A Checklist Evaluation of an Elementary School Library

Through its Online Public Access Catalog

Jennifer Perry

L651 – Evaluation of Library Resources and Services

Dr. Nisonger

March 24, 2006

For my checklist evaluation project, I have chosen to focus on an elementary school library media center, mainly because this is the environment in which I hope to work. I believe that practical experience evaluating this type of library will be most beneficial to me in preparing for my future career. In choosing a school, I focused first on those elementary schools that have websites listed on the Indiana Department of Education website index, *Indiana K-12 Web Sites*. Secondly, the school's website had to include information about the library, including access to its Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC). Many schools have not developed their web presence to include these features.

Lastly, I looked for an elementary serving Kindergarten through fifth grade. Several school corporations in Indiana serve either K-4 or K-6. It seems logical that the age of the students will impact the collection development policies of the library. If a school includes only K-4, some titles for upper elementary grades may not be purchased, causing that school's percentage of the checklist to be lower. Conversely, the percentage of titles held may increase when a library purchases titles for sixth grade students. Taking this variable into account, I chose to take the middle road, a school with Kindergarten through fifth grade students.

Based on these considerations, I have chosen Orchard Park Elementary School, which is located in a northern suburb of Indianapolis and is part of the Carmel Clay School Corporation. According to the Indiana Department of Education *School Snapshot* web site, Orchard Park's school library media center serves a school population of 662 students in Kindergarten through fifth grade and 38 teachers. Twenty-six percent of students receive free or reduced price lunch, an indicator of poverty used to determine Title I supplementary funding. Orchard Park last received Title I funds during the 2003-2004 school year. Twenty-four percent of students are members of minority ethnic groups. The school is frequently given a four star rating by the

Indiana Department of Education, indicating the school was in the top 25% of all Indiana schools in four categories including I-STEP (state mandated achievement testing) scores and attendance rates.

Orchard Park Elementary Library could be considered one branch of a multi-library system, since there are other school libraries in this school corporation that follow the same policies and may share a common coordinator of library media. However, in my experience I have found most school libraries to be primarily autonomous, cooperating occasionally on interlibrary loan matters, but rarely considering themselves to be branch libraries. For this reason, I am treating Orchard Park Elementary Library as an independent library.

I am currently taking a class in children's literature, which has piqued my interest in the latest fiction titles for elementary aged students. Based on this interest, I have chosen to evaluate the currency of Orchard Park's fiction collection. This focus has caused me to concentrate on printed books only, with the publication date being used to determine currency. I am not concerned with language parameters, partly because I do not expect to find many titles in languages other than English, but primarily because the currency of the titles is unaffected by the language in which they are written.

The checklist I have chosen to compare to the holdings of the Orchard Park library consists of the fiction titles listed in the 2004 and 2005 supplements to *Children's Catalog*, 18th edition, published by H.W. Wilson. *Children's Catalog* is considered to be an authoritative source on core titles for children's collections, as evidenced by Lundin's (1989) recommendation of *Children's Catalog* as a standard list for use in smaller libraries (p. 106). Since it focuses solely on children's materials, it is particularly appropriate for evaluation of an elementary school library. Everhart (1998) recognizes its usefulness in a school library situation

in her book *Evaluating the School Library Media Center* (p. 111). Using the yearly supplements

for the two most recent years available allows for a focus on the newest titles recommended for

purchase.

The checklist includes all fiction titles listed in the two yearly supplements, which

consists of 99 titles from 2004 and 101 titles from 2005, for a total checklist of 200 items. The

checklist contains several titles that are re-issued versions of older books. Since the focus of this

evaluation is currency, only the edition mentioned in the checklist was counted. For example,

although the Orchard Park library owns both the 1986 and 1998 editions of Mary Norton's *The*

Borrowers, it does not own the 2003 edition recommended on the checklist; therefore this title

was not counted. This is somewhat arbitrary, since the book can be located and used by patrons

of this library. However, older books are often worn and unattractive, making them less likely to

be checked out. A new edition will attract readers and make the collection appear current and

up-to-date. It is also possible that changes have been made to the text before the titles were re-

issued which could make purchasing the latest version more important.

Procedures used for checking the list against the OPAC (found at

http://library.ccs.k12.in.us/cataloging/servlet/presentadvancedsearchredirectorform.do?l2m=Libr

ary%20Search&tm=Catalog&l2m=Library+Search) included first conducting a title search, and

if the item did not appear, following up with an author search. If the book could be located by

neither title nor author, it was assumed that the title was not in the collection. Data were entered

into spreadsheets (Appendices A and B). A designation of ** was used for items that were "near

matches," such as titles with an older publication date.

Twenty-four of the 99 items from the 2004 portion of the checklist (24.24%) are held by

the Orchard Park library. There were three additional "near matches," where the items on the

checklist were reissues of popular older books. The library collection includes only older editions

of these titles, including *The White Mountains* (1988 edition) by John Christopher, Ian Fleming's

Chitty Chitty Bang Bang (1964 edition), and *The Borrowers* (1986 and 1998 editions) by Mary

Norton. These titles were not counted in the total number of matches.

The percentage of matches for 2005 was similar to 2004, with 22 of 101 items held by the

library (21.78%). Two "near matches" that were not counted in the total included older versions

of Kenneth Grahame's *The Reluctant Dragon* (1983 edition) and *Bunnicula: A Rabbit Tale of*

Mystery (1980 edition) by Deborah Howe. The total number of checklist items held by the

library was 46 out of 200 possible, for an overall rate of 23 percent.

Table 1
Results of Comparison of Checklist to OPAC

Year	Items Found	Near Matches	Items Not Found	Total
2004	24	3	72	99
2005	22	2	77	101
Total	46 (23%)	5 (2.5%)	149 (74.5%)	200

The percentage of current fiction books held by this library seems very low. However, it

is important to consider that determining what percentage of a checklist is acceptable is a

subjective decision (Dennison, 2000, p. 24). It is also possible to interpret these results in several

ways. One could jump to the conclusion that allocating funds for current fiction is not a high

priority in this library. However, many variables could be at work here that are not apparent

from this evaluation. For instance, the library could have experienced budget cutbacks, or

spending during these two years could have been focused on other areas, such as non-fiction or

classroom sets of older novels.

It seems likely that the library media specialist used a different source than *Children's Catalog* when making decisions about which fiction books to purchase. It is quite possible that this library would score much higher if a list of ALA Notable Books, Newbery Award or Young Hoosier Book Award nominees were used. Dennison (2000) suggests the use of tiered checklists to compensate for this effect (p. 25). It would be interesting to construct a tiered checklist from several of these sources and compare the results to those found in this evaluation.

Another factor to consider is that many library media specialists rely heavily on reviews in the professional journals when making purchasing decisions. It may take at least one year for new fiction titles to be reviewed in the major publications. This lag time, combined with the fact that school libraries may place only two or three orders per year, could cause significant delay in the purchase of new titles. It would be worthwhile to investigate whether the percentage of titles owned rises significantly when compared to *Children's Catalog* supplements for 2001 or 2002, for example.

During the course of this evaluation, an interesting twist did appear in the data. One title on the checklist, *Becoming Naomi Leon* by Pam Munoz Ryan*,* was held by the library but only in its Spanish translation, *Yo, Naomi Leon*. Since it had been determined that language was not an important factor, this title was counted. This book is the work of an author of Mexican heritage who often writes about the immigrant experience from a child's viewpoint. However, it seems strange that this popular title from an award-winning author was not also purchased in English.

Another case involved two very different books with the same title, *Ida B*. The library held one title, but not the same one mentioned on the checklist. This demonstrated the need for attention to detail, such as checking for the correct author when searching by title. Other than these two minor occurrences, there were no problems encountered in the course of this

evaluation. This is not surprising given that the ease of conducting a checklist study is one of its major advantages.

I found the OPAC for Orchard Park library to be easy to use. The "Basic" search screen consists of a single bar for entering text with five buttons below, designated "keyword," "title," "author," "subject," and "series." Also included are two drop-down menus, one for searching the OPACs of other schools in this corporation and another for searching for titles used in reading programs such as Accelerated Reader and Reading Counts, which are becoming very commonplace in elementary schools. Tabs at the top of the OPAC interface allow the user to switch to a "Power" search allowing Boolean searching, or a "Number" search, which searches by call number. The result lists are sorted alphabetically (the default setting) and contain the call number, author, date of publication, and the lexile score, if available.   More detailed information such as subject headings and publication information are available by clicking on the "details" icon. The OPAC also supports a booklist feature, allowing users to save or print their choices.

In my use of the OPAC for this evaluation, I used the "Basic" search screen's title and author searches exclusively, as I did not encounter any items that required a more refined search. As mentioned above, a title search was conducted first, and then an author search was used if no titles were found. The intent was to compensate for possible misspellings in the title or other clerical errors that might prevent a search from finding a title that was actually available in the collection.

I would consider ease of use to be the main advantage of the checklist method in this evaluation. Conducting the study was somewhat time consuming, but not at all difficult. In the case of this study, once it had been determined that older editions of titles on the list would not be counted, there were very few further considerations required.

The greatest disadvantage was the difficulty in the interpretation of the findings. A twenty-three percent result does not seem to represent successful collection of current fiction. However, there are many other factors that may influence the outcome. There could be perfectly legitimate reasons why Orchard Park library contained so few of the titles in the two most recent supplements to *Children's Catalog*. Without more detailed knowledge of the goals and circumstances of this particular library, the results of this evaluation are not as meaningful as they might be.

In the last several years, the impact of the World Wide Web on libraries has been profound. As a future school librarian, I will use the Web to provide access to materials and resources that are beyond the scope of my physical collection. Tools such as WebQuests and annotated bibliographies of informational websites will allow students to use and explore information from governments, businesses, educational foundations, and individuals around the world.

As children continue to become more and more comfortable with the Web, it becomes imperative to help them discern when Web resources may or may not be the best choice for their information needs, and how to judge the authority, accuracy, and currency (among other criteria) of Web sources. Use of the Web will also provide the opportunity and necessity for teaching about the ethical use of information, including copyright and fair use laws, and how to create bibliographic citations for Web sources.

In a way, use of the Web opens up a whole new realm for the teacher-librarian. The demands of the high-tech age will allow us many new opportunities to become active teachers of information and computer literacy skills. These are areas where many classroom teachers are not

as comfortable, and the expertise of librarians may be our foot in the door to further curricular collaboration.

Many, many schools still do not make effective use of the Web. I consider it a necessity for my future library media center to be well represented on the Web. I believe the information provided by a good website will encourage the participation of parents and other community members, allow me to showcase the impact the library makes on learning, and extend the reach of the library past school hours and classroom walls.

In conducting this evaluation project, I feel that I have learned a practical skill that I will return to again and again in my career. The checklist method is particularly well suited to a small library such as a school library media center. Checklists can be compiled quickly and the type of checklist can be tailored to suit the needs of the moment. The ease with which a checklist evaluation can be conducted will allow me to delegate large parts of the task to a volunteer or library aide, leaving my time free to work with students and teachers.

It has been very useful to conduct an actual evaluation. I have been able to encounter and resolve common issues such as determining what constitutes a "match" and how to count "near matches." Having actual experience in dealing with these issues will be much more valuable than just reading about them.

References

Children's Catalog: *Annual Supplement to the Eighteenth Edition* (2004). New York: H.W.
 Wilson Co.

Children's Catalog: Annual Supplement to the Eighteenth Edition (2005). New York: H.W.
 Wilson Co.

Everhart, N. (1998). *Evaluating the School Library Media Center: Analysis Techniques and
 Research Practices.* Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.

Dennison, R. F. (2000). Quality Assessment of Collection Development Through Tiered
 Checklists: Can You Prove You Are a Good Collection Developer? *Collection Building*
 9(1), 24-26.

Indiana Department of Education (n.d.). *Indiana K-12 Web Sites.* Retrieved February 27, 2006,
 from http://www.doe.state.in.us/htmls/k12.html

Indiana Department of Education (n.d.). *School Snapshot*. Retrieved February 27,
 2006, from http://mustang.doe.state.in.us/SEARCH/snapshot.cfm?schl=2513

Lundin, A. H. (1989). List-Checking in Collection Development: An Imprecise Art. *Collection
 Management* 11(3/4), 103-112.