

Fixed vs. Flexible Scheduling In Elementary School Library Media Centers: A Continuing Debate

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In her article "Prerequisites to Flexible Scheduling," van Deusen notes that "the idea of flexible scheduling has been in the culture of the school library media profession for at least 30 years. Flexible scheduling is a system in which classes are scheduled for instruction in the library resource center based on instructional need, rather than based on a fixed calendar which dictates that classes will meet in the resource center (223)." Within the flexible scheduling environment, teaching in the library occurs when a student needs to know, so that the moment of teaching and the moment of student application are concurrent. There is, according to van Deusen, "no point in teaching search strategies or note-taking or evaluation of sources or locational skills if there is no information need (223)."

Flexible scheduling is an accepted idea within the hierarchy of library associations. In 1991, the ALA/AASL published a position statement on flexible scheduling which makes their take on the issue quite clear:

Schools must adopt the educational philosophy that the library media program is fully integrated into the educational program. This integration strengthens the teaching/learning process so that students can develop the vital skills necessary to locate, analyze, evaluate, interpret, and communicate information and ideas. ... The integrated library media program philosophy requires that an open schedule must be maintained. Classes cannot be scheduled in the library media center to provide teacher release or preparation time. Students and teachers must be able to come into the center throughout the day to use information sources, to read for pleasure, and to meet and work with other students and teachers (ALA 1).¹

Similarly, *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning*, the jointly-prepared AASL/AECT document which effectively serves as the bible of the school librarian, is quite clear with respect to the scheduling issue: "Flexible, equitable, and far-reaching access to the library media program is essential to the development of a vibrant, active learning community (89)."

Remarkably, despite thirty years of theoretical acceptance of flexible scheduling within the library community and despite a clear-cut position statement on the advantages of flexible scheduling by the dominant associations in the field, fixed scheduling remains not only a fact of life in many elementary schools in which library is seen as a "special", like art, music, or foreign language, but also a scheduling type that has its adherents. According to Dr. Gail Dickinson, professor of Library and Information Science at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, "The dirty little secret, seldom discussed openly within the profession, is that some practitioners not only accept fixed scheduling, they prefer it (Dickinson, "LIS 653: The School Library")."

When the question of fixed vs. flexible scheduling is openly discussed, it is still quite capable of eliciting a firestorm of controversy among practitioners. Witness, for example, the flap created by Douglas Johnson (Director of Media and Technology, Mankato Public Schools) in his opinion piece "It's Good to be Inflexible" for the *School Library Journal* (39).

Johnson's opinion on fixed versus flexible scheduling in elementary school libraries is sharply at variance with generally accepted ideas reflected in library literature. He boils the positive elements of fixed library schedules down to five arguments:

- You can't teach kids you don't see:
Johnson states that, in the flex programs he is familiar with, no media specialist "meets with every teacher on staff, let alone for an equal amount of time. Granted those students whose teacher is cooperative get a superior learning experience. But what about the kids whose teachers are so isolationist that they don't even get to the library for book checkout, let alone to learn media skills?" His point is that, that, in a flex system, "we

¹ The entire text of this position statement is included as Appendix I.

give some kids great skills and other kids no skills”, while, in a fixed system, “we give all kids the ability to learn some skills knowing that we could do better in an ideal world.”

- We are enabling teachers to deviate from the curriculum
According to Johnson, in an era of high-stakes testing and standardized curricula, we must be able to ensure that “all teachers actually teach the skills they are expected to teach.” He says we should be asking whether fixed or flexible scheduling works better within the framework of a prescribed curriculum.
- It’s not just research, but reading:
Johnson maintains that every child “deserves time every week to experience story times, book talks, and, for goodness sake, book check out! ...Do we sacrifice our role in promoting life-long readers that can be best done with regular library media center visits to our role in teaching technology and information literacy skills in flexibly scheduled programs?”
- Inquiry should be a daily activity
Johnson’s argument is that “Flexible scheduling seems to encourage teachers and media specialists to work together on only big projects during the school year. But how accurately does this reflect how adults conduct inquiry?” Johnson posits that “we should be asking: Can smaller but continuous opportunities for practicing information literacy skills be as or more beneficial than a few, isolated larger projects?”
- We are neglecting our part in the containment activity:
Johnson argues that “Schools have three charges from society: teach, socialize, and contain.” He adds that “When media specialists in a fixed schedule also provide prep time, they are helping hold up the containment part of schools’ obligation (Johnson 39).”

Apparently, from the response elicited by Johnson’s article, the library community holds very strong and quite divided opinions on the issue of flexible vs. fixed scheduling.² Some responses were quite supportive, like that of Alice Yucht, a middle school teacher/librarian who applauded Johnson for acknowledging that “many of us are developing information literate students simply because we DO see those kids every week (13)”, or Lynnea McBurney, an elementary librarian who insists that “I want the kids in the library once a week to see me, hear what I have to say, ask questions, make comments, learn how to use the library, and appreciate literature. I could not possibly reach all the kids if I “taught” with only those teachers who wished to develop units involving library resources (13).” Others disagreed just as forcefully. Debra Gniewek, for example, insisted that “the educational value of flexible scheduling with collaboration far outweighs the pragmatic concerns....With flexible schedule, I had a meaningful program (13-14).” Gail Dickinson took a different approach in her response, agreeing with Johnson that “perhaps the school library field is concentrating too much on structure. Maybe the real issue we should be discussing is not scheduling, but rather good practice versus bad practice and how to best build the structures that underlie excellence in school library media programming (“Every Day is Library Day” 13).”

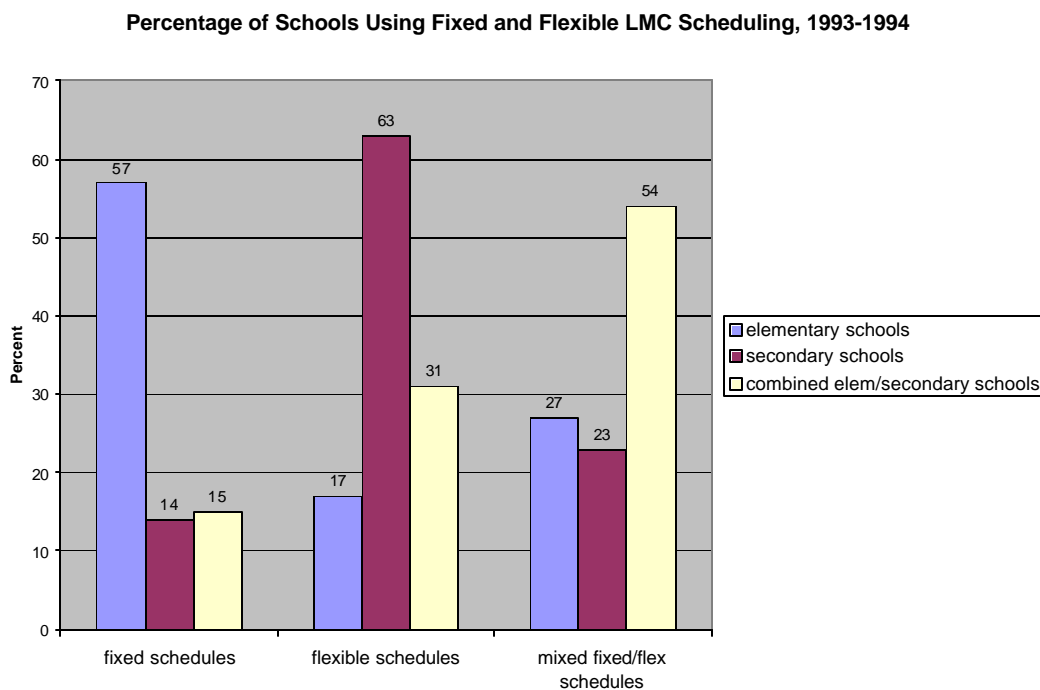
Given that thirty years have passed since flexible scheduling was first proposed as a library scheduling mechanism, it would seem to be a simple task to examine the research underpinnings of the generally-accepted idea³ that flexible scheduling in school libraries is inherently superior to fixed scheduling, all other factors being equal. In fact, however, when one sets out to gather the research often cited by proponents of flexible scheduling, and consider it closely, it quickly becomes clear that the research itself is woefully insufficient – and that is perhaps the reason why, after all these years of discussion, the relative merits of flexible and fixed scheduling can still cause sharp debate among practitioners.

First of all, it must be pointed out that, in elementary schools, despite the ALA/AASL positions, the most recent available national surveys of school libraries reveal that fixed scheduling of elementary school libraries is still more common than flexible scheduling. In the NCES/SASS study published in 1998, table 6-1 (“Percent of school library media center (LMC) using various types of scheduling for classes in the LMC, by selected school characteristics: 1993-94”) reveals that, at the

² Johnson summarizes responses both for and against his opinion piece at his website link <http://www.doug-johnson.com/dougwri/responses.html>.

³ Johnson would call it “a sacred cow”. (cf. reference 5)

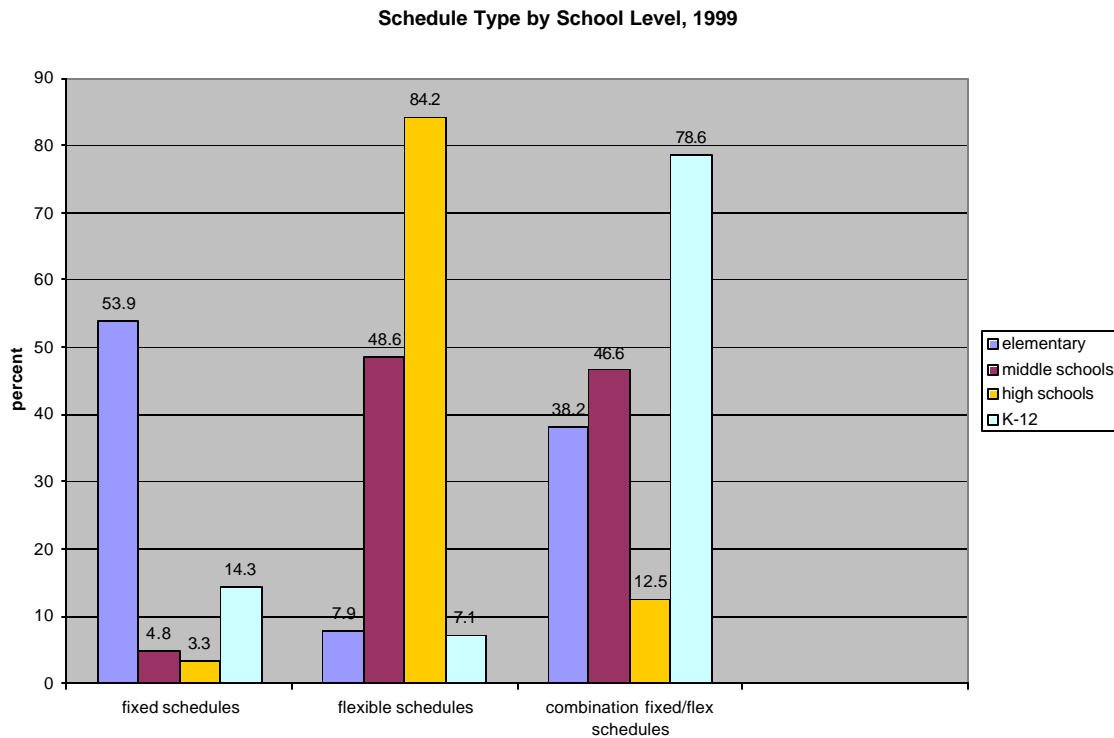
elementary school level, more than half (57%) of elementary schools with LMCs reported that all classes were on a fixed schedule, although that situation is reversed in high schools :



Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, *School Library Media Centers: 1993-94*.

For elementary schools, this percentage of fixed schedule library programs represented a decline from percentages of just a few years before; J.V. Rogers reports that, in 1990, “in 68% of elementary schools all classes are scheduled (72).”

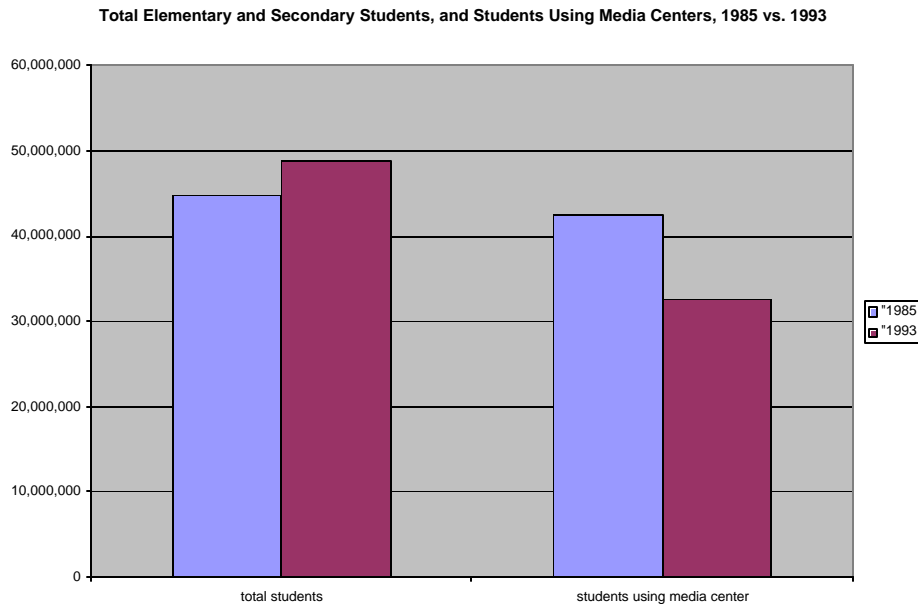
Since 1993-4, the percentage of fixed-schedule elementary schools has continued to fall, though far less precipitously. In her 1999 random sample of one thousand school library media centers, McCracken reported the following statistics:



Source: Anne McCracken, "School Library Media Specialists' Perceptions of Practice and Importance of Roles Described in *Information Power*" (Table 10)

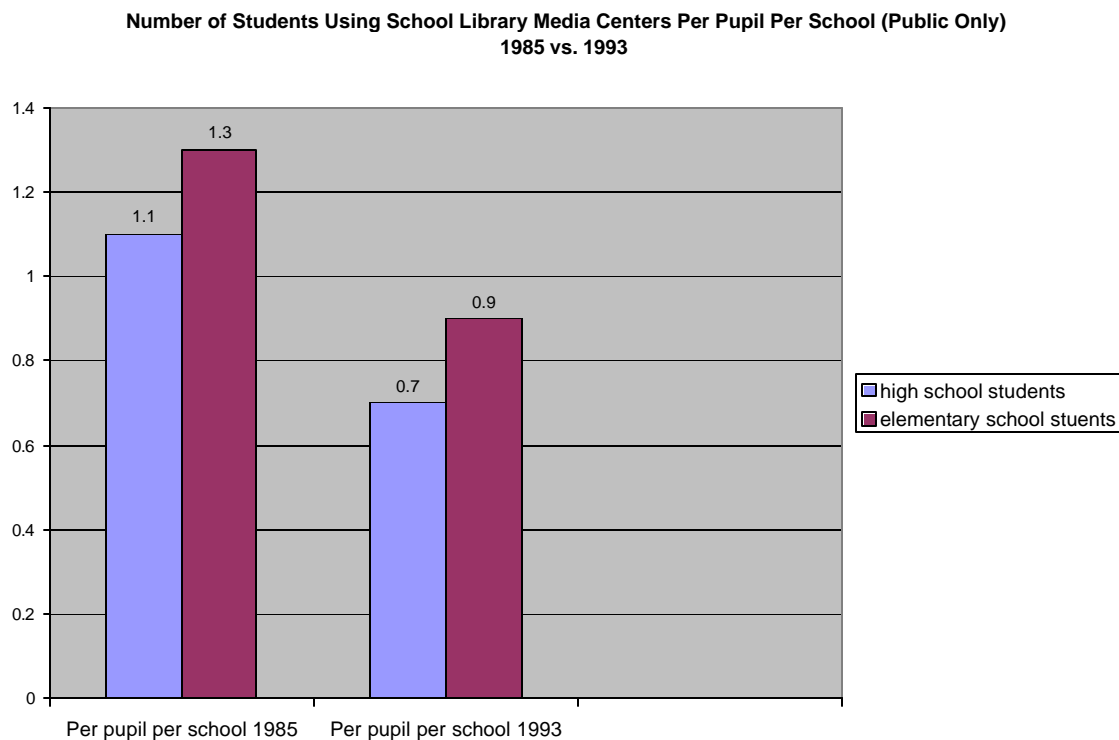
At the elementary level, the percentage of schools on a fixed library schedule had further declined from 57% to 53.9%. It is interesting to note that the percentage of flexibly scheduled elementary school libraries also declined, however, and much more sharply, from 17% to only 7.9%. It was in the group reporting a combined fixed/flex schedule that the astounding growth occurred, with 38.2% reporting that type of scheduling pattern (from 27% in the 1993-94 study). Even recognizing that the samples involved were different, it is probable that some schools shifted from flexible scheduling to combined fixed-flex scheduling in the interval between the 1993-4 study and the 1999 sample. No study verifying such a shift, or attempting to ascertain the reasons for this shift (if it indeed occurred) could be found, however. McCracken ignores it, concluding only that "Elementary school library media specialists who use flexible scheduling perceive they are able to practice more roles than library media specialists that use either combination or fixed scheduling. Those who use fixed scheduling perceive they are able to implement fewer roles than those who use either combination or flexible scheduling."

It is frequently stated by proponents of flexible scheduling that increased usage of library media centers is one of the primary benefits of this type of scheduling. Yet proponents of fixed scheduling would maintain that this increase is characteristic of students who actually visit the flexibly-scheduled media centers, but may not be characteristic of the experience of all students. And indeed, available national statistics certainly do not reveal overall increasing media center usage. If one examines the number of students in elementary and high schools with library media centers in 1985 versus 1993, and also examines the number of students visiting media centers in those same years, one in fact notes declining overall media center usage:



Source: U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Educational Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey: 1993-94. Library Media Center questionnaire; and *Statistics of Public and Private School Library Media Centers, 1985-86*.

If we again break the generalized data into elementary schools (where, as seen above, fixed schedules dominated in the years in question) and high schools (where flexible schedules dominated), one sees that the decline in usage is apparent across the board, with a slightly greater proportional decline in high schools than in elementary schools:



Source: U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Educational Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey: 1993-94. Library Media Center questionnaire; and *Statistics of Public and Private School Library Media Centers, 1985-86*.⁴

This trend raises more questions than it answers, however: it would be necessary to unlock the NCES data, and examine the library usage experience in flexibly scheduled schools versus the experience in fixed schedule schools to ascertain whether scheduling type correlates with library usage patterns.⁵

What is apparent, however, is that in a period of time when the ALA/AASL were creating their position paper on flexible scheduling, no statistical studies of the correlation of scheduling type and library usage existed.⁶ In her 1993 article for *School Library Journal*, J.V. Rogers reported that

School library media specialists bemoan the fact that school libraries have received little attention in documents concerning national education needs and reform efforts. One obvious reason that school libraries are not afforded a significant role in discussion and are not the focal point that library professionals believe they should be is that little hard data has been available to support discussion about their essential contribution to education. As the editor of this journal recently pointed out, most major works on education do not even contain entries in the index for school libraries. If school libraries want to be considered, they must stand up and be counted along with other school programs.

It is ironic that school librarians talk of information power while they lack the power to be included in planning for education improvement. Both basic data and data illustrating the impact of school library media programs on learning are sadly lacking. (116)⁷

Recent studies have not ameliorated that situation. In October, 2003, Marilyn Miller and Marilyn Shontz published their latest "SLJ Spending Survey." This survey is based upon responses provided by *School Library Journal* subscribers and is therefore a very selective sample. Moreover, while data on fixed and flexible scheduling was apparently gathered, the only mention of it made by Miller and Shontz involves statistics on cooperative planning between librarians and classroom teachers: "Cooperative planning in elementary schools has increased from 79 percent in 1999-2000 to 87 percent in 2001-2002 for those with flexible schedules. However, those with combination fixed and flexible schedules report a drop in planning time from 82 to 52 percent during the same period. Sixty-seven percent of all elementary library media specialists report formal and informal planning with teachers, an increase from 49 percent in

⁴ It should be noted that comparisons based upon this data may be misleading, since the 1985 usage was based upon "total per typical week", while the 1993-94 usage data was based upon "total per most recent week." (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey: 1993-94)

⁵ The McCracken study does not address this issue.

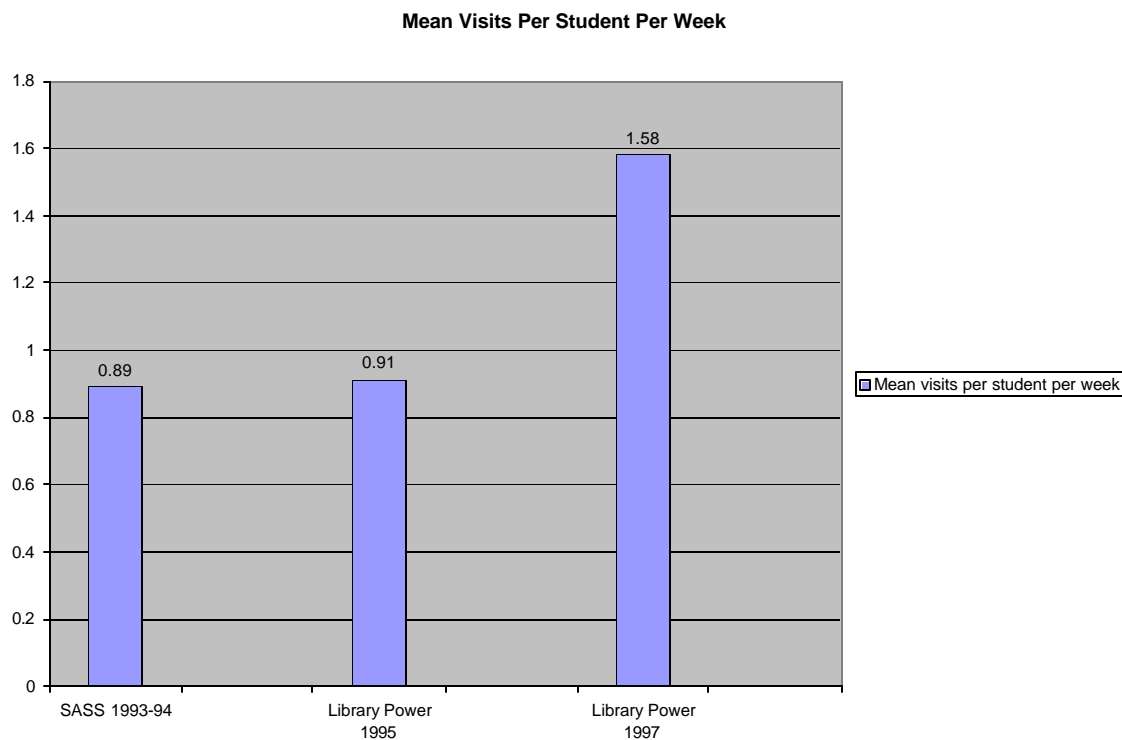
⁶ For fear that I had simply missed something, I e-mailed Doug Johnson to ask if he was aware of any such studies. His response was "I am afraid I won't be of much help. My sense is that flexible scheduling has proven to be very much a sacred cow in the profession and researchers don't set out to destroy sacred cows." (Johnson, e-mail interview). Similarly, I asked Dr. Dickinson if she were familiar with any statistical studies more recent than the 1998 NCES publication, which was based upon 1993-94 data. She suggested examining the *School Library Journal* spending survey (October, 2003) and *Lessons from Library Power* (Zweizig and McAfee Hopkins, 1999), both discussed below. As Dr. Dickinson suspected, neither provided the kind of statistical analysis I was seeking. (Dickinson, e-mail interview.)

⁷ In her update article in 1995, Rogers reiterates the need for statistical studies in the area of school library services, and reports that "NCES plans to continue to collect school library data as a part of the SASS, with the next survey to be done during the 1998-00 school year." (Rogers, "School Library Media Center Statistics") The study she refers to has not yet been published.

There is additional evidence that statistical studies on the impact of school libraries on educational accomplishment are beginning to be done. For example, Lance's study showed the statistical relationship between student achievement and library funding, and between student achievement and the instructional role of the librarian. The scheduling issue is not addressed in that study however.

1999-2000 (Miller).” Given the absence of statistical data, how is it that a causal relationship between flexible scheduling and improved student outcomes with respect to information literacy has become a widespread assumption in the LIS field? A possible answer lies in the fact that that conclusion is often based upon results sustained by Library Power schools, which do indeed reflect usage increases at the same time that Library Power school libraries shift from fixed to flexible scheduling. In their work *Lessons from Library Power: Enriching Teaching and Learning*, Zweizig and Hopkins describe the results of the National Library Power Initiative, a ten-year, forty-five million dollar initiative of the DeWitt Wallace–Reader’s Digest Fund to improve library services for young people in 19 selected (primarily urban) communities, where pre-existing school library services ranged from “communities with no library media specialists and no school libraries to established school libraries, full-time librarians, and district-level media supervisors (Zweizig 4).” In order to be eligible for the three-year grant, all participants agreed to provide “a full-time librarian, funds for collection development, and open access to the library throughout the school day. They also agreed to promote the use of school libraries through collaborative planning opportunities for teachers and librarians throughout the school year (Zweizig 5).”

Zweizig’s study shows the mean number of visits per student per week⁸ increasing markedly from the 1993-94 NCES/SASS data when Library Power schools were surveyed in 1995 and 1997 and reported usage in a “typical” week:



Source: Zweizig, Douglas L and Dianne McAfee Hopkins. *Lessons from Library Power*. (45)⁹

In all probability, this is the kind of data upon which Ohlrich, for example, bases her statement that “recent findings point out that flexible access to the library media center, the flexible scheduling of

⁸ Note that this statistic, mean visits per student per week, does not answer Johnson’s objection that some students may be visiting very frequently in a flexibly scheduled environment, while others may not visit at all.

⁹ Zweizig and McAfee Hopkins note that “the survey item used to gather data in 1995 was modified to request more detailed information in subsequent years. Some of the reported increase in library media center visits may be related to this change in the instrument (45).” They do not attempt to quantify the instrument-based bounce.

library literacy lessons, and collaboration between the library media specialist and teachers are proven practices used by the Library Power schools... (Ohlrich, "What's Good")."

One must keep in mind, however, that schools wishing to receive Library Power grants made a tripartite commitment "to full-time library media specialists, professional development, and flexible scheduling (American Association of School Librarians 137)." The scheduling stipulation effectively removes the research control: one cannot compare the outcomes for a fixed schedule school library of a similar infusion of grant money for facility renovation, collection development, and staff development to the results obtained by flexible schedule libraries, because a commitment to remain with or move to flexible scheduling was a prerequisite for the grant itself. Thus, using the experience of Library Power schools to state that the shift from fixed to flexible scheduling fueled the improvement (without being able to isolate the impact of the money itself) is non-sequitur from a research perspective.¹⁰

This is not to downplay the improvements made in Library Power schools, but only to suggest that when

- facilities are renovated (Library Power schools increased their media center seating capacity an average of 25% (Zweizig 41), adding reading areas, computer areas, storytime areas, and areas for individual, small group and large group activities;
- librarians are offered "professional development opportunities to support collection development" (Zweizig 25) and, according to the prototype collection development plan, receive ten thousand dollars from the Library Power Fund and an additional ten thousand dollars from local sources for collection enhancement (Zweizig, 26);

increased usage might be expected, independent of scheduling type.

In the final analysis, it is unlikely that the controversy regarding fixed vs. flexible school library scheduling will ever be resolved as long as the statistical research evidence upon which opinions are based remains inadequate. What is certain is that, as Ingersoll has pointed out, "the debate over the role of and support for school library media centers highlights the need for information on the current state of library media centers across the country (3)." Moreover, the apparent shift from pure fixed/pure flex scheduling to a combined form (indicated in the McCracken study) should itself be examined to determine whether the percentage shift is a statistical aberration based upon sampling, or a real and conscious movement among practitioners to concentrate on what Dickinson calls "best practice" ("Every Day is Library Day" 13), combining fixed and flexible scheduling as curricular needs and individual circumstances dictate.

There is little room in academic research – especially in the LIS field - for an "I've already made up my mind – don't confuse me with the facts" mentality. Thus, the field must be willing to undertake serious, open-minded, and on-going research, in which variables are subject to stringent control and can be compared over time, if we are to resolve this debate once and for all, recognizing that that resolution might involve the determination that practices, not schedule type, determine the effectiveness of library programs.

¹⁰ Many years ago, at Western Electric's Hawthorne plant, Elton Mayo and his team of researchers came to a startling conclusion: sometimes a bounce in outcomes is the effect not of what you do, but of the fact that you are doing something. In that well-known case (the results of which came to be known as "the Hawthorne effect"), researchers studying worker performance found that it improved when lighting was improved, which seemed to be a very predictable result. Unexpectedly, they also found that performance improved further when lighting declined again. Their final conclusion was that the very fact of being singled out for study made workers feel that their work was important and provided a psychological stimulus for improvement. The results obtained by Library Power schools may reveal somewhat the same effect. It would be interesting from a research perspective to offer a flexibly-scheduled school library grant money for physical renovation, technological improvements, collection development and staff development with the stipulation that the library would have to move to fixed scheduling to be eligible for the grant, and then study the results!

Appendix I

American Library Association and American Association of School Librarians

Position Statement on Flexible Scheduling

Schools must adopt the educational philosophy that the library media program is fully integrated into the educational program. This integration strengthens the teaching/learning process so that students can develop the vital skills necessary to locate, analyze, evaluate, interpret, and communicate information and ideas. When the library media program is fully integrated into the instructional program of the school, students, teachers, and library media specialists become partners in learning. The library program is an extension of the classroom. Information skills are taught and learned within the context of the classroom curriculum. The wide range of resources, technologies, and services needed to meet students learning and information needs are readily available in a cost-effective manner.

The integrated library media program philosophy requires that an open schedule must be maintained. Classes cannot be scheduled in the library media center to provide teacher release or preparation time. Students and teachers must be able to come to the center throughout the day to use information sources, to read for pleasure, and to meet and work with other students and teachers.

Planning between the library media specialist and the classroom teacher, which encourages both scheduled and informal visits, is the catalyst that makes this integrated library program work. The teacher brings to the planning process a knowledge of subject content and student needs. The library media specialist contributes a broad knowledge of resources and technology, an understanding of teaching methods, and a wide range of strategies that may be employed to help students learn information skills. Cooperative planning by the teacher and library media specialist integrates information skills and materials into the classroom curriculum and results in the development of assignments that encourage open inquiry.

The responsibility for flexibly scheduled library media programs must be shared by the entire school community.

Appendix I (continued)

THE BOARD OF EDUCATION endorses the philosophy that the library program is an integral part of the districts educational program and ensures that flexible scheduling for library media centers is maintained in all buildings and at all levels.

THE DISTRICT ADMINISTRATION supports this philosophy and monitors staff assignments to ensure appropriate staffing levels so that all teachers, including the library media specialists, can fulfill their professional responsibilities.

THE PRINCIPAL creates the appropriate climate within the school by advocating the benefits of flexible scheduling to the faculty, by monitoring scheduling, by ensuring appropriate staffing levels, and by providing joint planning time for classroom teachers and library media specialists.

THE TEACHER uses resource-based instruction and views the library media program as a integral part of that instruction.

THE LIBRARY MEDIA SPECIALIST is knowledgeable about curriculum and classroom activities, and works cooperatively with the classroom teacher to integrate information skills into the curriculum.

(6/91)

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