

An Analysis of Information Age e-Books, Reading and Resources in the School Library

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ABSTRACT

In an age when school libraries are becoming cybraries, a survey of media specialists indicates that libraries are providing traditional library orientation and library skills instruction. Although the study indicates that the most popular information tools used in the schools are internet search engines, librarians view issues such as collaboration with the library budget as more pressing issues than teaching higher level information literacy skills such as the ethical use of information or the evaluation of online resources. The use of e-books is also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

As we move into the digital information age, school library media centers are experiencing dramatic changes in the way information services are organized, administered, and used by teachers and students in the school. Although media specialists are keenly aware of the changing face of information services in school libraries, current research does not fully explain what shape information services in school libraries has taken in recent years. Much of the research in the area of information services in school library media centers has focused on information literacy, particularly how students move through the information seeking process^[1-3]. However, it is not known what information tools and resources teachers and students are using most often in library media centers during this process, how media specialists make decisions about what resources to provide, what skills and topics they teach, and what they think are the most critical information needs in their schools. Results from a number of state studies indicate that providing access to a robust collection and up-to-date technology in the library, along with a process approach to teaching information skills, is associated with higher student achievement, but it is still unclear how school libraries are providing information and e-books regarding information services in their schools and whether or not they are providing resources and instruction that reflect this new information landscape^[2,4].

Purpose

This study is designed to evaluate the status of school media centers in Kentucky in relation to the state standards published in Beyond Proficiency and information age materials^[5-8]. The study will use the program evaluation rubric provided in the standards document to determine if media centers in Kentucky are in the "Apprentice" or "Proficient and Beyond" categories in each standard area on the evaluation rubric. In addition, the study will examine specific library variables, including e-Books, budget, staffing, and flexible scheduling to see if they play a significant role in the ability of a media center to meet standards^[9]. Finally, this study will explore characteristics of media centers in high performing schools to determine if there are any significant practices that appear to contribute to student achievement and use of 21st century materials^[6,10].

METHODOLOGY

Based on similar studies on done at the national level, the following were selected for this study: Genre (Realism; Animal Realism; Historical fiction; Regional Realism; Mysteries; Sports Stories; Formula Fiction; Fantasy Fantastic; High Fantasy; Science Fiction; Fable; Folktale; Myth; Legend or Hero Tale; Folk Epic; Nursery Rhyme; Verse; Narrative Poetry; Ballad; Lyric or Personal Poetry); Character (Gender; Age; Ethnicity; Presence or absence of parents; Parents' economic status; Parents' occupation); Theme (Friendship; Family Relationships; Love; Survival; Determination/Courage; Maturing; Adventure; Search for Identity; Good Overcoming Evil).

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After reviewing a number of titles in children's literature and surveying librarians, the researcher also developed a list of significant events that seemed to transect every genre and challenge 21st century learners. A survey of school media centers was developed and distributed to participating schools. Additionally, a total of 100 books were evaluated in this study according to the categories listed above. The books were chosen from the following catalogs and databases: Library of Congress, World Cat, Books in Print, and NoveList. Out of the 100 books located for this study, 82 books were able to be accessed for evaluation purposes ^[4]. Information on each of the books was collected and analyzed using the database program, Microsoft Access. Over 100 school media specialists participated in the study on a national level.

RESULTS

Of the 82 books evaluated in this study, 66 percent are written at the elementary level, 20 percent are written for young adult audiences, and 14 percent are written at the easy fiction level. The dominant genres in Kentucky children's literature are by far historical fiction and realism. Forty-eight percent of the books evaluated are identified as historical fiction. When the categories of realism and regional realism are combined into one category called realism, over 41 percent of the titles fall into this category. Historical fiction works cover colonial Kentucky, the Civil War, the Great Depression, and the War on Poverty. Kentucky children's fiction is set predominantly in rural locations and small towns in central and eastern Kentucky. In an analysis of titles for this study, 52 percent of the stories were set in rural areas, 41 percent were set in small towns, and 7 percent of the stories were in urban settings. A majority of the stories took place in central Kentucky (59 percent), almost 30 percent of the stories were set in eastern Kentucky, while 8 percent were in the western part of the state, and 3 percent in the south central region. The dominant themes in Kentucky children's literature are family relationships, determination and courage, and love. In historical fiction novels, typically children are interacting with parents as they conduct the work of the farm or struggling through the issues and events surrounding the Civil War. In realistic fiction, children are faced with a multitude of family related problems of varying severity that they must face and learn to overcome. Pivotal events occurring in the titles most often include a move from home.

The main characters in Kentucky children's fiction are overwhelmingly white females between the ages of 11 and 16. In an analysis of the main characters' gender, race, age, socio-economic status and parents' characteristics, the data show that 68 percent of the main characters are female, 92 percent of the main characters are white, and 68 percent fall between the ages of 11 and 17. In the majority of the stories, the main characters are members of low income families (56 percent), with both parents present (55 percent) who are engaged in agriculture (66 percent) or small business (24 percent).

DISCUSSION

Results of the Study Descriptive, Chi square, and linear regression statistics included in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 4.0 program are used to analyze the data in the study. Descriptive statistics provide an overall picture of survey respondents' communities and types of information resources and services they provide to the school. The Chi square statistic is used to identify significant differences in information services provided in high achieving schools. Linear regression statistics are used to determine if any of the school community or library media center demographics account for a significant variation in school test scores measured by the state's combined accountability index. The 333 school media specialists responding to the survey are from schools representative of the total population of schools in terms of their geographic distribution, and school and community demographics (Kentucky Department of Education, 2007). Thirty one percent of the respondents are from central Kentucky, the state's most populous region, while 23 percent are from eastern Kentucky, 19 percent are from western Kentucky, 14 percent are from northern Kentucky, and 11 percent are from south central Kentucky. A total of 41 percent of the schools are located in rural areas, 28 percent are in small towns, 17 percent are in urban areas, and 14 percent are in suburban areas. Of those media specialists responding to the survey, 64 percent report their school serves a student population where more than 50 percent qualify for the free or reduced lunch program. A majority of media specialists responding to the survey (58 percent) work in elementary schools, while 22 percent work in high schools, and 15 percent work in middle schools. About four percent of the media specialists report they work in an "other" kind of school. A majority of survey respondents report that their schools fall into the middle range on the combined Kentucky accountability measure referred to as the "CATS" test. A total of 41 percent of the respondent's state that they scored between 65 and 79 out of a possible 100 points on the CATS index, while 36 percent report their school scored between 80 and 94 points on the index. In the upper range of index scores, 11 percent of the schools report they scored between 95 and 100 points, while six percent of the schools report they scored more than 100 points on the assessment. In the lower range, 5.3 percent of the respondents reported they scored between 50 and 64 points, while only one schools reported it scored below 50 points on the index. All but one of the media specialists responding to the survey indicated they held certification as a library media specialist ^[11-13].

About 60 percent of the respondents report that their media centers are on a flexible schedule at least half the time. All of the middle schools and 97 percent of the high school have this kind of flexible schedule, while 44.8 percent of elementary school media centers are flexibly scheduled. Of those media specialists responding to the survey, 84 percent of media specialists report they are assigned full time to their school, while 42 percent of media specialists report they have teaching duties in addition to their responsibilities as media specialists. In response to questions regarding budget and staffing levels, 49 percent of the media specialists report their schools meet recommended media center budget allocations, 81 percent report their schools

meet minimum numbers of books recommended for the collection, 32 percent report their schools meet minimum staffing guidelines for small schools (200 students or more) and 40 percent report their schools meet minimum staffing guidelines for larger schools (500 students or more). A stepwise linear regression analysis was performed on the data to determine if any of the school community variables accounted for a significant amount of the variance in student test scores. The analysis shows that 4.4 percent of the variation in school index scores is affected by whether or not less than 50 percent of the students qualify for the free and reduced lunch program (adjusted $R^2=0.119$, $F=12.644$, $p=0.001$) and 2.2 of the variation in scores is affected by whether or not the school met minimum state standards for the number of books in the library collection (adjusted $R^2=0.062$, $F=5.886$, $p=0.016$). The responses by library media specialists to questions regarding the most commonly used information tools, instructional activities in the area of information services, and their views on the most critical information literacy issues in their schools. The responses to these questions are sorted by elementary, middle, and high school levels in order to identify any differences between information services activities that may be provided to different age groups. As the study shows, when asked to select the two most often used information tools in their schools, elementary and middle school level media specialists selected print reference materials and electronic search engines, while at the high school levels, electronic resources, including internet search engines and the state supported electronic library, were the most popular ^[14]. The study also shows that in all grade levels the state provided electronic library (KYVL) plays much less of a role in the information seeking activities of students in these schools than internet search engines. When asked to select the top four kinds of information skills instruction provided to students in media centers, responses were similar across school levels, and included basic library skills instruction, library orientation, searching for information using the media center Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC), types of print reference resources, and instruction in how to search online catalogs and databases for information. At the elementary level, there appears to be more emphasis on print resources and basic library skills, while at the intermediate and high school levels, there is more focus on using electronic resources. However, none of the higher level types of information skills instruction, such as the use of an information literacy model, instruction in evaluating print and electronic resources, or instruction in the ethical use of information is taught by more than a third of the media specialists surveyed. When media specialists were asked to select the four most critical information literacy issues at their schools, the responses were similar at the elementary and middle school levels and included increasing collaboration between teachers and media specialists, the library budget allocation, teaching critical reading skills, and teaching research skills. At the high school level, the most critical issues shifted to those more closely related to the use of electronic information and included ethical and legal uses of information, increasing collaboration, and improving research and information evaluation skills. Library Media Specialist Information Resource Critical Issues and Instructional Activities by Level 15 A Chi square analysis was performed on the data to determine if there was a difference in the responses of high performing schools to these questions. High performing schools are defined as those schools with an above average score of 80 points or more out of 100 on the combined accountability index. Overall, media specialists in schools scoring above average on the accountability index selected print reference resources significantly more as one of the two most often used information tools (Chi-square=2.913, d.f.=1, $p=0.056$).

Media specialists in these schools also selected basic library skills instruction significantly more as one of the four kinds of information skills instruction provided at the school (Chi-square=3.678, d.f.=1, $p=0.037$). There were also significant differences in what media specialists in high performing schools selected as one of the four most urgent information literacy issues at the school. At the elementary school level teaching research skills was selected significantly more by media specialists in high scoring schools (Chi-square=6.547, d.f.=1, $p=0.008$), as was teaching online searching skills at the middle school level (Chi-square=8.983, d.f.=1, $p=0.002$). Currently, most digital children's literature collections contain digital re-representations of a specific printed book in textual or picture format and do not contain many of the features attractive to Digital Natives. However, digital books created exclusively for the Internet and the myriad e-readers and mobile applications currently available online can provide children with more flexibility for interacting with digital information. Digital resources as a type of media have unique characteristics that affect how both children and adults are able to use them. High-quality digital resources are visually rich and contain beautiful pictures, illustrations, or graphic design elements. Often they are filled with a convergence of media types (for example, text, image, spoken word, music, and video), which can convey multiple layers of meaning. Because of text features, visual hyperlinks, and social networking features, digital books can be highly connective, interactive, and nonlinear in their physical, literary, and social structure ^[15,16].

According to Studies, high-quality digital books must be made available for children and "must provide the same relevance and opportunities for exploration found in the online world, or they will indeed become relics on the trash heap." Along with making books available in digital format to meet the needs of Digital Natives, the entire digital design governing how children interact with these materials must be considered. Children see and experience the world differently than adults. Their ability to use technology differs widely because each child develops skills and abilities at a different rate ^[17,18].

CONCLUSION

Although conclusions made from this study are limited by the characteristics of the survey respondents and may not be generalizable to a larger population, the study does raise some important issues related to the status of Kentucky schools in the information age. This study shows that students may be participating fully in the digital information age and are using search

engines to locate and find information. Library media specialists, however, do not think providing information skills for the digital age is the most pressing information literacy, and are not providing higher level information skills instruction in this area. This could lead to some serious information literacy gaps for students as they prepare for membership in a global information society.

When looking at Kentucky children's literature as a holistic body of work, there are distinct patterns that emerge regarding genre, theme, setting, and character that have a strong regional flavor. Although this study shows that main characters are predominantly white, as they are in national and regional studies of children's literature, the dominant characters in Kentucky children's literature are female as opposed to male, and come from rural, agricultural, low income backgrounds, as opposed to suburban and middle class backgrounds. This could be because of the large number of female Kentucky children's authors who tend to write about their own experiences through fiction, or it could be that Kentucky writers are using Southern or Appalachian stereotypes to give their work a regional flavor. When examining the characters and their settings, it is apparent that the influence of the Appalachian literary tradition is strong in Kentucky children's literature, even though critics of the Appalachian tradition have complained that the literature tends to reinforce the stereotype of the Southern mountaineer or poor white farmer, and doesn't reflect the complexity of the Southern mountain region. When looking at Kentucky children's literature, it is clear that the Southern and Appalachian stereotypes are quite prevalent. While the majority of Kentuckians live in urban and suburban settings in Central Kentucky, over 30 percent of the titles examined were set in eastern Kentucky and reflected the traditional occupations, cultural heritage and social issues stereotypical of that region. In this study 48 percent of the titles were in the historical fiction genre; many of the stories are set in time periods spanning the late 19th century to the Depression.

This is the period when Appalachian stereotypes became institutionalized in popular culture and the regional realism movement began to draw the attention of readers to Appalachia and the South. While the use of settings and characterization in Kentucky children's literature that are stereotypical of the South give these works a distinct regional flavor that sets the works apart from the larger body of children's fiction, the dominant genres and themes used in Kentucky children's literature share close similarities with American children's literature. Studies of prizewinning children's literature indicate the most common themes are friendship, family and adventure. In Kentucky children's literature, although the setting is not the suburban United States, the themes of family relationships, determination and courage, survival and love also predominate, indicating that there is a universal set of experiences that are of interest to both children and writers of fiction for children. Because there are experiences that are shared by all children as they grow and experience family and social life, it would make sense that common themes found in children's fiction would not vary from genre to genre, or region to region.

In this study similar themes crossed both historical fiction and realism. Consequently, it would be reasonable to expect that these themes would be common in children's fiction titles across all genres and settings. This study of genres, themes, characters and setting in Kentucky children's literature shows that these titles do not reflect the way a majority of Kentucky children live nor do many of these titles reflect the growing cultural diversity found in the state. The absence of contemporary settings in this body of literature poses problems for librarians and educators who are using literature either in a thematic or resource-based curriculum to promote an appreciation for reading or to promote literacy in high risk or second language students. This is a problem that can be addressed by Kentucky writers, illustrators, publishers and educators, as they work with authors interested in writing about Kentucky. Good examples of multicultural Kentucky literature do exist and are listed in the bibliography below. As we continue to strive to meet the needs of all learners regardless of race, background or orientation, it is vitally important that setting and characterization in Kentucky children's fiction represent a more contemporary and diverse citizenry.

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