Genre Classification for the Fiction Section in a Middle School Library:

Increasing library circulation and building and maintaining positive student-to-library relationships.

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INLS 780: Research Methods
December 3, 2012
**Introduction**

Middle school students are at an important and difficult period in their lives. They are experiencing a transition that is often inexplicable and frustrating, and research shows that this time can be formative for creating lifelong library users and readers. Middle school librarians must find ways to make the collection inviting and easy to navigate for the students, allowing them to find the types of books they are looking for quickly and efficiently as well as opening the door for them to discover books they weren’t looking for specifically while browsing, so that we do not lose their patronage over the course of this transition.

We often see techniques such as turning the books so the covers can be seen and the creation of book displays in middle school libraries, but we must be open to finding more ways to attract users. One area we should consider is how bookstores successfully market their books. A major difference between the vast majority of libraries and bookstores is the organization of our fiction sections, which most libraries accomplish by placing them alphabetically by the author’s last name, while bookstores separate their books first by genre and use alphabetical within that separation. I would like to study the effect that going to a genre based organization system for the fiction section would have on circulation in a middle school library. *My hypothesis is that reorganizing the fiction section in a middle school media center from alphabetical by the author’s last name to primary genre category will increase fiction circulation.*

**Literature Review**

There is not actually an abundance of research on this exact subject. While there has been some research on classifying fiction sections by genre for adults in public
libraries, which has been an area of discussion and disagreement since at least the late 1980’s, I could find very little research in the area of school libraries and much less for schools that teach younger students.

In general, it seemed that there was research to support organizing fiction by genre in the public libraries. Sharon Baker’s article *Will Fiction Classification Schemes Increase Use?* (1988) is a study of North Carolina public libraries focused specifically on experimenting with genre classification by separating specific titles from the general fiction collection. They were able to find support for their theory that doing this would increase the circulation of those books. A number of different perspectives on genre classification in public libraries are compiled in *Guiding the Reader to the Next Book* (Shearer 1996). Most studies included found that separating by genre increased the circulation of those books separated but other essays raised a number of problems that arise when moving to a genre classification system.

Both sides of the debate over genre classification of fiction also appear in *A House Divided? Two views on Genre Separation* (Trott & Novak 2006). Some problems mentioned are: deciding upon genres for difficult or mixed genre books; creating or continuing stigmas over certain genres; and whether there is space for separation. Arguments for separation by genre include: creating a smaller, more manageable selection for patrons; creating “entry points” into the collection; and preserving the independence of the reader. These issues will also appear when reorganizing a school library by genre category.
The article *Shelf Shifters* (Stiles 2004) discusses a group of secondary schools which shifted to a genre based classification style for their fiction sections. The librarians felt strongly that the switch had been a good one, stating that “when one student realized that *The Princess Diaries* (HarperCollins, 2000) by Meg Cabot was relocated to a new fiction area called romance, she was suddenly interested in reading all of the other books in that category.” They also noted that students normally considered “nonreaders” were able to find “their kind” of books and that students in a rush were able to find their favorite genre quickly.

This article also briefly addressed one common argument against organizing by genre, namely that doing so tends to limit students to only a certain kind of book. Stiles (2004) argued that thought should not be something that the school librarian is concerned about because the students are, in fact, reading and that through putting like books with like books and making them easier to find, low-level and reluctant readers gain a new level of confidence with the library and reading.

**Methodology and Analytic Techniques**

For the purposes of this study, the term *middle schoolers* and *middle school library* refers to students in grades six through eight and the on-campus library that serves that population. Specific ages of those students will vary, so we will go strictly by grade level.

During the winter break of the 2012-2013 school year – December 24 – January 4, the fiction section of the middle school library at Stanback Middle School will be reorganized by the primary genre category. New and appropriate signage will also be
added at this time. Upon returning to school in the new semester, students will be introduced to the new organization through brief Media Center orientations in their Language Arts classes over the course of the first week back after break – January 7-11. After that, Media Center activities will resume and proceed as normal.

The library already uses a program that tracks circulation statistics, including the percentage of total library circulation that is works of fiction as well as the total number of fiction checkouts. Because I am not tracking change over time but looking instead at one long period of time, I will not need to look at the data until after the last day I want to include in my study. Ideally, I will collect statistics for January 7 – February 28. Additionally, statistics for the comparable time period (the day students returned from the winter break to the end of February) for the 2011-2012 school year will be obtained. The numbers for each of these time periods will be collected and analyzed, and I will use a t-test to compare the percentage of total library circulation that is works of fictions and the total number of fiction checkouts. It is important to compare two similar time periods within the academic calendar because the academic calendar is fairly static each year, and, theoretically, students will have similar requirements from teachers around the same time of year.

Limitations

One major limitation to this study is that it will be conducted at only one school in one school system, so it may not be indicative of what would happen in similar situations outside of this school. This study also does not take into account other factors that may also help increase circulation, such as teacher requirements for their students, different
student population in the sixth grade from the previous spring, and outside influences like movies versions of books being released. I think the study may also be limited slightly, or at the very least affected by, because of the choices for signage the media coordinator at Stanback and I will be making. The signage will have an effect on the ability of students to understand where things are in the collection, so this will be something that needs to be taken into consideration.

We do also run the risk of having a weakness in the area of the genre categorizing. The categories for each book may not always be immediately obvious or already chosen for us, and, at times, the media coordinator and I will simply have to make a decision as to which category in which to place a book. This may create an issue where students believe a book they liked is in one category, and we have placed it in another. We will try to limit this weakness by doing extensive research into books of questionable genre through the use of internet, colleague suggestions, and student thoughts. On a similar note, we will be limited in the genres that we can use within our collection for a number of reasons. For example, it is unlikely that we will be able to create a “Romance” section because of the age group we are working with despite the fact that there are fiction novels that could be considered romance for this age range.

**Expected Results**

I expect the results of this study to support the hypotheses that reorganizing the fiction section in a middle school media center from alphabetical by author’s last name to primary genre category will increase fiction circulation. Students will be able to find the
type of books they are looking for more quickly, as well as be able to find a brand new book, one they weren’t necessarily looking for, more efficiently.

This study will be beneficial to students, teachers, and the school as a whole, as well as have possible influence on the greater school library community. Improving student relationships with the fiction in their library can have important effects on school test scores and grades in classrooms, for example, as well as improving long-lasting efforts to create lifelong learners and readers. This may also provide more data to support keeping school librarians in schools by increasing the impact the work the librarian does has on the school and how it upholds the library and school mission.

**Qualifications**

I have a strong background in education that makes me highly qualified for a study such as this one. Before beginning my graduate studies in Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I studied Literature and Education at the University of North Carolina at Asheville under the umbrella of the North Carolina Teaching Fellows program. I tutored and observed throughout my undergraduate studies; I made certain to gain experience at all grade levels and in many different areas of education outside of my personal interest in English. I received a Bachelor of Arts in Literature and my teaching license for teaching English is grades nine through twelve. Upon graduation, I began teaching high school English and continued to do so for six years. I taught each grade level at one point or another, as well as all ability levels (special education up through Advanced Placement), until I settled into teaching mostly
mixed level ninth graders for the last four years. I also co-taught a research seminar course with the media specialist during this time.

I taught ninth graders at a high school but in a middle school setting, with shorter classes over a longer period of time and mixed teachers on the hall rather than having an English hall with all English teachers or a Math hall with all Math teachers. This allowed me a unique perspective into the benefits of the middle school environment for students in this age range. Seeing them for English and the research seminar truly allowed me to see the importance fitting a media center to these teenager’s needs, rather than the differing needs of an adult.

Sandra Hughes-Hassell serves as my advisor this research and her knowledge and expertise in the area of school librarianship will be very helpful in completing this study.

Finally, my field experience for the current semester (Fall 2012) is at a Stanback Middle School. I plan to continue going to the school on my own time in the spring to maintain the relationships I have built this semester; this will allow me easy access to the library materials and information I need to conduct this study.

Summary

For middle school students, having a school library that is easy to navigate successfully can be the difference between becoming a lifelong reader and library user and never setting foot in a library again. One possible area for school libraries to reconsider in the quest to bring students in is the organization of the fiction section of the library. Going to a classification system by genre of a book rather than simply ordering fiction alphabetically by author’s last name might help students to find the types of books
they want more easily, as well as to find books they may not have been looking for specifically more effectively and efficiently, thereby increasing student use of the library and the library’s circulation statistics. I will test this hypothesis with a comparison of circulation statistics from one comparable period of time prior to reorganization and another period of time after reorganization to see if there is a significant increase in the percentage of total circulation that is made up of the fiction collection.

**Schedule**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Expected completion date</th>
<th>Worst-case date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secure paper advisor</td>
<td>September 15, 2012</td>
<td>December 15, 2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discuss experiment with Media Coordinator at school/get approval</td>
<td>October 31, 2012</td>
<td>December 15, 2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reorganize the books in the library</td>
<td>December 31, 2012</td>
<td>January 4, 2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>Complete lit review</td>
<td>January 31, 2013</td>
<td>February 15, 2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>Complete data collection</td>
<td>February 28, 2013</td>
<td>March 10, 2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analyze data</td>
<td>March 10, 2013</td>
<td>March 15, 2013</td>
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<td>Complete rough draft</td>
<td>March 15, 2013</td>
<td>March 31, 2013</td>
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References


