Principals' Views of the School Media Coordinator

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When school media coordinators look in their mirrors, they see professionals who, in order "to take on more and more"[1] must let something else go. When school principals stand beside those media coordinators and gaze into the same mirrors, the reflections they see resemble those of managers who are "caretakers of books, checkers in/out, runners of machines, and overseers of media."[2] Obviously, if the media coordinators make no move to change the angle at which principals are viewing them, and if the principals initiate no closer looks, then distortions will persist.

A former media coordinator who recently was hired as a school administrator found an interesting reception waiting from the school's media coordinator. Upon introduction, the media coordinator said that she was delighted with the new leadership of the school. She said it was "so nice to have someone who understands the school library." While that was flattering to the rookie administrator, it was disturbing to the experienced librarian. Is it still true that what school library media "service should be and whether it is being well provided seems to be of little or no concern"[3] to anyone outside the field? Sadly, that is just what a survey of the literature reveals.

It would be easy for media coordinators to throw up their hands, attribute any difference in perception to "outsiders'" unconcerned, uncaring ignorance, and say, "Forget it;" but it would be foolish. First, if the library is not now functioning as the hub of the educational program as professionals believe it should be, and if the media coordinator adopts the "I can't do anything about it" attitude, the program has no chance of assuming a position of strength in affecting children's learning. After all, as Ken Haycock wrote, "The school principal is the key player in seeing that a program is developed, supported, and enhanced."[4] Secondly, the principal is charged with the evaluation of school personnel. Whatever media coordinators can do to improve principals' understanding of media services may directly affect evaluations of their positions. Third, Elnora Portteus warned in 1978 that, if differences are not resolved, school library professionals could be in danger of losing their position in the education setting altogether.[5]

How principals see media coordinators almost a decade after Portteus' warning can furnish advice to those who want both security and support. To find out their perceptions, the writer conducted an informal survey and interviews with North Carolina principals during the fall and winter of 1987-88. (See Figure 1.) Principals, it was found, give more credit to media coordinators than the child who asks, "Do you have to go to school to be a library teacher?" However, when such comments as "Media Coordinators need whole courses on people skills" and they are "totally inflexible in the school program" are still heard today, there is little room for comfort. The Portteus warning is still viable.

In order to change the school administrators' perception of media coordinators for the good of the total school program, a majority of principals interviewed suggested a more active public relations program. When asked what advice they would give the media coordinator, they mentioned, repeatedly, reaching beyond the media center walls. This step also has been promoted by Margaret Tassia.[6] One principal told the interviewer that "enthusiasm" and "energy" were extremely important to "show," and that the media program needs to be "sold." Ken Haycock emphatically agrees with this position, stressing that, "We must become advocates for our programs; there is no question of this."[7] Kieth Wright, writing as a library educator, concurs: "In terms of the need to work successfully in service institutions 'marketing' their services in the public sector, human relations/communications skills are essential."[8] He identifies a national trend of renewed emphasis on those skills in library education programs.

While principals may be pleased to learn of that trend, they are more concerned with present

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"marketing" in their own schools. In interviews and on the surveys this winter, they offered the following suggestions which practicing media coordinators may find enlightening, not because of their originality, but because of their familiarity:

1. Become involved in individual classroom activities.
2. Prepare a regular newsletter for the faculty.
3. Make a habit of communicating with teachers about curricular needs through bulletins, sign-up sheets, etc.

One principal seemed to summarize remarks by the others by recommending that the media specialist "be more assertively/actively involved in the curriculum."

Suggestions from the library field echo the principals' ideas. Tassia has compiled a series of activities for media coordinators who want to improve communication. Among them are newsletters, library bulletins, in-service activities, diaries, puzzles from book jacket covers, displays, and surveys.[9] Barbara Stripling, similarly, recommends needs assessments for faculty and students, monthly reports, new book displays, bulletin boards, and teacher forms. Her heading for those ideas is sure to make the busy media coordinator smile (perhaps sadly): "increasing visibility" of managerial work.[10] Baeckler and Larson's *GO, PEP, and POP* provides a number of very lively ideas for a public relations program sure to please principals[11] and to help achieve the public relations goal of creating among "various publics an understanding and appreciation ... that will result in ongoing commitment and support."[12]

Surveyed/interviewed principals perceive that the media coordinator is not focusing on instructional development.

If, then, administrators and the library profession are in agreement that public relations skills are important to the successful school library media coordinator, one might well ask, where is the problem? The public relations problem is one of degree. But there is another. Surveyed/interviewed principals perceive that the media coordinator is not focusing on instructional development. Of note is their repeated use of words like "curriculum," "classroom," "integrated learning," and "teaching," all the while recommending some of the same vehicles for achieving those ends as are found in the writing on public relations. Their accolades, without exception, went to media coordinators who in their views, made curriculum planning a major part of their responsibilities.

If school library media coordinators (SLMC) now examine themselves and see that instructional development—that is, "direct involvement by the SLMC in the curriculum at all stages, from needs assessment to evaluation"[13]—is already a major focus of their programs, then the literature on library public relations should provide more than enough suggestions to present their program and, ultimately, themselves more favorably to the school administration. If, on the other hand, media coordinators engage in self-examination and discover that the total school curriculum is not their emphasis, they have at least two choices: 1) use a public relations blitz in an effort to sell the program as is, or 2) accept an instructional leadership role as did Barbara Stripling ("All right, all right, I'm convinced.")[14] and follow the recommendation of Stripling, Turner and Naumer, and others to sharpen their instructional development focus.

Turner and Naumer describe an outcomes-based model they have created which maps the way toward higher involvement in instructional development.[15] They cite four levels of present involvement by media coordinators, ranging from "not involved" at the lowest to "action/education" at the highest. They note that few media coordinators will find themselves in the lowest range since they do many instructional development activities without even realizing it. Their second level is called "passive participation" ("business as usual") or as one principal described it, "a tendency to 'lay back.'" The third level of Turner and Naumer's hierarchy of participation in instructional development is labeled "reaction." It refers to the program in which it is required that someone else initiate a request for response ("I'm doing this ... Help me find ... ") Their highest level, "action/education," is the one which interviewed principals would like their media coordinators to reach. According to Turner and Naumer it is a worthy goal, for only when all instructional leaders recognize the importance of instructional involvement by the media coordinator will the media center truly become the center of the instructional program, the hub of the school so often described.

Naylor and Jenkins, in their 1985 study to explore principals' perceptions of media coordinators and the sources of those perceptions, found an interesting phenomenon. They discovered that half the principals in their sample "defined climate in terms of physical facilities and attractiveness," while the other half defined it "in terms of interaction between people."[16] Those who viewed the media center in human interaction terms also viewed the media coordinator as an instructional resource. Naylor and Jenkins postulate that this difference may reflect principals' perception of their own role, that is, as instructional leader. With the current national fervor toward effective schools, and its corresponding emphasis on principals as the instructional leaders of those schools, one finds one more reason for the media specialist to "assume a willingness to reach for acceptance as an instructional leader"[17] in his/her own right.

With both public relations and instructional development activities, media coordinators can do much to improve their image to principals. Probably, however, some resistance will remain because media coordinators feel overworked already and may be reluctant to add one more responsibility to an already overloaded job description. Secondly, they may feel principals should initiate some changes in understanding.

To the first, the response comes from Naylor and Jenkins, who challenge the media coordinator "to stop viewing the media center as another home for 'woman's work' (no matter how much there is to keep clean and organized ...). That attitude wins less praise than performing the tasks of an instructional leader in the school."[18]

Figure 1.
Principal Survey

Use the space below each question to respond in a word, phrase, or sentence(s).

1. How would you rate your school media coordinator in overall effectiveness?
2. What are some of the things your media coordinator is now doing that you wish him/her to continue?
3. If you couild give the media coordinator some advice, what would it be?
4. List some things you believe the media coordinator should be doing that he/she is not now doing that would improve the total school program.
5. If you could change one thing about media coordinators' training or performance, what would it be?
6. Other comments.

To the second, responses can be read in Haycock, Stripling, and others; but the best may well come from the U.S. capitalist system. If a product is to be sold, the owner of the product initiates the advertising campaign. In this case, the owner, i.e., the media coordinator, has an "advertising firm" already established. Research indicates that principals' perceptions of media coordinators are formed in three major ways, but the most important of them is the reporting done by media specialists themselves.[19]

Although the perception principals have of media coordinators in 1988 is not overwhelmingly flattering, their vision of the ideal is obtainable. If curriculum planning is not now a major priority of the media coordinator, it can become one. If it is now at the center of activities but the principal is not aware of it, then public relations procedures, including simply giving the principal accurate information, will help the image. It appears, unmistakably, to be a win-win situation.

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