Schedule		Flexible Schedule	
Months	1992-1993	1993-1994	1994-1995	1995-1996
September	1108	1532	1092	927
October	1638	1767	1022	1185
November	1698	1707	1151	1324
December	1244	1159	755	460
January	1870	1981	1580	1189
Total	7558	8146	5600	5085

Circulation figures under the fixed schedules in 1992-93 and 1993-94 showed an increase every month except December, 1993. Decline occurred every month in the first transitional year with the move from fixed to flexible schedules. In the second year of flexible schedules there continued to be further decline in four out of the six months charted. In the first two years of

flexible scheduling at Howe Elementary School, circulation decreased by 32% when compared to the last two years of fixed schedule data.

Research question number two was "How will flexible scheduling affect attendance?"

Circulation data collected is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Attendance Data from Fixed and Flexible Schedules

MONTHS	Fixed Schedule		Flexible Schedule	
	1992-1993	1993-1994	1994-1995	1995-1996
September	856	1064	479	504
October	836	1055	498	633
November	862	882	429	621
December	428	784	399	429
January	948	1014	521	602
Total	3930	4799	2326	2789

Attendance figures increased between the last two school years of fixed schedules but showed a decline during the first transitional year from fixed to flexible schedules. However, the second year of flexible schedules showed a monthly increase over previous totals. In the first two years of flexible scheduling at Howe Elementary School, attendance decreased by 41% when compared to the last two years of fixed schedule data.

Both traditional measures of effectiveness of the school library media program decreased from the last two years of fixed scheduling when compared with the first two years of flexible scheduling at Howe Elementary School.

Chapter 5

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Summary for Further Study

Conclusions

The goal of this project was to show how a change in the library media center schedule at Howe Elementary School, Des Moines, Iowa, affected two traditional measures of program effectiveness. The schedule moved from a fixed pattern to the nationally recommended flexible pattern. The measurements studied were circulation and attendance. The researcher found that circulation declined by 32% in the four years studied and that attendance declined by 41%.

There are more factors to consider than just the schedules, however. Although both circulation and attendance were reduced, utilization of the library media center may have been more effective because of its use at the point of need rather than only fulfilling a requirement. Although fewer students actually came to the library following implementation of flexible schedules, those same students were frequent visitors. They were allowed by their teachers the flexibility to come to the library as needed, rather than be restricted to once a week visits with their entire class.

Other factors in the decline of circulation and attendance in this study may be more directly related to the staff. How well did the library media staff prepare the teaching staff for the change from fixed to flexible scheduling? Was the library media center adequately staffed to handle a scheduling change? And how well did the teaching staff embrace these changes?

Some teachers were very structured within their class framework and

found it difficult to accept any deviation from set daily schedules. Some teachers were hesitant to relinquish control over their students by allowing them access to the library throughout the day. Others would simply forget to offer the opportunity for students to use the media center during the day.

The researcher noticed a correlation between student and teacher use of the library media center. Students that repeatedly used the library media center came from classrooms where the teacher was known to use the library frequently herself.

Attendance did improve during the second year with flexible schedules. This may have been due to better promotion of the library media center program or because the teachers were more comfortable using flexible schedules.

Another obstacle was that this program was operated by only one school media staff member. When additional duties were added to her schedule, it reduced the time that she was able to work directly with students in the library media center.

Finally, the researcher concluded that, while the data show a drop in circulation and attendance, this should not be considered a crisis. Instead it showed that there needs to be a different approach to evaluating a school library media program apart from relying only on traditional circulation and attendance statistics.

Recommendations

This study may be expanded by doing a survey of the teachers to see whether they preferred fixed or flexible schedules or a combination of the two.

Another study may include surveys of the students to see which library schedule they preferred. Further study of circulation and attendance statistics could be done in five years, allowing more time for acceptance of the schedule change.

Another study might investigate a move away from the circulation and attendance statistics that most library media centers currently use to prove program effectiveness. What other methods could administrators, teachers, and library media specialists use to evaluate the effectiveness of their media program?

The researcher recommends that a similar study be done in a school library media center that has a larger library media center staff.

Summary

This study considered the effects of changing an elementary school library media center from fixed to flexible schedules as measured by collecting circulation and attendance data at Howe Elementary School in Des Moines, Iowa. Complete records were tracked over the first semesters of a four-year time period, two years using fixed schedules and two years using flexible schedules, to determine if there was a change in circulation or attendance. The statistical analysis indicated a sizable decrease in both circulation and attendance following the shift from fixed to flexible schedules. This drop does not indicate that the change was for better or worse but it does show the need for further study.

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