Student Use of School Library Media Centers in Selected High Schools in Greater Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas

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This descriptive survey, which analyzed high school library media center use in one area of north Texas in 1991, was designed to determine the nature and extent of student use of library media centers and to describe the characteristics of users and nonusers. The two most important findings are that a small percentage of students made regular visits to the library media center and that assignments were the single most important influence on use and nonuse of the high school library media center. Data collected in this study were compared with data collected in a 1960 study by Ducat.

Education in Texas has come under particular scrutiny in the last few years, and many steps have been taken to improve both the quality of education and the education environment. The curriculum is now expected to include skills development that will prepare students to be contributing members of society. The utilization of a variety of media is required to implement this new curriculum so that these expectations can be met. Students must use school library media center resources and services in order to develop these skills.

An extensive use study conducted by Ducat in 1960 measured the nature and extent of use in three secondary parochial schools.(1) In the thirty-five years since that study, school library media centers have been affected by major federal and state funding, by subsequent budget cuts and changes, and by developing technology, as well as by the introduction of national guidelines with changing emphases. Although the library media center has been an integral component of the education process for many years, there is a lack of data about actual student use. Such information is needed, particularly because of budget cutbacks and a focus on accountability. Research findings can help support decision-making and planning, which in turn can increase effectiveness in responding to the information needs of actual and potential users.

Further, *Information Power* recommends that school library media center programs be evaluated systematically to assess their goals and objectives, which have been designed to meet patron and instructional needs.(2) It is important not only to determine users' perceptions of the variety of resources and services offered by the library media center, but also to compare and contrast those perceptions with actual measurements of use. Analyzing data on school library media center use by students can provide information to help assess how well the library media center is meeting the challenges of *Information Power*.

Since the Berelson public library use study more than forty-seven years ago, there have been many studies of the use of libraries; only a few, however, have focussed on public school library media center use by students. In 1933 Adams investigated individual use of the library media center, e.g., time spent and proportion of individual student, group, and departmental use. He found that more than half of the students in his junior and senior high school sampling did not use their school library media centers.(3) Until Ducat in 1960, no study was conducted to ascertain whether there had been any change in the pattern found by Adams. Ducat examined

what Adams did not address: she studied the reasons why students did or did not use the school library. Since 1960 much has been written about instruction in library media center use and several studies have identified program effects on use, but none has described the nature and extent of use of the high school library media center by students until this study.(4)

The purpose of this study was (1) to determine the nature and extent of the use of library media centers made by students in selected schools in north Texas in 1991 and (2) to describe the characteristics of these users and nonusers. "Use" refers to library media center visits made without regard to activities engaged in while there, and "typical week" refers to a week in which the routine of the school is not unduly interrupted (e.g., by exam period, end-of-term assignment, or preceding or following holidays). The sample week studied was a typical week.

Methodology

This study queried students in three public high schools in the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area; students were surveyed and some were interviewed. These three public high schools were selected because they were representative of high schools in this area. Several survey instruments were used to compile a profile of the reading, viewing, and listening habits of student users and nonusers of the library media center. Students were asked about their use of the library media center and of the public library, as well as their perceptions of service.

School library media specialists provided information related to the school library media center program and facilities. Principals provided data about the population of the school and its community, details about the administration of the schools, and characteristics of the educational programs. In addition, forms that provided data about daily attendance and materials usage were compiled as were class use forms, which provided data about the subject areas of teachers who used the library media center and what types of materials were used.

Sample Schools

Each of the study's three public high schools, all located between Dallas and Fort Worth in north central Texas and within ten miles of the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, offered a comprehensive curriculum including courses to meet requirements for the college-bound as well as the vocationally oriented. Between 80 and 84 percent of the students in the three schools were expected to attend college after graduation. In each of the schools, the library media center was considered to be an integral part of the total instructional program and was staffed with professional library media specialists as well as paraprofessionals, student assistants, and adult volunteers.

Sample Population

The sample of students surveyed totaled 3,514, and included 1,752 males and 1,762 females. The percentages of students in each grade level were similar. The ratio of male to female respondents in each school was strikingly similar; however, two of the schools had a larger percentage of respondents who were females and one school had a larger percentage of males. Students in English classes were surveyed because these students were assigned to these classes according to reading ability.

Characteristics of Users and Nonusers of the Library Media Center

Reading, Viewing, Listening Habits

Reading books for pleasure. In each of the three schools, students declared that they read fewer books than usual during the month of the survey. A total of 56.7 percent said they had read at least one book, and 43.3 percent said they had read no book; 62.3 percent, however, said they usually read at least one book in a month. Sixty-one percent responded that they had read the same number of books as usual. Students who read fewer books for pleasure than usual during the month stated that they had no time, were too busy, or had too much homework. Almost one in ten students in the sample responded that they did not like to read or chose not to read during the month. More than twice as many students (31 percent) responded that they read zero hours per week as responded that they read one hour (15.1 percent) per week. The mean number of hours read by students in each school was similar, and between 51.4 percent and 54.5 percent of the students read from one to seven hours per week.

Students obtained their recreational reading materials from a variety of sources. Almost three times as many students (29.4 percent) used the public library for this purpose than used the school library media center (10.8 percent). Another 10.3 percent said they used the school library media center and the public library about the same amount of time. Approximately one-fourth of the students obtained recreational reading materials from friends, between ten and fifteen percent from parents, and fewer than three percent from classroom libraries. Of the 835 students (23.8 percent) who listed "other" places where they obtained recreational reading materials, three-quarters listed bookstores.

Reading newspapers and popular magazines. Slightly fewer than one-fourth of the respondents read no newspaper on a regular basis. Of the 3,165 respondents questioned about magazine use, 576 (18.2 percent) read no magazines on a weekly basis, while 2,589 (81.8 percent) read at least one magazine regularly. The most popular magazine titles were *Seventeen, Sports Illustrated,* and *People.*

Radio and television use. Students reported spending more than twice as many hours during a week listening to the radio as they did watching television. More students watched television than listened to the radio when the total amount of usage was twenty hours per week or less; when usage was between twenty-one and thirty hours per week and higher, however, students spent more time listening to the radio. Television usage during a week averaged approximately thirteen to fourteen hours, while radio usage averaged between twenty-six and twenty-nine hours. Both of these averages are higher than the one to seven hours spent reading by approximately half of the students.

Student Use of the Library Media Center

Use of Materials

A greater percentage of students used materials in the library media center itself rather than checking them out for use elsewhere, and several factors contributed to this pattern of use.

- More than 50 percent of students used the photocopy machine when they visited the library media center, and many of those students preferred to copy materials rather than check them out, particularly reference materials;
- More than 40 percent of students used the library media center only during a class visit whose purpose was almost always to use materials;
- Students were not always aware that magazines and other nonbook materials circulated, while many nonbook materials could be used only in the library media center; and
- Students were not always aware that reference books circulated.

In general, those students who preferred to borrow materials rather than use them in the library media center described themselves as (1) being too busy to spend much time in the library media center; (2) loving to read, particularly fiction; and (3) not visiting with classes.

Handling difficulties in the library media center. When asked what they normally did when they had difficulty using the library media center, a majority in each school (51.5 percent of the total sample) asked the library media center staff for help, 27.8 percent asked a friend to help, and 9.3 percent gave up and left. More than one-third of the students (37.6 percent) responded that they usually did not have difficulty using the library media center. When students did have difficulty in locating specific items in the library media center, however, there were several methods they used to obtain help, the most common of which was to ask the library media specialist for help (2,028 students or 57.7 percent). The next most common steps taken were to ask a library media center assistant to search for the items (1,044 responses or 29.7 percent) or to use another library (1,009 responses or 28.7 percent). Three other steps were used by approximately 10 percent of the students: (1) to browse until finding another title, (2) to use materials they did find, hoping the materials would be adequate to complete their work, or (3) to give up and leave.

Data from two questions provided additional insight by addressing the frequency with which students asked for assistance in the library media center and the reasons given by some students for not requesting assistance. Of those students who sometimes asked for assistance, the largest number (1,887 or 53.7 percent) said they rarely needed help. This was also the most frequent answer given. Other reasons students seldom asked for assistance, in descending frequency order, were: (1) reluctance to ask (10.7 percent), (2) previous help that was unsatisfactory (6.7 percent), and (3) uncertainty about the kinds of help available (3.8 percent). Some students in one of the schools thought the staff looked too busy to be interrupted (12.1 percent), were too embarrassed or uncomfortable to ask for help (10.7 percent), or could not find staff on duty when they needed help (8.2 percent).

What students liked about the library media center. Students were asked to list the things they liked best about the library media center, and in each school the single most frequent response was that the library media center was quiet. Twelve percent (421 respondents) gave that response. A total of 37.9 percent of the choices fell within the categories of atmosphere, facility, and physical climate. In contrast 11.9 percent chose individual resources, and 10.8 percent chose services and staff.

What students disliked about the library media center. The largest number of students (221 respondents or 6.3 percent) stated that there was nothing they did not like about the library media center. Just over half that many respondents (3.8 percent) said that what they did not like was that there were not enough books. More than 2 percent believed the atmosphere was not quiet enough, while fewer than 2 percent found it too quiet. A total of eleven percent complained of limited materials or selection.

What students would add to the library media center. Students were asked what services, help, or materials they would add to their library media centers. Percentages given reflect the number of respondents who used the library media center. Because 403, or 11.5 percent, of students in the three schools indicated that they did not use the library media center, the number of student respondents who used the library media center was 3,112. Apparently there were many satisfied high school library media center users. Twice as many students (382 or 12.3 percent) responded "nothing more" as did those (181 or 5.8 percent) who gave the second most frequent answer, "computer catalog." One percent of the students wanted to "take food" into the library media center.

Frequency of Use

Students were asked about the number of visits made to the library media center during the sample week and to compare that number with their usual frequency of use. The strongest relationship was found between usual frequency of use and number of visits during the sample week. That is, the highest number of visits during the sample week was made by those who usually had the highest frequency of use. Other significant patterns were identified. Males had a higher frequency of use in general and a greater number of visits during the sample week than girls did. Students in the ninth and tenth grades made more visits than juniors and seniors did during the sample week. Students in the above-average English classes had a higher frequency of use in general as well as a greater number of visits during the sample week.

It is most interesting to compare these findings with those of Ducat from 1960. In Ducat's study almost 47 percent of the students surveyed visited the library media center during the sample week. In this study only 15 percent visited during the sample week. Almost one-fourth of the students in the Ducat study responded that they used the library media center two to three times each week; in this study only seven percent reported this level of use. The percentages in the two studies are very similar, however, for once-a-day use (3.8 percent for Ducat and 3.5 percent for this study) and for once-a-month use (10.9 percent for Ducat and 9.4 percent for this study). The majority of students in this study (40.7 percent) used the library media center with a class, and more than 22 percent reported using their library media centers only a few times a year. In the Ducat study a total of 58 percent reported a use interval between once every two weeks and two or three times per week.

General Reasons Students Used the Library Media Center

Students provided a variety of reasons for using the library media center, the most common being that their teachers made assignments requiring the use of library media center materials (76 percent). Use of computers for assignments was important to 13 percent of the students. A quarter of the students said they studied better in the library media center, and a fifth liked to spread out their work on library media center tables. More than 10 percent found that "everything [they] need is so handy." About 13 percent of the students liked to "browse around and look at the books" and another 13 percent valued the chance to "move around more than in the classroom. "Closely related to these responses were those of students (13 percent) who indicated that they had "extra time on [their] hands and the library media center seems a good place to go."

Specific Uses

High school students in these schools visited the library media center to use the photocopy machine more than for any other reason. More than half of the respondents (50.6 percent) did so. Almost as many (50.3 percent) used the library media center to study or work on assignments. More than three-quarters of the students used the school library media center because teachers made assignments that required the use of materials there. Students were also asked about the number of books they read for class assignments during the one-month period of the survey. One-fifth read no books and 40 percent read only one book for class; a total of three-fourths of the respondents read between one and six books during the month.

Students were asked where they usually found material needed for their school assignments. The most common answers (1,284 respondents or 36.5 percent) were the school library media center and the public library in about equal numbers. As for those who used one or the other library to obtain materials for assignments, more students preferred to use the public library than the school library media center. In contrast, 590 respondents (16.8 percent) found no need to use any materials other than textbooks.

Student Use of the Public Library

The number of students who indicated use of the public library was 3,199.

Assignments. The students gave a variety of reasons for using the public library to complete school assignments. Almost three-quarters of the respondents believed that more books were available at the public library. Nearly one-third liked it better than the school library media center, and nearly a third found the public library more convenient to meet their needs than the school library media center. One-quarter believed that more magazines were available at the public library, and one-fifth reported that there were fewer rules restricting the use of materials. More than ten percent felt they received more help at their public library than at their school library media center.

More than six hundred other reasons were given by the student respondents for using the public library to complete school assignments. The single most common other reason, cited by eighty-seven students, was that the facility was quiet. A larger percentage of the total number of responses, however, focussed on hours, e.g., the public library was open for longer hours, on weekends, late in the evening, and had more convenient hours. Fewer than fifty students liked the materials that were available at the public library, although thirteen students mentioned using the public library only if they could not find what they needed in the school library media center. Twenty-nine respondents liked the privacy afforded by the public library and being away from their friends; yet twenty-eight others liked being with their friends at the public library. A few students in one of the schools appreciated not being searched or hassled and liked being treated as an adult at the public library. Another popular reason given by forty-seven students for using the public library to complete assignments was to use the computers or the online public access catalog (OPAC). (It should be noted that the library media centers in two of the three schools did not have OPACs.)

Recreational reading. Students used the public library for recreational reading purposes overwhelmingly because they believed that there was a wider choice of books than in the school library media center, and almost 30 percent of the respondents said there were "better" books at the public library. Students gave 179 "other" reasons for using the public library to obtain recreational reading materials. Many students went to the public library for a selection of materials that they did not think the school library media center had. For example, they believed

that the public library had more "high level" books, more interesting books, and books that were different, as well as information the school library media center did not have. Further, a few students said the recreational books in the school library media center were old. Twenty students preferred to use the public library for their recreational reading because of the differences in the hours open. Some students had no time during school hours to visit the library media center; others appreciated the public library's being open after school, at night, and on weekends. Thus, the public library's hours of operation equaled convenience to these students.

The circulation of materials also had an impact on student use of the public library. Ten students said that the loan period was longer at the public library, and five said they could borrow more books at a time. A few students responded that the books they wanted in the school library media center were always checked out. Other students said they were more familiar with the public library and found it easier to locate materials there.

Extent of Use of the High School Library Media Center

The extent to which students used the high school library media center was surveyed, with special attention given to when students usually used the library media center and to regulations that may have restricted student use. Student use was measured during the sample week.

General Use of the School Library Media Center

Time of use. The most common time for students to use the school library media center in all three schools was during a class visit. More than two-thirds of the students made these visits. Nearly one-fourth of the students used the library media center either before or after school. Of the other times these students used their library media centers, some were fixed (e.g., study hall, free class period, while waiting for the school bus), and some were unpredictable (e.g., when time was available, when there was nothing else to do). Some of the time use was based on a specific reason, such as completing an assignment or using the photocopier. Students also visited the school library media center to get out of class, visit the library media specialist, enjoy the cool temperature, meet friends, and receive tutoring.

Effects of regulations on use. The number of students visiting the school library media center in general was lower than it might have been because library media center and school regulations restricted visits by some students. Overall, more than 80 percent of the students were able to visit the library media center when they wanted to visit. Regulations did not restrict them. The biggest impediment to use, however, were the hours of operation. Hours of operation were not compatible with the schedules of some students, (e.g., not open when students could go, early closing, no evening hours, open only when school was in session).

Regulations pertaining to the checkout of materials were the second most commonly cited cause restricting student visits to the school library media center. Students expressed concern about one-day or shorter loan periods for research paper materials. A few students thought that the general loan period was too short, and a few students believed that the number of books that could be loaned was too few.

In two of the schools, the library media center rule (other than those rules having to do with hours or circulation) that most restricted student visits was the requirement that students have a pass to visit to the library media center. Fewer than four students responded that late fees were too high, computers were down too often, the facility was too crowded, or they did not like the

security system or the "strict rules." Sixty-two students believed that faculty restricted visits by students. Some said teachers did not allow them to visit the library media center during class, and a few said that teachers seldom took them to the library media center or that they needed to have teacher permission to visit. Very few school policies seem to affect the number of student library media center visits. Two impediments to use, according to students in the three schools, were the large number of meetings held in the library media center and their own lack of a study hall period.

Typical frequency of school library media center use. Students most often visited the school library media center only as part of a class. The data pertaining to class visits were consistent in all three schools, with 1,422 students (40.7 percent) indicating that "with a class" best described how often they visited the school library media center. Only one other frequency showed similar consistency, that being "once a day " Of students who responded, 121 (3.5 percent) indicated that they generally visit the school library media center once a day. This is a sharp contrast to the 794 students (22.7 percent) who use the school library media center only a few times a year. The second and third most common frequencies of school library media center use for students during a year in all three schools are "a few times a year" and "once a month." If it is assumed that students who visit only with a class do not visit the library media center otherwise, then the real number and percentage of students who never visit by their own choice is 1,574 (45.1 percent). It is interesting to note that students in one school visited the library media center twice as often as students from the other two schools. Nearly one-fourth of the students visited at least once a week.

Reasons for General Nonuse

The student survey asked those students who indicated they never visit the school library media center to explain the reasons for their nonuse. Interestingly, more students responded to this question than responded that they never used the school library media center. It is likely that many students who visit the library media center only with classes think of themselves as nonusers, and that the larger number of students who gave reasons for "never" using the library actually meant, "When I don't use it, this is why . . . " A total of 241 students (6.9 percent) said they did not have time to visit the library media center. A small number of respondents (186 or 5.3 percent) said they did not like to read, and an equal number reported having no need to use it in order to complete their assignments.

A small number of students (eighty-eight, or 2.5 percent) were never assigned to visit the library media center by their teachers. It was pointed out earlier that a large number of students prefer to use the public library, and responses about nonuse verify this preference, with 129 students (3.7 percent) mentioning that they use the public library rather than the school library media center. The data suggest that nonuse of the school library media center by students in two of the schools might be attributed to there being no study periods scheduled at those schools. Seventy-two, or 2 percent of students, responded that the library media center was closed when they could use it, and they mentioned particular times that would be convenient for them to visit the library media center (e.g., after the last class period, at night, before 7:30 a.m., or during weekends, at lunch, and during pep rallies).

A few students attributed their nonuse of the school library media center to their having all of the materials they needed at home (e.g., encyclopedias, magazines, dictionaries, and books). Of special concern was the small number of students (forty-four, or 1.3 percent) who revealed that they did not visit the library media center because they did not know how to use it. (This study

was conducted in the spring so that all students would have had opportunity to visit the library media center.) Why did these students feel they did not know how to use the school library media center if they had never visited it? Why had they not visited? Why had none of their teachers scheduled a class visit or made an assignment that required the use of the library media center? Why did these students not have a need, a desire, or other motivation to visit the library media center of their own accord?

Student Use of the School Library Media Center during a Specific Time Period

Data from student questionnaires, along with class use forms and daily use forms, provided information on the nature and extent of student use of the library media center during a particular period of time, i.e., the sample week. Students were queried about the number of times they used the school library media center during the sample week. Of the 3,273 respondents, 2,129 students (65 percent) did not visit the school library media center, and 1,144 (35 percent) did visit the school library media center at least once during the week. One of the schools, however, did have a much higher percentage of students who visited the library media center at least once during the sample week; 50 percent of these students paid a visit. The frequency of student use in general during the sample week was typical of what students reported their normal use during the year was. It was determined that 1,912 students (58.5 percent) used the school library media center as much as usual and 1,354 (41.5 percent) did not.

Of those students (41.5 percent of the total) who used the school library media center *less* than usual, 1,309 (37.2 percent) used it less because they had no assignment requiring its use. Approximately 3 percent said they were absent during the sample week, and about 15 percent gave other reasons (e.g., "something else took my time").

Of the 590 students who reported that they used the school library media center *more* during the sample week than usual, 378 (10.8 percent) attributed their increased use to their having assignments that required the use of library media center materials. Only 2.6 percent of students surveyed said they used the library media center more during the week because they did not have much homework and could therefore do more reading. Other reasons students gave for increased use during the sample week included the use of photocopy machines, study, circulation of materials, class visit, and meetings. Of those students who used the library media center more because of assignments, the majority (218 or 57.7 percent) indicated that the assignments were for their English classes. Other subject assignments were in history (26 students), economics (10 students), math (9 students), debate (9 students), reading (6 students), foreign languages (5 students), health (5 students), and government (4 students).

Reasons for nonuse. Mention has been made that 65 percent of the 3,273 students did not use the library media center at all during the sample week. The main reason given by these students (329 or 15.5 percent) for nonuse during the sample week was a lack of assignments that required the use of the library media center. A quarter of the students (518) did not use the library media center because they had "no need to" or had "no reason to" use it; more than 50 percent had "no assignment."

Use of Specific Library Media Center Resources by Students

The photocopy machine was the most commonly used resource by students in the school library media center, followed by reference books, tables, and nonreference books. Materials used by students in classes visiting the library media center during the sample week were similar in the

three schools with a total of 38 percent of students using nonreference books, 47 percent using reference books, 12 percent using magazines, and 3 percent using other materials (e.g., SIRS, newspapers, and vertical file). Art classes in one school visited to display their art work rather than use library materials, and in another school students in career exploration classes used computerized career databases. Differences in computer use can be attributed to the catalog in one of the schools.

Conclusions

This was a descriptive study. Analysis of the data collected resulted in a description of the nature and extent of high school library media center use by students in one area of north central Texas in 1991. It was not the purpose of this study to replicate Ducat's study; further, thirty years separate the two studies, and instruments and return rates differed. Therefore, comparisons are difficult.

The findings in this study show limited use of the high school library media center by students based on lack of time and motivation. Use by students was determined primarily by teachers making assignments that required the use of library media center resources. The extent of student use within the schools was indicative of the important influence of teachers. In this study, the school with the highest teacher usage had more students who read books for pleasure, who used the library media center to study or complete assignments, and who had the highest percentage of use during the sample week as well as in general. Among the schools, a strong relationship was observed between the normal frequency of student use of the library media center and the number of visits students made during the sample week.

Students preferred to read magazines and newspapers more than books; they preferred to select recreational reading material from the public library; they spent more hours listening to the radio than they did watching television. A great many students usually did not have difficulty in using the school library media center; when they did have difficulty, however, they asked the library media center staff for help. They used other sources in addition to the school library media center for their academic and recreational reading materials. Students were well satisfied with their school library media centers. They liked best that the library media center was quiet. Many said that they liked everything about the library media center and would not change anything about it.

Assignments were the single greatest influence on use and nonuse of the high school library media center by students. Students attributed less use to their lack of assignments and their infrequent or nonuse to their being able to complete assignments without the resources of the library media center and to never being assigned by their teachers to use the library media center. The most common uses made of the library media center in the three schools were to study, to work on assignments, and to use the photocopy machine. Use of the photocopy machine was more frequent in connection with assignments than for other reasons.

In 1960 Ducat called for the education of prospective teachers and school librarians to include the type of instruction that would "translate the function of the school library into terms of greater reality." Thirty-five years later, her statement reflects a need that still exists, that of motivating educators to become acquainted with the materials and skills that can help students become successful consumers of information in an ever-changing world.

References

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