

School Media Specialists: Changes and Challenges for the Next Millennium

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Abstract. It has long been recognized that media programs and media centers contribute to the successful schooling of students. Studies over the past ten years have linked the presence of school media centers with students' academic achievements (Bowie, 1984). Persons providing media services, therefore, play key roles in the overall success of instructional programs. Some of these roles have remained fairly stable since the founding of the first public school library. However, with every new round of challenges to the schools and advances in instructional technology, some roles have shifted emphasis. Responses to the many demands and challenges have varied in degree, but programs have been expanded and adapted to provide needed services to learners and teachers. This ability and willingness to adjust and to meet new challenges has enabled media specialists to assume their role as curriculum and instructional leaders.

This article suggests future directions media specialists must take to meet the challenges of today's educational climate. These suggestions are made against a framework of both traditional and contemporary functions assumed by media professionals. It also suggests sources from which these challenges have sprung and how such forces are reshaping media programs in the schools.

Past and Present Roles of School Media Specialists

While media centers and libraries are working to maintain quality in traditional services, there is also a demand to move into new areas that require new technologies that deliver these services. These imperatives are creating important tensions about the fundamental value of traditional roles and functions. (Van Houweling, 1986, p. 82)

Van Houweling, who coordinates computing and telecommunications at the University of Michigan, gives us pause to consider the many past and present roles of school media specialists as distinct but ever changing pictures. The clarity of a given role depends on the time period in which the media specialist is under focus. For example, if one were to observe the work of school media specialists prior to the 1970s, one would generally see school "librarians" who warehoused book collections and worked indepen-

dently of audiovisual specialists who maintained small equipment and non-print centers in the same schools. A look in the early 1980s would reveal an entirely different scene in which media professionals provided a wide variety of print and nonprint information services from an integrated collection. An examination of the current roles of school media professionals will prove useful in making sound and rational predictions about their roles in the next century.

Grounded in Tradition

Traditionally, school media specialists spent most of their time facilitating systems that coordinated student and teacher needs with access to resources of all kinds. Probably one of the best terms to describe this role is "information specialist," meaning one who is knowledgeable about formats of in-

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formation and how to use them. Reader guidance, instruction in library skills, book talks, literature enrichment programs, book fairs, technical and reference services, and a host of other print-oriented activities were the limits of professional activities. Most media specialists felt comfortable with these roles, and many described them as their primary source of professional satisfaction. These roles, however, provided little opportunity to interact with the curriculum and the teaching staff, except in a most superficial manner.

Collection development was also a major part of this tradition. Selecting, acquiring, and managing materials to support the curriculum and satisfy the individual needs of students and teachers have long been, and still remain, central to the goals of the media program. These activities represented, in many professionals' views, the pinnacle of professional responsibility. Direct involvement in the instructional program, except to respond to teacher requests, was not a major responsibility.

Defending the right of students to learn and combating outside and inside infringements on intellectual freedom in the schools have also been traditional roles of school media specialists. Increases in the number of challenges to instructional and library materials have magnified this role and amplified its importance during the last few years. Media specialists remain on the front line in the many battles and skirmishes for free access to a wide range of ideas and materials in the schools. It is a role that is not likely to diminish any time in the near future.

A Contemporary View

Our second "snapshot" shows the media specialist increasingly engaged in curriculum and instructional development activities, working closely with teachers and administrators to implement and evaluate instruction. This role change has required a significant shift from being a passive keeper of a storehouse to becoming an active participant in the instructional program. Helping to design and implement curricula that teach students to think has recently been identified as the most pressing priority for media

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specialists in their role as instructional developers (Mancall, Aaron & Wallen, 1986; Kuhlthau, 1987). They are planning and budgeting for the curriculum and are helping to integrate vital information access skills with classroom instruction. Many in the profession feel less comfortable with these new responsibilities, but are beginning to accept them now that greater support from state, district, and local school administrators is being realized.

Changing and Re-creating

... for a conscious being, to exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly. (Seldes, 1985, p. 40)

The comment above, attributed to French philosopher Henri Bergson, implies that change emanates from intrinsic forces, that it is a self-propelling compulsion that needs little outside assistance to realize its ultimate creation. On the other hand, Golas (1972) describes change as the desire of a body to adjust to outside forces. He says: "Absolute stability exists naturally at the space level, because all relationships are persistent to the degree that the beings involved have the same expansion" (p. 58). It is possible to explain changes in the role of school media specialists by subscribing to either or both of the above viewpoints. While it is true that the profession has grown or matured because of inside forces and demands, it is also true that outside influences on the parent institution

precipitated and demanded adaptation for survival.

Whatever the reason, school media programs have changed, and so have the media specialists, even though some strongly questioned their ability to do so. In the early 1970s, for example, it was predicted that school librarians would lack both the interest and the ability to assume a more comprehensive role in the teaching and learning processes in the schools (Gilman, 1970). Many were of the opinion that the concept of an integrated media center under the direction of these "print-oriented" professionals would take fifty years to implement, if in fact it could ever be implemented. This was at a time when many school media specialists were experiencing a so-called "identity crisis," trying to decide allegiance to either librarianship or education (Burnell, 1979; Vandergrift, 1979; Mugnier, 1979; Fitzgibbons, 1976; Bowie, 1981). It was also a time when discussions of the role and even the title of school media specialists were a main focus of the research literature and professional gatherings. Franklin (1984) identified 23 different professional titles for school media specialists. Summarizing the dilemma, Daniel (1980) asked, "Butcher? Baker? Candlestick maker? What is our profession? What basic principles and values do we profess?" (p. 107).

In less than twenty years, not fifty, school media specialists have, for the most part, shaken their identity crisis (in purpose, if not in nomenclature) and have implemented the media center concept. They have done this with

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resilience in the face of reduced budgets and resources, and with an open commitment to meaningful professional reform of their image and work. They have merged some of the best from both education and librarianship and have discarded the useless and irrelevant. They have also adopted many practices from management in an effort to become more productive in their broader role. The results have been innovative programs in many school media centers that merit attention and, sometimes, awards from the public and private sectors.

Internal Forces Mandating Change

There have been both internal and external forces at work to precipitate and facilitate changes in the role of media professionals in the schools over the past fifteen years. One important force was the gradual awareness within the profession of the power, as well as the good sense, of unity among peers. A number of statewide divisions of school librarians/media specialist thus broke away from their parent National Education Association (NEA) and American Library Association (ALA) state affiliates and formed their own separate statewide organizations. As of 1986, 35 of the 50 states were reported as having individual and separate professional organizations devoted to problems and issues relative to school media specialists (Bowker, 1986). In at least one state (Georgia), the professional organization is currently debating the merits of breaking away from its

parent, the Georgia Association of Educators. State associations, representing almost 20,000 professionals, have established agendas that reflect growing concern for accountability, management, evaluation, copyright infringement, censorship, and a host of other issues that have made their way to statewide platforms.

At the national level, members of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) have been seeking more autonomy as a division of the American Library Association. The division wants more control over the distribution of monies and other resources. In a 1984 poll, a majority of AASL's almost 10,000 members felt that the division's current relationship with ALA was counterproductive to the division's goal of becoming more responsive to its own constituents. The division's "Future Structure Report" presented a number of options to the dilemma (Day, 1985). These options are currently under discussion by the boards of both AASL and ALA. The outcome could have far-reaching effects on the image of the division and control of the parent organization. The growing power of school media specialists within ALA is further evidenced by the fact that AASL has held four national conferences of its own during the past decade. These national forums have given the division a larger and louder voice within the parent organization and have called national attention to the progress and problems of school media specialists.

The creation of the Division of School Media Specialists (DSMS) within the Association for Educational Communi-

cations and Technology (AECT) is additional evidence of the visibility of school media specialists as a professional force. Formed in 1981, DSMS provides its members with another national forum for discussing issues of interest to media professionals in K-12 schools. At the Association's 1987 Convention, DSMS presented an equal share of the national agenda along with the Association's older and more established divisions.

School media specialists are also flexing their muscles on an international scale. The newly formed International Association of School Librarians (IASL) and the Society of School Librarians International (SSLI) are also indicative of an increasing determination within the profession to establish agendas for future growth (Cheatham, 1986).

The trend to form independent state, national, and international groups is likely to gain momentum as school media specialists continue to realize the positive influences such organizations have on their image and their place in the scheme of school organization and global education. Bane (1987) recently referred to school media specialists as "superpersons" who simultaneously serve in a number of vital capacities—as administrators, managers, financial wizards, subject specialists, instructional development specialists, audiovisual technicians, and teachers. This image is a far cry from the one projected by Gilman and others in the early 1970s.

Outside Influences

An important external force for changing the roles and functions of school media specialists was the relinquishing of responsibility for the training and subsequent certification of school media specialists by schools of library science. Since the 1920s, state departments of education gradually assumed responsibility for certification and today are the primary agencies empowered to certify all school personnel, including those who work in library/media centers (Bowie, 1986). Several states are continuing their efforts to revise and update certification requirements to improve the quality of education for all students. Joint school library/media standards by AECT and AASL also have had an effect on the

work and functions of school media specialists. Prior to 1975, library standards were designed by leaders in the field of library science. Since that time, cooperative efforts between leaders in instructional technology, curriculum, and library science have resulted in recommendations that reflect a more comprehensive role for media specialists in the schools.

The recent public school reform movement represents probably the most powerful external force in shaping and changing the role of media specialists. While "A Nation At Risk" (1983) failed to make specific recommendations concerning the impact of school media centers in the scheme of improved education, it did precipitate a number of state and local reforms that have directly affected school media specialists. It also led to a second study and recommendations from the U.S. Office of Education, entitled "What Works" (1986).

School media specialists have naturally assumed much of the responsibility for integrating technology into the school's curriculum. This, in turn, has altered not only the work, but in many cases the image of the media specialist held by parents, teachers, and administrators. Today it is not unusual to find media specialists working with district personnel, curriculum teams, and students in the search for better and more efficient uses of computers and other interactive devices in teaching.

An Emerging Role for the 21st Century

To stand on the summit of perfection is difficult, and in the natural course of things, what cannot go forward slips back.

Gaius Paterculus, 20 B.C. -30 A.D.

Decisions about the media program will be rooted in reliable data bases, not in hunches or educated guesses.

The development of technology that began with oral language, moved to written symbols, and then to electronic symbols, has placed greater and greater demands on schools to make newer formats of information available to all students. Chisholm (1984) writes,

Even though individual students may not be able to articulate it, most would be aware that this is the information age and that many aspects of their lives require them to be able to obtain information. . . . The impact is that children's need for information, as well as their awareness of this need, is increasing. (p. 165)

The emerging "snapshot" of the future role of school media personnel is less sharp. However, it does indicate the media specialist will increasingly work with new formats of communication and information and new instructional strategies that will require that more time, thought, and effort be devoted to helping both teachers and other media center personnel carry out the school curricula. Because development of the curriculum will require new skills, staff development must be firmly based in four major assumptions (Buccino, 1986):

1. that a curriculum grounded in a single theory is indefensible,
2. that practical decision making requires eclectic arts,
3. that the more one moves away from the particular, the more difficult it is to make wise decisions, and
4. that values and intentions are only imperfectly known and realized in educational programs.

Buccino's assumptions suggest staff leadership that is broadly focused, while at the same time sensitive to individual strengths and weaknesses. Recent suggestions that school media certificates carry a designation of "leadership" rather than "service" appear to indicate that media specialists are ready to assume such leadership.

This emerging vision of the role of future media specialists is one in which warehousing and circulation duties are relegated to nonprofessional staff and computers. Central to this new role is a broader program of research to determine needs in programming, services, and materials. Decisions about the media program will be rooted in reliable data bases, not in hunches or educated guesses. Teachers and media specialists will assume equal status as curriculum leaders who work together to design curricula that are sensitive to Buccino's four imperative assumptions. These new responsibilities call for greater attention to public relations activities so that taxpayers perceive and realize a greater return on their invested dollars, which will result in greater public support for our schools.

The three "snapshots" of school media specialists presented here depict roles that are by no means stagnant, but dynamic and ever evolving. They represent periods in which internal and external forces demand different forms of response. Programs that prepare school media specialists must continue to shoulder much of the responsibility for selecting appropriate responses to these forces. Otherwise the role of media specialists will cease to progress and will begin to slip back. The schools and the profession cannot afford to let this happen.

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