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ANALYSIS OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LIBRARY WEB SITES
IN SOUTHERN NEW JERSEY

by
Tricia L. Squire

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts Degree
of
The Graduate School
at
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Approved by
Dr. Marilyn Shonk

Date Approved

May 11, 2006

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ABSTRACT

Tricia L. Squire
ANALYSIS OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LIBRARY WEB SITES
IN SOUTHERN NEW JERSEY.

2005/2006

Dr. Marilyn Shontz
Master of Arts in School and Public Librarianship

Elementary school library media centers have the opportunity to utilize a Web site to promote the goals and objectives of the program, assist students with information literacy skills and encourage students to read more. Organizations such as the American Library Association and the International Association of School Librarianship provide guidelines for creating Web sites. The purpose of this study was to evaluate whether or not elementary school library media centers in southern New Jersey were using these guidelines when creating Web sites.

Using a researcher designed checklist, Web sites were evaluated for information provided for all students, content for all students; content for students in grade k-2 and students in grades 3-5; ease of navigation, visual appeal and provision of information on site creation and maintenance. Results showed that the ALA and IASL guidelines were not being utilized and the Web sites were lacking in both overall content and design.

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CHAPTER 1

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Some public elementary school libraries in Cumberland County, Gloucester County and Atlantic County, New Jersey use Web sites to convey information to students. In order for a Web site to be visited, its intended audience must know that it exists. In order for a site to be used, its content must be relevant, useful and appropriate. However, some Web sites are designed in a way that makes them too difficult for young students to navigate and use. The reading levels are often too high, and the content is not useful to children.

A study conducted by Kimberly Poe in 1999 measured three main categories of information found on school library Web sites. She concluded that those Web sites did not meet proper design and usage criteria.

Purpose of the Study

This study was conducted to determine how well children were able to use elementary school library Web sites created for use by elementary school age children. Research questions used in this study were: What types of Web information did elementary school libraries provide for students? Were children able to navigate and utilize the Web sites provided by elementary school libraries? What was the specific content provided for children in grades K-2? What was the specific content provided for

children in grades 3 - 5? Who created the elementary school library's Web site? What elements were present that added visual and audio appeal for children?

Definition of Terms

Children: For the purpose of this study, child or children is defined as a person between the ages of approximately 5 through 10.

Content: The essential matter or substance of a written work or discourse, as opposed to its form or style. All of the ideas, topics, facts, or statements contained in a Web site (Reitz, 2004).

Navigation: The use of hypertext links, icons, menu options, and search engines displayed on a Web page to move to other resources available on the Internet or to other pages within the same Web site. When the user proceeds in a casual way, the activity is called surfing; when the approach is purposeful, it is a search (Reitz, 2004).

Reading level: One of several degrees of proficiency in reading, usually defined in reference to a specific academic grade level (example: third-grade level) or stage of reading development, applicable to both reader and reading material. Factors determining reading level include vocabulary, sentence structure, length of text, and difficulty of content (Reitz, 2004).

School library: A library in a public elementary school that serves the information needs of its students and curriculum needs of its teachers and staff, usually managed by a school librarian or media specialist (Reitz, 2004). For the purposes of this study, an elementary school may contain kindergarten through fifth grades. For the purposes of this study, school library and school library media center (SLMC) will be used interchangeably.

School library Web site: A Web site created by or for a school library that provides information about the library and information for its students, teachers and/or parents of the students.

Student: For the purpose of this study, student is defined as a child of school age from kindergarten through grade five, with an approximate age of 5 through 10.

WebQuest: An inquiry-oriented activity in which most or all of the information used by learners is drawn from the Web.

Web site: A group of related, interlinked Web pages installed on a Web server and accessible 24 hours a day to Internet users equipped with browser software (Reitz, 2004).

Assumptions and Limitations

It was assumed for this study that elementary school library Web sites that had content for children were intended for use by children who were or were not working with an adult.

The scope of the study was limited to elementary school libraries in Atlantic, Cumberland and Gloucester Counties in New Jersey. There were some elementary schools in those counties that had library Web sites but were not included in the study. Elementary school library Web sites that were only one page and contained just a small amount of general information, such as number of books children could check out, and circulation dates were not considered.

Since variations existed within New Jersey as to what grades were included in an elementary school, the study included schools within the selected counties which held any combination of kindergarten through grade five.

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What's a WebQuest: Site overview (1998). Retrieved April 3, 2006, from <http://webquest.sdsu.edu/overview.htm>

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

Introduction

Anyone can create a Web site and put it on the Internet. However, the quality of sites varies a great deal. If school library media center Web sites are intended for use by children it is especially important that they meet high standards. What standards exist and can be utilized by those creating Web sites for school library media centers?

The American Library Association had selection criteria for determining “great Web sites for kids” (ALA, 2005, ¶ 6) on their Web site. The criteria were established by the Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC) Technology Committee in 1997. Those criteria included:

- A. Authorship/Sponsorship: Who Put up the Site?
- B. Purpose: Every Site Has a Reason for Being There.
- C. Design and Stability: A Great Site Has Personality and Strength of Character.
- D. Content: A Great Site Shares Meaningful and Useful Content that Educates, Informs or Entertains.

Research about Elementary School Web Sites

In a 1999 study conducted by Kimberly Poe, 20 school library media center Web sites were analyzed. Ten of the sites had been created within the previous two years and ten had been on the Web for more than two years. Her sample included Web sites from all over the world.

The main categories analyzed by Poe in her study were as follows (Poe, 1999, p. 10-18):

- Factual information about the SLMC,
- links, and
- design, (three separate categories of design elements were analyzed).

In her discussion, Poe stated that “On the whole, SLMC Web home pages do not reflect proper usage of content and design elements” (Poe, 1999, p. 19). Additionally, although Poe expected to find that newer pages contained more of the design elements that were desirable, this was not the case. She concluded that SLMC home pages did not meet a majority of the design criteria she compiled based on the literature and Web style guides (p. 20).

Dr. Anne Clyde, (Clyde, 2000) in her research, conducted a content analysis of school library Web sites based on 26 features. She analyzed Web sites in 1996 and again in 1999 to identify which of 50 sites exhibited selected features and to note if there had been changes and/or improvements over the three year time period. She noted that these were “not necessarily the...most desirable or most important for users” (Clyde, p. 7). Rather, they were just the features she observed.

Dr. Clyde did not provide a list of definitive criteria for evaluating school library media center Web sites. However, she stated that the guidelines used by the (International Association of School Librarianship) IASL/Concord School Library Web Page Award provided a basis for current “best practice” (Clyde, 2000, p. 10). The criteria for selection as an IASL/Concord School Library Web Page of the Month as of November 2005, were:

- evidence of school library and/or school librarian involvement in page/site development;
- relevance of the page/site to the goals and objectives of the school library;
- visual appeal, including layout, choice of images, type face and style;
- organization of information on the page/site;
- quality of the writing and use of language (and proof-reading);
- ease of use of the page/site, and navigational features;
- educational, information, entertainment, or public relations value of the page/site;
- appropriateness for the needs of users;
- currency, evidence of update policy, and the provision of current information and/or links;
- technical quality (note that this is interpreted as the appropriate use of technology, not necessarily leading-edge technology); and
- value of the page/site as a model for other school libraries and/or school librarians (IASL, 2005).

The researcher found two studies on the design of children's Web portals. Large, Beheshti and Rahman (2002) conducted focus groups with children aged 10 to 13 wherein the children utilized Web portals and commented on them. While this study was conducted on Web portals, not Web sites, there were some important conclusions which should be noted as they relate to children's use of the Internet (Large, Beheshti and Rahman, 2002).

One conclusion of this research was that "For any user audience, and perhaps especially for children, first impressions are important" (Large, Beheshti and Rahman,

2002, p. 86). Additionally, some design elements that were discouraged in the creation of adult Web sites were desirable for children. They stated:

A range of issues needs to be considered when determining the visual appearance of the portal. Foremost among these are use of attention-grabbing colors (background as well as foreground), and both meaningful and imaginative icons, graphics and animation. It may be necessary to question some of the more conservative guidelines, for example on color use, that have regularly been recommended for adult users (p. 92).

Their study stated that the ability to personalize color choices, and animations may need further consideration when use was intended for children (p. 93). Building on this research, Large, Nettet, Beheshti, and Bowler (2004) established an intergenerational design team study with children aged 11 and 12. These students sometimes disagreed with what the children in the earlier study had stated, but when designing their portal, they included elements such as animation and bold colors. The children explained that use of these elements was desirable as long as they were purposeful.

These studies raise some important issues to consider when analyzing Web sites for children. Although adults may not like to see animation and bright colors on a Web site, these things were seen as desirable by children. When analyzing Web sites for children, adults may need to look at sites intended for children with a younger eye.

In 2005, Jamie Beth Hunsinger conducted a content analysis of 20 school library Web sites used by 14 school districts in North Carolina. This research was based on the 1999 study conducted by Kimberly Poe. Included in the study were 14 elementary

school Web sites, 2 middle school Web sites and 4 high school Web sites. The main categories for the criteria included in the study were:

- Basic Information
- Reading Encouragement
- Information Literacy Tools
- Curriculum Support
- Miscellaneous Features
- Design and Navigational Features
- Design Problems and Errors (Hunsinger, 2005, p. 13).

Each of these main categories included three to ten subcategories. In her discussion, Hunsinger concluded that “effective content and design elements are not applied. Practice does not reflect knowledge of the field” (Hunsinger, 2005, p. 22). She concluded that “While the literature shows ...a consistent set of criteria for quality SLMC Web sites, the majority of the sites observed are not meeting these criteria” (Hunsinger, p. 25).

Summary of the Literature

Much research has been done on designing Web sites for both children and adults. Information on what makes a good Web site can be found in books and on the Internet. Professional associations such as the American Library Association and the International Association of School Librarianship created guidelines for good Web sites for students.

However, studies have shown that school library media center Web sites do not meet criteria for good Web sites as defined by the relevant literature. Both Poe in 1999 and Hunsinger in 2005 found that design elements were not used properly in SLMC Web

sites and the content was not effective. Hunsinger noted that while there were consistent guidelines in the literature for quality Web sites, those guidelines were not being followed.

Research on Web portals for children found that children desired different design elements than adults. Children were able to give reasons for their preferences and provided specific examples of changes they would make. Although their final decisions about what design elements were desirable often did not agree with their initial statements about the topic, they were able to explain the choices they made.

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CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Overall Design and Justification

This study was conducted using survey research. Elementary school library Web sites from three New Jersey counties were evaluated to determine if certain design criteria were met. The purpose of a descriptive survey is to “describe characteristics of the population of interest” (Powell & Connaway, 2004, p. 87). Since survey research is used to gather contemporary data (Powell & Connaway, p. 84) it was the best suited type of research for this study. This research was conducted to determine if elementary school library Web sites were meeting criteria defined by the relevant research as best practices. The results of the study showed the current conditions, so survey research was the preferred method.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

This study was conducted to determine how well children were able to use elementary school library Web sites created for use by elementary school age children. Research questions used in this study were: What types of Web information did elementary school libraries provide for students? Were children able to navigate and utilize the web sites provided by elementary school libraries? What content was provided for all students? What was the specific content provided for children in grades K-2? What was the specific content provided for children in grades 3 - 5? Who created the

elementary school library's Web site? What elements were present that added visual and audio appeal for children?

Population and Sample

The sample for this study was 20 elementary school library Web sites in three counties in New Jersey. The sample was selected using the State of New Jersey Department of Education Web site. The researcher selected Atlantic, Cumberland and Gloucester counties. Web sites of all school districts in each county were visited to determine which schools maintained elementary school library Web sites. All of the elementary school library media centers that had library Web sites from the three counties were examined in this study. Elementary school library Web sites that were only one page and contained a minimal amount of general information, such as number of books children could check out, and circulation dates were not considered.

Variables

The criteria assessed were included in a checklist developed by the researcher.

Variables from the checklist included:

- Information for students about the school library;
- Ease of navigation;
- Content for all students;
- Specific content for k-2nd grade students;
- Specific content for 3rd-5th grade students;
- Visual appeal for children; and
- Information about site creation and maintenance.

A copy of the checklist is found in the Appendix.

Method of Data Collection

Data were collected through observation by the researcher. Each Web site was visited and the checklist was utilized to assess whether selected criteria were present or not. The 20 Web sites were visited on February 5, February 19 or February 20, 2006. The checklist was developed utilizing relevant research on best practices in development of Web sites for use by children.

Variables included in the checklist were divided into seven categories. These categories included: 1) Types of information provided for students; 2) Ease of navigation; 3) Content intended for all students; 4) Specific content for children in grades kindergarten through second; 5) Specific content for children in grades third through fifth; 6) Information about who created and maintained the Web site; and 7) Visual appeal for children.

Reliability and Validity

The checklist was determined to be valid by pretesting the checklist using the J. H. Winslow Primary School Web site at <http://www.vineland.org/winslow/library/librarymainpage.htm>; and the Taunton Forge Elementary School Library Web site at <http://www.tauntonforgeschool.org/tfmediacenter/index.htm>. Those Web sites were not used in the research. Changes were made based on the pretests and in consultation with the Master's degree thesis advisor.

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- Powell, R. R., & Connaway, L. S. (2004). *Basic research methods for librarians*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Procedures/Methods Used

The researcher electronically visited 20 elementary school library Web sites in Atlantic, Cumberland, and Gloucester Counties in New Jersey. The sites were visited on February 5, February 19 or February 20, 2006. Specific elements were analyzed using a checklist created in Excel.

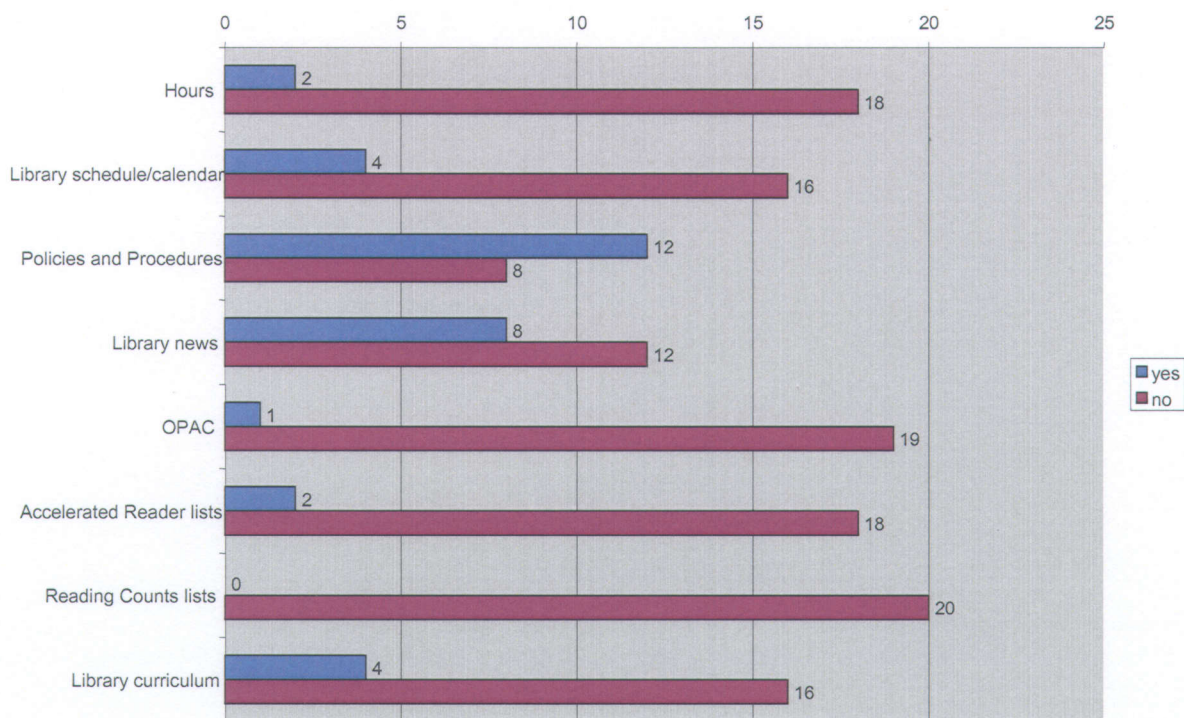
Variables Studied

This research was conducted to determine if current practice in creation and utilization of Web sites for elementary school libraries followed the guidelines of the American Library Association and International Association of School Librarianship. There were seven broad categories observed with sub-categories in each. Schools were coded and categories were organized into a checklist in an Excel spreadsheet. As each Web site was visited, the researcher checked off whether or not each element was present, or, in some cases, not applicable. A spreadsheet was then utilized to create graphs. All graphs represent the total of 20 Web sites.

Presentation of Results

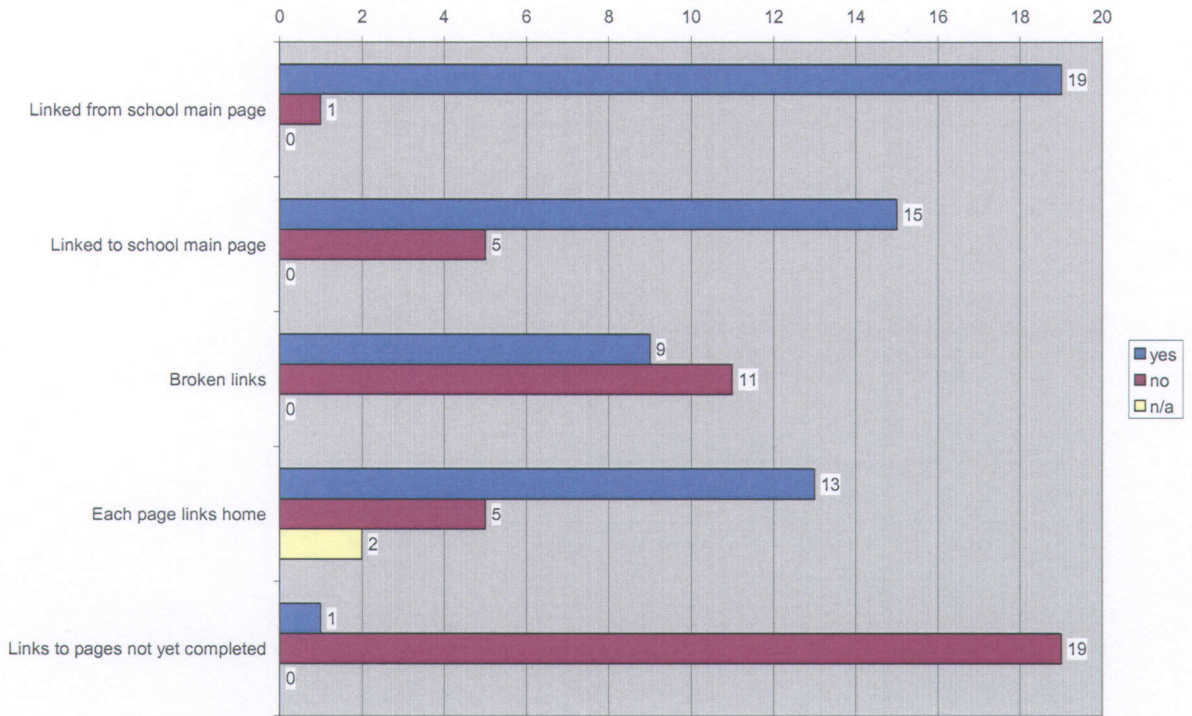
The first category from the checklist was: What information was available for students about the school library? Specific items in this category were: hours, library schedule/calendar, policies and procedures, library news, OPAC, Accelerated Reader lists, Reading Counts lists and library curriculum. Results are found in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Information for Students About the School Library on the Web site



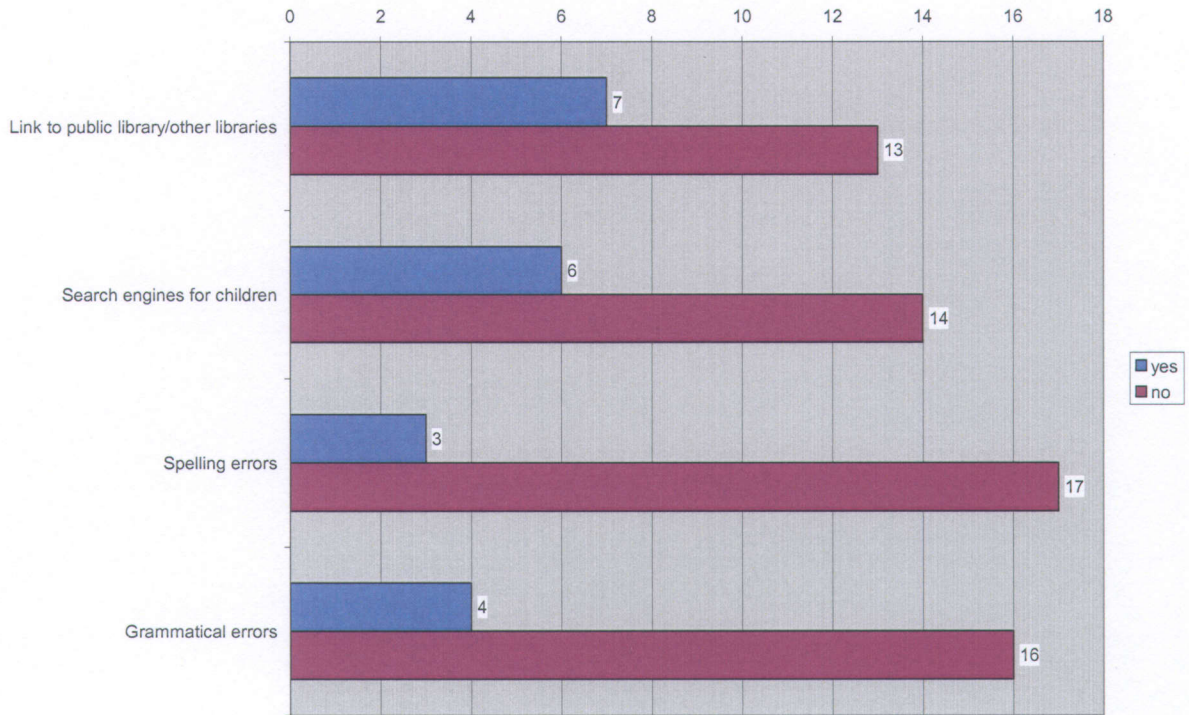
The second category of five items from the checklist concerned the ease of navigation. To determine ease of navigation this researcher looked to see whether or not the site: was linked from the school main page, was linked to the school main page, had any broken links, had each page linked home, and had links to pages not yet completed. Results are found in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Ease of Navigation



Next the researcher analyzed the checklist category of items concerning content for all students at any grade level. These items were: links to public libraries/other libraries, search engines for children, and whether or not there were spelling or grammatical errors. The results are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Content Intended for All Students



The fourth and fifth categories looked at content specifically for children in grades k-2 and content for children in grades 3-5. Did the Web site have: book reviews, information on new acquisitions, book awards, reading links, reading lists, author links, illustrator links, WebQuests, pathfinders or reference links to dictionaries, encyclopedias, etc.? Also, with regard to 3-5 grades, was there any content about information literacy skills? Finally, of those book reviews and WebQuests present, was the reading level appropriate to the grade level? The results are shown in Figures 4 and 5.

Figure 4: Specific Content for K-2 Grade Students

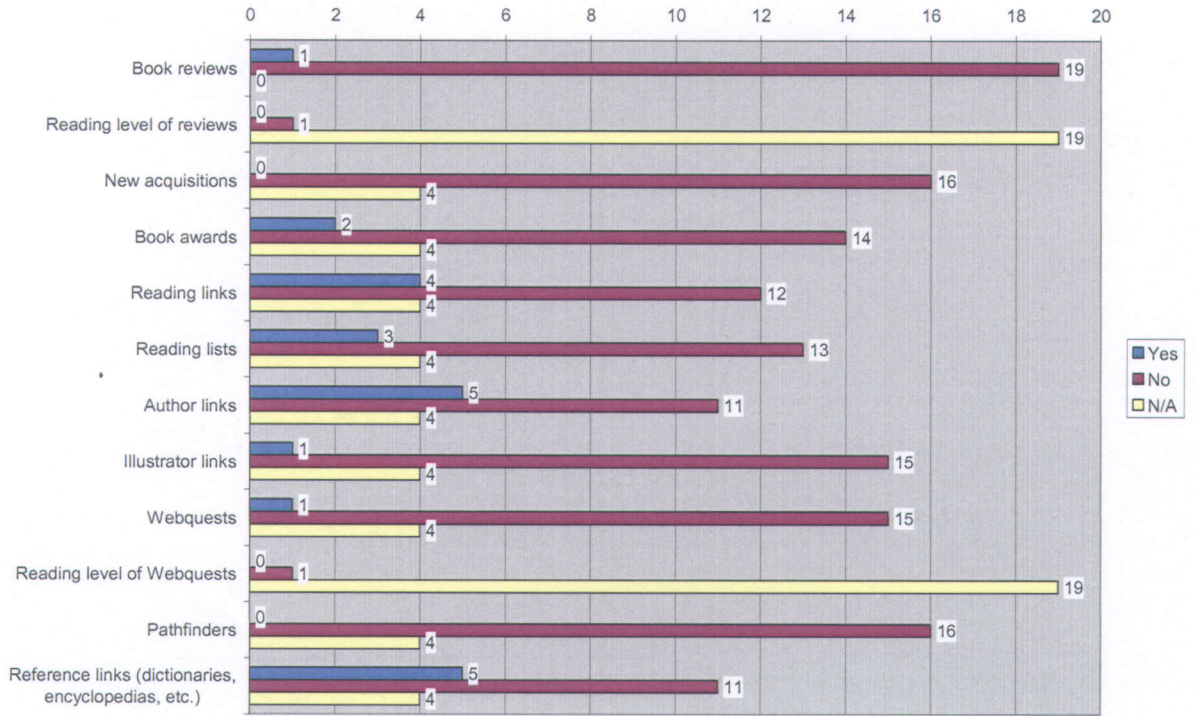
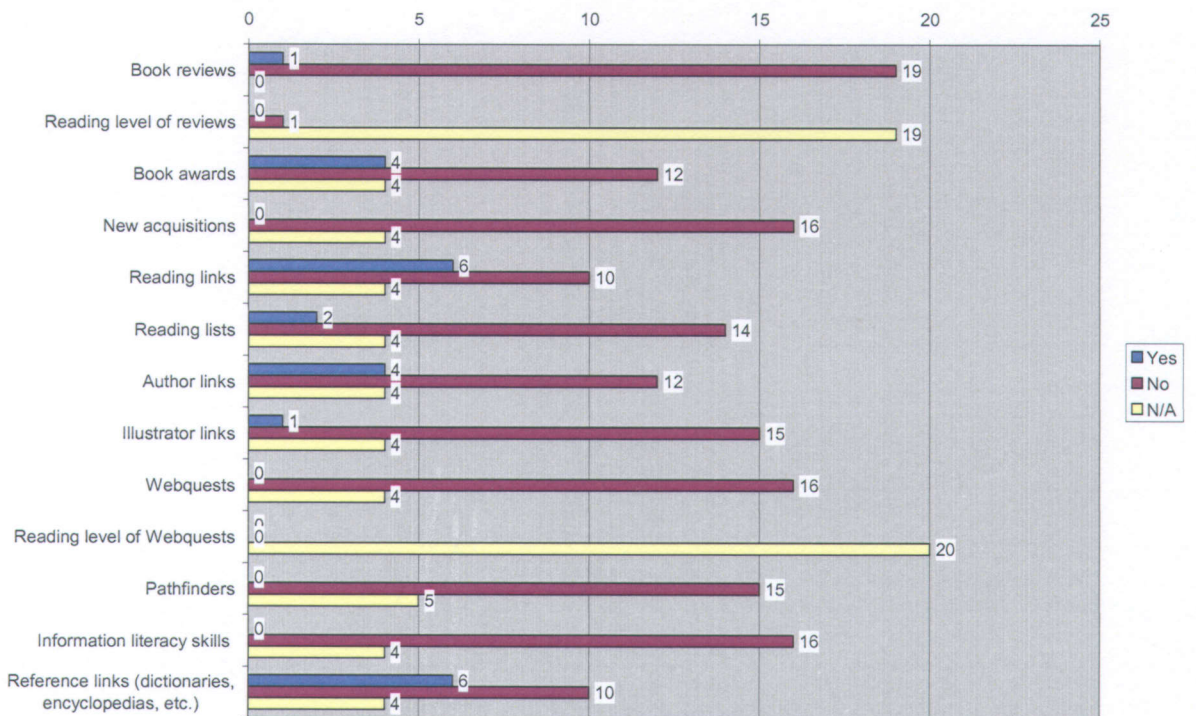
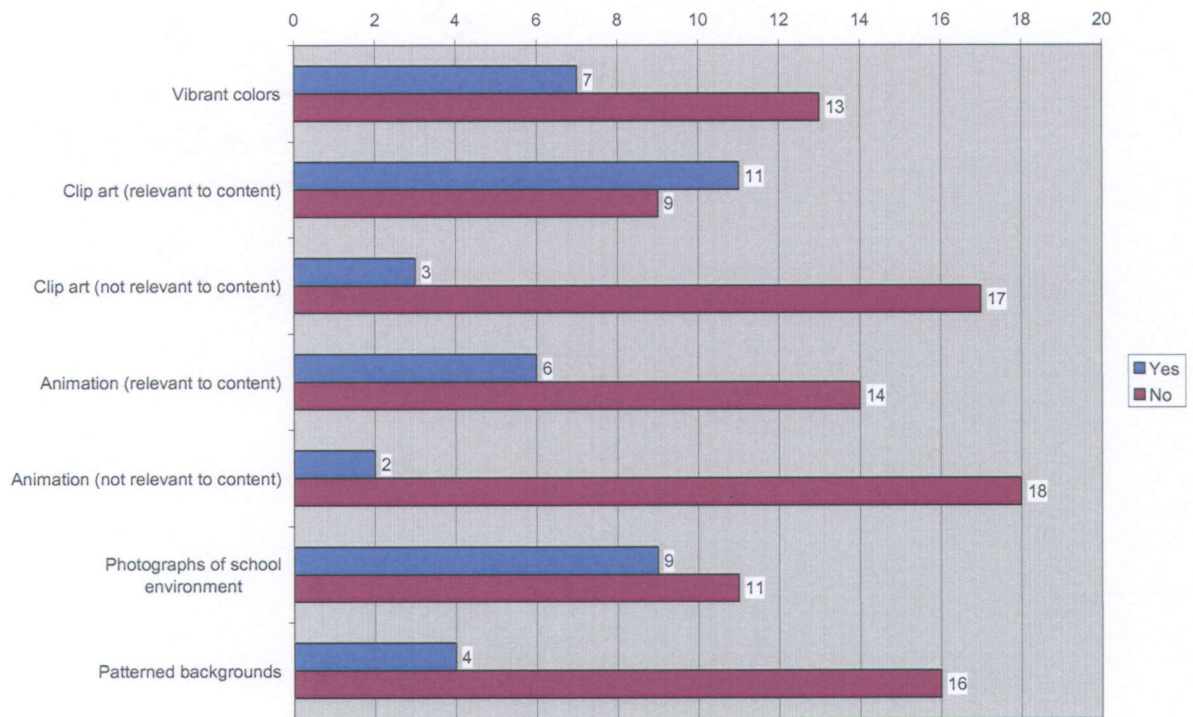


Figure 5: Specific Content for 3-5 Grade Students



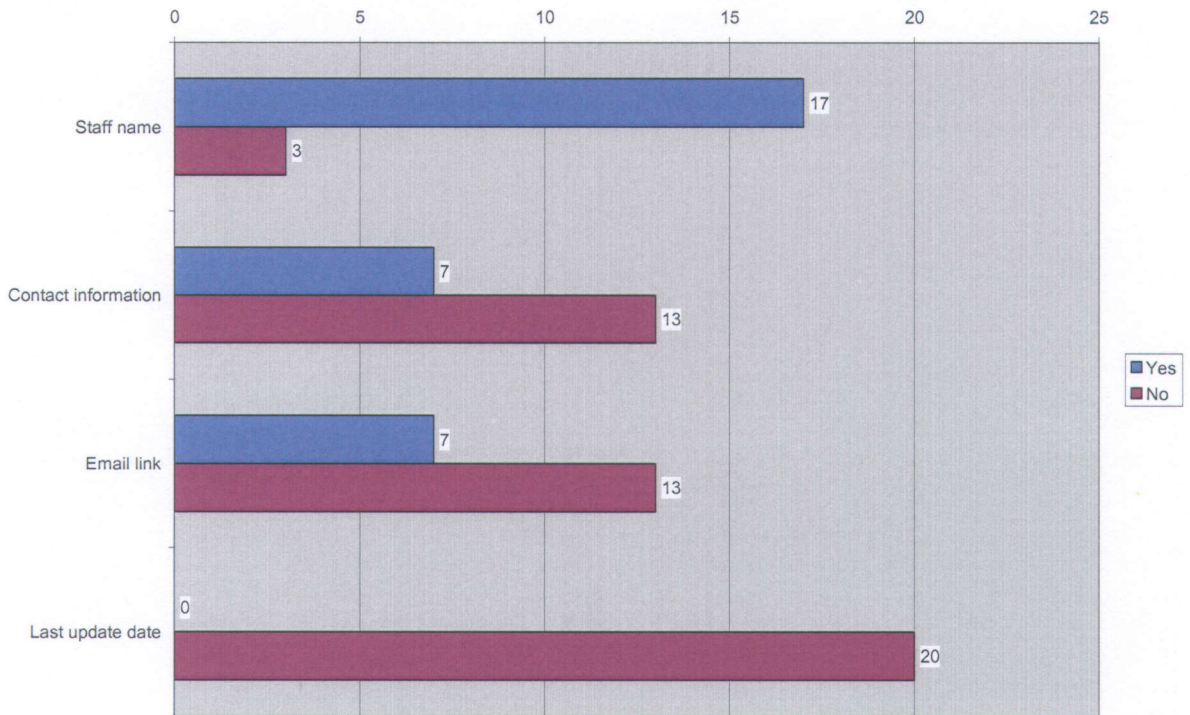
The sixth category concerned the visual appeal of the site for children. The researcher looked for: patterned backgrounds, photographs of the school environment, animation and whether or not it was relevant to the content, clip art and whether or not it was relevant to the content and used vibrant colors.

Figure 6: Visual Appeal for Children



The final section was information about Web site creation and maintenance. Did the Web site provide: a last update date, email link, contact information and the staff name? Results are presented in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Information About Site Creation and Maintenance



CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This study was conducted to answer the following questions: What types of Web information did elementary school libraries provide for students? Were children able to navigate and utilize the Web sites provided by elementary school libraries? What content was provided for all students? What was the specific content provided for children in grades k-2? What was the specific content provided for children in grades 3 - 5? Who created the elementary school library's Web site? What elements were present that added visual and audio appeal for children?

Interpretation of Results

The first category: What information was available for students about the school library? Most of the elementary school library Web sites visited did not have much information for children. Twelve of the Web sites had some policies and procedures listed, most of this information was regarding the circulation policy. Only one of the Web sites provided access to the OPAC. Although several schools indicated use of Accelerated Reader, only two of the schools provided lists of books available in the program.

The second category concerned the ease of navigation. The majority of the Web sites were well created in this area. All but one was linked from the school's main page

and 15 were linked to the school's main page. On thirteen of the Web sites each page linked back to the home page, two of the Web sites were only one page so this was not applicable. Only one Web site had links to pages that were not yet completed or labeled as "under construction". Just under half of the Web sites contained broken links.

The third category analyzed, content for students at any grade level, yielded the following results: overall, there were few spelling or grammatical errors on any of the Web sites. Three sites had spelling errors and four had grammatical errors. However, only seven of the Web sites provided a link to the public or other library and only six provided links to search engines for children.

The fourth and fifth categories were concerned with content specific for students in grades k-2 and in grade 3-5. The researcher's intent was also to analyze the reading level of content to determine appropriateness for the grade level for which it was intended.

For children in grades k-2, (category four), five Web sites had links to reference sites such as dictionaries or encyclopedias, and five had links to information about authors. In the area of reading promotion, three Web sites provided reading lists, and four provided reading links. One Web site contained book reviews of books for students in grades k-2. Those reviews were assessed at a reading level of 10.2 using the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Score utilizing Microsoft Office tools. One Web site stated that there was a WebQuest, however, the link led to a video presentation of how to use the library. Therefore, reading level could not be analyzed.

For students in grades 3 through 5, (category five), six of the Web sites provided reading links, and two provided reading lists. One Web site contained book reviews of

books for students in grades 3-5. Those reviews were assessed at a reading level of 12.2 using the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Score. Four sites provided author links and two had illustrator links. Six of the Web sites provided links to reference materials.

The sixth category analyzed the visual appeal of the Web sites. Visually, the sites were not very interesting. Three sites contained clip art that was irrelevant to the content and two sites contained irrelevant animation. Eleven sites had clip art that was relevant and 6 had relevant animation. Nine of the sites contained photographs of the school environment. Most did not show students, but showed events such as author visits, displays and student work.

Finally, in the seventh category, information about site creation and maintenance was evaluated. The results of this segment were the most surprising to this researcher. Library media specialists teach children to evaluate Web sites and one of the methods taught is to check the last update of the site. Of the 20 sites visited, none had a last update listed. Seventeen Web sites provided staff names. Only seven provided contact information and those seven also had an email link.

Conclusions

The researcher expected to find better designed Web sites. Both the ALA and the IASL provided guidelines for the creation of elementary school library Web sites, the sites observed for this study did not reflect utilization of those guidelines. Both sets of guidelines stated that school library media center Web sites should have a purpose for being. However, the sites did not have clear stated purposes.

The ALA guidelines stated that “A great site has personality and strength of character”. The IASL guidelines contained components for “technical quality” and

“visual appeal”. Many of the sites were completed on templates that seemed to meet requirements of the district.

Some of the Web sites minimally met expectations for containing meaningful content by providing information to let the community know about events at the library such as author visits and Read Across America. Many of the sites also contained some policy and procedure information useful to students, as well as parents of the elementary school community.

Based on the literature about what makes a good Web site, the researcher also expected to find that the sites were being used to promote reading and the curriculum of the school library program. However, most sites were not being used for these purposes. Although several sites mentioned the use of the Accelerated Reader program by the school, only two sites provided a list of Accelerated Reader books owned by the library. Most links provided were geared toward games. Most of the sites did not even provide a link to a child friendly search engine. There was very little promotion of information literacy skills on the Web sites analyzed.

The IASL guidelines also rated Web sites on their value as a model for other school libraries and librarians. Given that none of the sites contained last update information, they could not be used as a model for others.

Possible Uses of Results

These results could be used to help library media specialists develop better Web sites to meet the needs of their students. The guidelines provided by the ALA and IASL could be used as a basis for creating “great” Web sites. The checklist developed by the researcher could be utilized when creating Web sites to assist in meeting the guidelines.

Recommendations

Further study could be conducted to determine whether the elementary school library Web sites that were closer to meeting the criteria were created by library media specialists of their own volition or as a requirement of the district. Also, it might be helpful to study whether those school library media specialists whose sites met some criteria had time allotted in their schedule to work on the Web site. Results could be utilized by building administrators to provide time in the library media specialists schedule to create Web sites to better promote the purpose of the school library.

It was also possible that the school library media specialist did not have training or knowledge in creating Web sites for children. Continuing education could be provided by the school district or the South Jersey Regional Library Cooperative to school library media specialists in the creation of better, more useful Web sites.

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APPENDIX

Web site checklist

Specific Content for 3-5 grade Students								
Book reviews								
Reading level of reviews								
Book awards								
New acquisitions								
Reading links								
Reading lists								
Author links								
Illustrator links								
Webquests								
Reading level of Webquests								
Pathfinders								
Information literacy skills								
Reference links (dictionaries, encyclopedias, etc.)								
Visual Appeal for Children								
Vibrant colors								
Clip art (relevant to content)								
Clip art (not relevant to content)								
Animation (relevant to content)								
Animation (not relevant to content)								
Photographs of school environment								
Patterned backgrounds								
Information about Site Creation and Maintenance								
Staff name								
Contact information								
Email link								
Last update date								