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# **Tools of the Trade: School Library Media Specialists, Reviews, and Collection Development**

## INTRODUCTION

How many times might you peer into a school library media center in a school building in the United States and see this picture? A school library media specialist sits at a library table in a darkened building late in the afternoon looking at what seems to be an oversized, overwhelming jigsaw puzzle. Six thousand of the pieces represent the approximate number of children's books published annually, 4,000 small pieces represent the number of dollars allotted to purchase books for the year, and 500 pieces of more prominent size and shape represent the number of students and staff served by the school library media collection. Off to the side of the table is a small box into which all the puzzle pieces must fit, representing the average cost of children's books, now hovering near the \$15 mark. Did you recognize me at the table? Although the number of pieces may vary greatly, this puzzle is a visual image of the collection development dilemma faced by all school library media specialists every year.

## COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

*Information Power: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs* (American Association of School Librarians [AASL], 1988) states that "collection development is a systematic process administered by the

library media staff to bring together the materials and equipment to meet users' needs" (p. 72). This definition could apply to any type of library. Is there anything truly unique to collection development in the public school setting? What are the guidelines and procedures for a school library media specialist to examine and implement in order to develop and manage a collection effectively?

In Illinois, four primary factors in the school culture determine the context for the selection of materials for the school library media collection. First, all public schools in Illinois are required to adhere to the State Goals for Learning that have been established in the areas of the social sciences, biological and physical sciences, mathematics, language arts, physical development and health, and fine arts. In addition to these goals, certain topics are mandated to be taught, among these being African-American history, women's history, and the Holocaust. Also to be considered at the state level are the *Illinois School Library Media Program Guidelines* (Illinois Library Association [ILA], 1992), which include a major section on resources and equipment. Our broad goals and guidelines in the public schools are, therefore, predetermined at the state level.

At the school district level, the local learning outcomes are based upon the State Goals. These outcomes must be developed for each curriculum content area. Specific to materials, a local school district is encouraged to formulate a collection development plan which, according to *Information Power* (AASL, 1988),

provides a broad overview of the needs and priorities of the school's collection, based on the short- and long-range goals of the library media program and on an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the collection, and provides specific guidelines for building and maintaining the school's collection. (p. 75)

School districts are more likely to have a districtwide selection policy that addresses only some of the components articulated in the *Information Power* collection development definition, specifically the selection and acquisition of materials.

The third factor is the community in which the school is located and the geographical areas from which the students come, whether they are one and the same or distinctly different. An understanding of the demographics of the clientele is a critical factor in the collection development process.

The fourth and final factor is the building culture, which includes such things as the way the building is organized and the teaching and learning styles that are part of that local school. The building in which I am the school library media specialist differs greatly from individual buildings in other districts and somewhat from the other buildings in the Urbana school district.

My particular building culture is Leal School, a K-5 elementary school with 457 students, which serves the local neighborhood as well as several other neighborhoods that are not contiguous. Leal serves an economically diverse population as well as a culturally diverse one. While the Urbana school district curriculum provides a skeletal framework of learning outcomes, each building determines the specific nature of what is taught in order to accomplish those outcomes.

The Leal Alternatives Program was developed and implemented to provide three environmental variations within one school, all consistent with the school philosophy and designed to meet the needs of our students. Kindergarten is a full-day, self-contained classroom instructional setting, while in grades 1-4, a choice of instructional styles is offered, including a team-teaching environment of grades 1-2 or 3-4, a primarily self-contained environment of 1-2 or 3-4, or a single-grade classroom of 1, 2, 3, or 4. Students in grades 1-4 stay with the same teacher for two years in all environment choices. These classrooms offer an alternative-year curriculum, covering the learning outcomes and content for two grades over a two-year period.

Fifth grade is composed of a three-teacher team that departmentalizes instruction in major content areas. All choices and configurations strive to integrate the disciplines in a curriculum subscribing to a whole-language philosophy. Throughout Leal School, there are no textbooks—all teaching and learning is resource based. This philosophy and teaching style place the focus of curriculum support on the school library media center requiring a very different collection development process than, for instance, a school that has required textbooks throughout the district and a lock-step curriculum.

My collection development plan is always evolving. Perhaps you have heard all you ever want to hear about trickle-down theories, but my guess is that you have not heard about the trickle-down collection development plan. Leal School is a building showing its age and lacking the attention of a regular preventive maintenance program. Last November on a dreary Saturday afternoon, I received a call from one of the library staff indicating that there was a major problem at school and asking me to come over as soon as possible. What I encountered was four inches of hot water all over the floor of the library media center and one entire shelf area and assorted other nooks and crannies that had been soaked with clean, almost boiling water from the bursting of a ceiling water pipe. The irony of the situation was that the major section obliterated by the "flood" was the weather section with the book entitled *It's Raining Cats and Dogs* a sample of the worst damage to an individual title. We were sad, mad, and many other things but went about the work of assessing the damage and replacing the hundreds of lost items—both print and nonprint.

You've heard that lightning never strikes in the same place twice—wrong! In mid-January, the pipe on the other side of the library media center burst in exactly the same way while I was assisting a class of primary-grade children to find materials. Because we were there when that pipe burst, we were able to minimize the damage but lost the majority of our pets section. In response to these mini-disasters, I proposed a new plan to my principal—the revolving collection development plan. I suggested that if I rotated the entire collection every month, changing the location of major sections, we might eventually be able to replace all the books should our pipes stage repeat performances!

While various general forces—including, obviously, natural disasters—determine the school culture, there are more specific factors affecting school library media collections. Economic factors are the first to come to mind, affecting the monies school districts get from the state and the monies that are then designated by the local district for support of school library media collections. *School Library Journal* provides annual statistics on budget support for school library media centers. The average book budget of a school library media center is approximately one-fourth of the average book budget for a public library children's department (Roback, 1991, p. 38). Of course, the state of the economy in general is an external factor that affects us all.

The commercial market also affects our choices and options. What are the "hot topics" of the moment that are so readily available on the market? How much are we at the mercy of the publishing industry and book jobbers in our selection of materials? What percentage must we overorder to fulfill our orders? What about those out-of-print problems?

Social factors impinge upon school and public libraries in untold ways. Demographics are constantly changing as we survey and assess our clientele. The mobility of school populations is incredible. The number of at-risk students seems to be ever increasing. Our roles as caretakers seem to increase daily as schools are expected to offer social services. Cultural diversity is a growing challenge as we try to effectively teach and learn from many cultures and life-styles.

Technology is allowing us to expand our horizons. Depending upon the range of our technological capabilities, we can offer more services and resources as well as increase our field of networking and cooperation.

## MATERIALS SELECTION

Bearing in mind that these school culture and external factors set the scene for my selection process, just exactly how do I go about selecting

materials for the Leal Library? Having been there for only two full years, after serving a school district in Minnesota for 18 years, I am still struggling to get a handle on the curriculum. The fluid structure of the district curriculum and the autonomy granted individual teachers in my building make that a full-time challenge complicated by our two-year curriculum cycle at Leal.

One of the keys to becoming informed about the curriculum is involving the teachers in the process. The staff at Leal is a group of very dedicated, knowledgeable teachers who know and care a great deal about teaching/learning materials. They are continually on the lookout for potential library materials through their own involvement in conferences, workshops, coursework, and constant use of the two public libraries that serve our communities, and they are bookstore fanatics. The teachers at Leal recommend materials to me on a regular basis through informal verbal exchanges as well as more formal recommendation forms and requests. The professional review journals that are subscribed to through the school library media center are also routed, by request, to many teachers in the building who regularly read and mark reviews for my consideration.

My personal/professional selection process is based primarily on the use of reviews but is augmented on occasion by the serendipitous means of directly examining books via conferences, workshops, public libraries, vendor contacts, and frequent bookstore perusal. How do book reviews fit into my selection process? After I have assessed my school population, carefully examined the curriculum, and determined the needs and priorities of the collection, I rely on book reviews to form the core of information and opinion for my materials selection.

## BOOK REVIEWS AND MATERIALS SELECTION

I need and expect a lot from book reviews. First, book reviews should be descriptive, objective statements about plot, characters, theme, and illustrations. Second, I expect book reviews to have an evaluative statement including comparison of the title being reviewed to similar titles and literature in general. Third, the potential appeal, curricular use, and possible controversial aspects of the title need to be addressed to fully inform me as a potential selector. Using sound reviewing resources and selection procedures assists librarians in developing documentation/rationale in the event of a request for reconsideration of an item or title (Reichman, 1988).

Book reviews certainly do not meet all our needs. First, there are limited reviews of specialized materials. School library media specialists are most often confined to general selection tools and journals and

may not have access to journals that provide specialized reviews. Second, some reviews and reviewing sources have a rather "generic" quality and vocabulary and therefore may not be as reliable as others. Third, there may be a significant time lag between the publication of the item and the review of same. This is less of a problem for school library media specialists than for public librarians, as our budgets are rather limited and ordering is usually done only two to three times a year. Fourth, there seems to be no way to avoid the occasional "lemon."

My favorite "lemon" story is a personal one. Over 20 years ago when my husband and I were preparing to purchase our first home, we combed the want ads early each Sunday morning searching for a house that would fit our needs and our budget. One such morning, I was reading along and immediately got excited about the house described. It sounded like the perfect house for us in a great location at a price toward the top end of our limits. It wasn't until I read completely to the end of the advertisement that I realized the house being described was the less-than-perfect rental house in which we were currently living! I always think back to that experience when I receive a title that may have struck one person's fancy or met one curricular need but is definitely off-base for the collection in the library media center in the building I serve. Selection of materials based upon reviews cannot be expected to be successful 100% of the time!

As the person responsible for the selection and purchase of materials for a school library media center, I employ a broad range of reviewing sources and approaches. Reviews by professional reviewers have a different flavor and focus than those by field reviewers. Both perspectives are essential to making informed decisions. We all need to make more of an effort to address multicultural issues in the review and selection of materials. In building multicultural-multilingual collections, we need to be ever mindful of the general criteria for selection in addition to giving consideration to the more specific concerns of authorship, content, language, characterization, theme, and physical format of multicultural materials (Jackson & Robertson, 1991, pp. 11-12).

Hamilton (1988) states, "It is very difficult to choose materials for a school library. To do the job properly, the teacher-librarian has to be fully aware of every curriculum thrust in the school, every teacher's teaching styles, every kid's reading level, every item in the existing collection" (p. 5). Can any of us truly do the job properly? Van Orden (1988) includes a comment from John Belland, in reporting on the results of a national survey:

It is intriguing, then, to notice that both media program personnel and publishers/producer respondents ranked favorable reviews as being the most important selection factor. This would tend to imply that school personnel have neither the time nor the commitment to analyze materials in terms of a particular curricular need. They defer judgment to those persons who are professionally involved in reviewing a wide variety of materials. (p. 119)

Yes, I do depend upon book reviewers who work with a wide variety of materials to help me make informed decisions. However, I must come to those reviewing sources knowing the curricular needs of the staff and students as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the collection for which I am responsible. With those factors uppermost in my mind, my major selection criteria focus on the literary and artistic worth, the intellectual content, the age and ability appropriateness, and the overall value of the title or item in meeting the educational needs of my users.

When and where do I read these reviews and build my consideration file? It is a rare school library media specialist who is able to find quiet, uninterrupted time *or* space at work to devote to professional reading of any kind, particularly reviews, so most of us focus on selection in our homes. Review journals find their way to a stack on my desk at home waiting for quiet perusal there. I mark those titles I wish to add to my consideration file, which is kept up to date using FileMaker Pro on the Macintosh. Book orders are then built from my consideration file.

The most systematic and thorough process of selection that I have seen was a process employed by a Minnesota colleague several years ago. She methodically read reviews, copied the ones she wished to put in her consideration file, and transferred them to notecards. Careful consideration was only given to those titles for which she had copied and clipped a minimum of two and preferably three reviews. She then evaluated these titles/items very carefully in terms of the need and balance factor before making final selections. Selection was a high priority for her, and the quality of the collections for which she was responsible reflected that.

Let's take a closer look at how reviews helped me in the selection of three specific titles recently. First, *The Great Kapok Tree* by Lynne Cherry (1990). I examined four journals that reviewed this title upon publication. Reviewers agreed that the book was most appropriate for ages 4-8. The following are excerpted phrases that I found particularly helpful in my selection process. "Carefully researched," "endpaper map" (Corsaro, 1990, p. 1443), "stunning endpapers" (Jenks, 1990, p. 321), and "attractive environmental brief" (Long, 1990, p. 177) helped me know that the title would probably be effective in our curricular areas of social studies and science focusing on the rain forest. "Large format" (Corsaro, 1990, p. 1443) indicated that the title could be used with small and large groups, while "simple and clear" and "rich colored-pencil and watercolor drawings" (Toth, 1990, p. 82) gave me a good sense of the visual and verbal aspects of this title. "Story is heavy-handed" (Jenks,

1990, p. 321) and "thinly veiled nature and conservation lesson" (Toth, 1990, p. 82) helped me know that the book would need to be used with other similar titles in order to provide balance.

A title about the Holocaust (one of our state-mandated topics), *The Lily Cupboard* by Shulamith Oppenheim (1992), generated at least six reviews. Reviewers generally agreed that this title is appropriate for ages 5-10. This is a sensitive subject and one for which I continue to look for titles that are suitable for primary-graders. The reviews helped me determine such suitability: "gentle story" (Zeiger, 1992, p. 193), "exceptionally sensitive and effective portrayal of a difficult subject" (Long, 1991, p. 1596), "realistically childlike focus," "a picture book simultaneously gentle and sharp in its perspective on the Holocaust" (Hearne, 1992a, p. 190), "rich watercolor and gouache paintings" (Abbott, 1992, p. 953), "used . . . in a classroom setting or by parents, this could provide a memorable introduction to the suffering and bravery of individuals during the war" (Sherman, 1992, p. 97). Did I feel like I was making an informed selection? Yes!

Selecting resources that will be of particular interest to teachers is a high priority for school library media specialists. *Talking with Artists* edited by Pat Cummings (1992) is just such a book, and I selected it for Leal Library this year. Reviews in five journals agreed that this is an exceptional book that could be enjoyed and used by readers of all ages beginning with third grade. Such phrases as "innovative approach to informational books" (Burns, 1992, p. 465), "beautifully reproduced samples of current work" (Wilton, 1992, p. S28), "candidly child-like questions" (Hearne, 1992b, p. 202) "delight for aspiring artists" (Zvirin, 1992, p. 1598), "represent a range of styles and interests," and "minority, girl, and economically deprived readers can find role models among the fourteen artists" (Hoyle, 1992, p. 62) convinced me that this was an essential title for the Leal Library.

## CONCLUSION

In fulfilling the three roles of today's school library media specialist, those of information specialist, teacher, and instructional partner, the selection of materials must be a high priority. If quality materials are not available and accessible in and through the school library media center, the effectiveness of all three roles will be greatly diminished. Our mission to "facilitate students and teachers becoming effective users of ideas and information" (ILA, 1988, p. 1) will not be met.

Book reviews are essential tools in building a collection, our link as "solo" librarians to what is being published. Members of a skilled trade carefully select the right tool only after they have analyzed the

task at hand. Should we as school library media specialists be expected to do any less? We must make it a high priority to analyze and plan for our task, sound collection development, and then skillfully, not willfully, use the tools that will help us select materials "to support the school's curriculum and to contribute to the learning goals of teachers and students" (AASL, 1988, p. 82).

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