

Jill Heritage. For the Love of Reading: The Readers' Advisory Interview in the Elementary School Library Media Center. A Master's paper for the M.S. in L.S. degree. April, 2004. 110 pages. Advisor: Evelyn H. Daniel.

This research study examines the readers' advisory interview in the elementary school library media center. Ten interviews were conducted with media specialists currently practicing in North Carolina elementary schools. Participant responses helped to identify steps taken during the readers' advisory interview as well as the school-specific influences on this interview. Current practices are combined with existing literature to provide recommendations for conducting a successful readers' advisory interview, establishing a climate favorable to the promotion of recreational reading in the elementary school, and publicizing the unique skills of the media specialist.

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FOR THE LOVE OF READING:  
THE READERS' ADVISORY INTERVIEW IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL  
LIBRARY MEDIA CENTER

by  
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## **Introduction**

The American Association of School Librarians' (1998) handbook for school library media specialists, *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning*, states, "Creating a foundation for lifelong learning is at the heart of the school library media program" (p. 1). Further,

As an essential partner who both contributes to and draws from the expertise of the entire learning community, the library media specialist plays a role that...begins with promoting and reinforcing students' interests and abilities in reading, listening, and viewing (AASL, p. 3).

According to this definition, the school library media specialist's role *begins* with reading encouragement or readers' advisory services. Broadly defined, readers' advisory services in the school media center encompass such activities as booktalking, read alouds, reader's theater, displays, and all activities designed to foster enthusiasm for reading. Readers' advisory services provide the primary means of promoting and reinforcing students' reading interests through the school library media center.

At the core of any readers' advisory effort, lies the readers' advisory interview itself.

Shearer (1996) defines the readers' advisory interview or transaction as;

...an exchange of information between two people with the purpose of one person's suggesting text for the other's later reading interest...The text suggested in the transaction is expected to meet a recreational, emotional, psychological, or educational need. Unlike a reference transaction, the successful conclusion of the readers' advisory transaction is not the provision of a fact or missing data, nor does it attempt to fill a known gap in an otherwise complete information or knowledge framework. The success of a readers' advisory transaction is reflected in a reader discovering a book (or cassette or software) which is enjoyable,

entertaining, stimulating, mind-stretching, and eye-opening; it is in the realm of the subjective (p. 3).

In this study, the definition of the readers' advisory interview can be simplified to mean the one-on-one interaction that occurs between media specialist and student in the school media center, as the media specialist attempts to recommend a recreational reading book for the student.

The term "readers' advisory" is rarely used in reference to services rendered by the school media center, but rather the term is used almost exclusively in public librarianship. Often no label is given to the many "reading encouragement" activities affiliated with the school media center. This lack of labeling might be explained in a number of ways. It could indicate 1)the ubiquitous nature of these services in the school media center; 2)the long held stereotype that public children's librarians primarily recommend books for recreational reading whereas school media specialists help students with school assignments and other curriculum-based services; 3)the inattention to recreational reading in light of the current emphasis on flexible scheduling, collaboration, curricular support, and high stakes testing in education; or 4)simply the nonexistence of instances in which reading encouragement activities in the school media center are explored in a scholarly manner. Most likely, this lack of labeling is due to a combination of each of the above factors and highlights even more clearly the need to study this unique transaction.

The media specialist operates within a specific environment very different from his or her peers in the field of children's public librarianship. The learning community, defined as "students, teachers, administrators, and parents" (as well as local, regional, state, national,

and international communities) can impact or even dictate what occurs during the readers' advisory interview (AASL, 1998, p. 2). When an elementary school student approaches his or her school media specialist with the question, "Can you recommend a book for me to read?" (or the media specialist approaches a browsing student with an offer to help locate a book) myriad issues come into play regarding the placement of this interaction within the context of the learning community. The predecessor to AASL's *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* (1998), *Information Power: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs* (1988) articulates the mission of the library media program:

The mission of the library media program is to ensure that students and staff are effective users of ideas and information. This mission is accomplished:

- by providing intellectual and physical access to materials in all formats
- by providing instruction to foster competence and stimulate interest in reading, viewing, and using information and ideas
- by working with other educators to design learning strategies to meet the needs of individual students (p. 1).

Therefore, after ensuring access through collection development, the media specialist must both "stimulate interest in reading" and work collaboratively with other educators (e.g. classroom teachers) to support the curriculum. During the readers' advisory interview itself, the media specialist must remain cognizant of both roles and negotiate their sometimes opposing demands on philosophy toward recreational reading. The interpretation of these dual roles might shift as the media specialist considers issues such as content appropriateness, readability, leveling or the philosophy of classroom teachers, administrators and parents.

Current school library literature typically refers to the transaction of the reader's advisory interview in terms such as "an art" (Carter, 2000, p. 37; Salvadore, 2001, p. 43) without delineating the particular steps involved in determining the suitability of a book for a particular child. This study seeks not only to articulate these distinct steps involved in the readers' advisory interview in the school media center, but also to document the influences on the steps taken by the media specialist as he or she moves from the student's initial request to a reading recommendation. How can the media specialist best negotiate these influences to achieve goals of both inspiring reading interest and collaborating with the reading curriculum? The success of the reader's advisory interview is vital in directing students' budding reading abilities and infusing them with the passion to encourage further reading, lasting enjoyment of literature, and lifelong learning. To ensure success, the inner workings of the readers' advisory interview must be examined and perfected.

## Literature Review

In “Missing the Real Story: Where Library and Information Science Fails the Library Profession,” Wayne Wiegand (2001) cites the following statistics:

- Americans make 3.5 billion visits to school, public and college libraries every year—three times more than visits to movies
- School children visit their library media centers 1.7 billion times during the school year—two times more than they visit state and national parks.
- As many children participate in summer reading programs as play Little League baseball (p. 7, ALA Public Information Office, 1998).

Despite these statistics, he explains, an “underwhelming” amount of attention has been paid in the library and information science profession to the “act and social nature of reading” (p. 8). This inattention to recreational reading and readers’ advisory services in professional literature in general, exacerbated by the inattention paid to readers’ advisory services in the school media center in particular, results in a near absence of research-based library literature directly addressing the readers’ advisory interview in the school media center.

The role of the school media specialist in matching children with books is also severely underrepresented in the education literature. The *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction* (2000), for example, addresses alphabetic, fluency, comprehension, teacher preparation and comprehension strategies instruction, teacher education and reading instruction, and computer technology

and reading instruction. None of these subtopics address reading encouragement, readers' advisory services, recreational reading, matching readers with books for pleasure and, most importantly, none address the vital role to be played by the school media specialist in reading instruction. A recent article on *Learn North Carolina* ([www.learnnc.org](http://www.learnnc.org)), Parks' "Choosing Books that are 'Just Right,'" (2004) epitomizes the way in which the role of the school media specialist in reading education is routinely devalued and the varied nature of reading misunderstood. Parks studied the ways in which "students select books for independent reading and how teachers can help them make choices more appropriate to their reading levels." Parks prefaces her study with an anecdote explaining that she dreads when students ask to go to the library because, in her opinion, only a small number of her students choose library books that they can read independently. The study sought to examine the ways in which fourth grade students self select books and followed with recommendations for educators guiding these students based on these findings. The specialized skills and knowledge of the school media specialist in recommending recreational reading are noticeably absent from the study whether due to a lack of awareness of the media specialists' role or a misconception of the varied kinds of reading that are required in balanced literacy instruction. Thus, when education literature specifically addresses the act of matching a student with a book to read, the valuable role to be played by the media specialist is rarely acknowledged.

To provide a context for this study, while keeping in mind the limitations outlined above, the literature summarized below first addresses existing research on the readers' advisory

interview and second addresses research on the selection of recreational reading books for children in a school setting.

### ***The Readers' Advisory Interview***

Dickey and Jones (1994) write, "one of the librarian's great joys is successfully matching a book to a reader" (p. 15). As such, they provide an outline of skills and tools for the media specialist to help make this reader-book match, specifically for the teen reader.

Suggestions include:

- Greet the student with a smile;
- Ask, Can I help find something for you to read?;
- If yes, ask, What books have you read that you liked?;
- Present titles in an exciting manner;
- If student can cite a specific book he or she liked, determine what elements brought about this interest (this includes also questioning self about titles considering for recommendation as to what elements are addressed in the same manner);
- Don't avoid a book "with a strong male lead" for female students;
- Find out what books the student didn't like and why;
- Describe a range of titles and watch reaction;
- Write down everything you've recommended for individual readers on a card and pull that individual's card every time you suggest a new title;
- Identify a few all-purpose, "sure-fire" hits to be offered to anyone;
- Remember non-fiction books;
- Utilize readers' advisory ready reference tools (p. 15-16).

Though intended for transactions with teens rather than elementary school age readers, Dickey and Jones' article offers suggestions for the readers' advisory interview in a school library-specific setting.

Doll (2001) also discusses the school library setting, though she focuses more heavily on readers' advisory services in general, rather than the readers' advisory interview in particular. She, too, notes the prime importance of the school community when the

readers' advisory transaction is placed within a school setting, as argued previously in the introduction to this paper (p. 149). And despite the frequent challenges involved in conducting this interview within the school community, she states, "One of the greatest joys for school library media specialists is to share their love of literature with students" (p. 162). Her recommendations for conducting the readers' advisory interview itself include the following: ask questions sensitively; listen to their answers carefully; and blend knowledge of children's literature with knowledge of children (p.158).

Saricks (2001) provides "Tips for the Readers' Advisory Interview." First, patrons should be given an opportunity to talk about the types of books they like and dislike; the librarian must then question further to verify understanding and whether a similar or different type of book is desired. Second, a range of suggestions should be provided based on personal knowledge and ready reference sources all the while modeling the process so patrons feel they are or will be capable of finding a book on their own. Third, if the librarian is unable to come up with suggestions, the patron's name should be taken down and called once a book is found. And lastly, the patron should be encouraged to return and report whether he or she was happy with the recommendation or not (p. 393-394).

In "Readers' Advisory 101" Chelton (2003) discusses the results of a study conducted by MLS students at Queens College to determine the service mistakes made by public librarians during the readers' advisory interview. The most frequent mistakes cited included an immediate movement to the Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC) without

asking questions regarding interest; no questions concerning “appeal factors” such as pacing, characterization, story line, and frame leading to faulty suggestions based on theme, topic or genre (in other words the librarians observed relied on very general characteristics instead of delving into the intricacies of the book’s characteristics); inability to recommend titles beyond personal reading experience/failure to utilize ready reference tools; failure to follow through after making a suggestion; and lack of eye contact and avoidance behavior perhaps due to insecurity regarding readers’ advisory ability (p. 38-39).

Ross (1991), in “Readers’ Advisory Service: New Directions,” conducted over one hundred interviews with readers to help understand how readers choose books and the kinds of assistance services they like and dislike about libraries. After conducting these interviews, she made the following observations of these adult readers:

- They remember a special librarian who made a difference.
- They like the way libraries encourage risk taking.
- They like the sense of freedom, expansiveness, and adventure afforded by a library.
- They dislike rules, limitations and restrictions (p. 510).

Based upon this research, she suggested the following elements for the readers’ advisory interview: get a picture of previous reading patterns; determine current reading preferences; and understand the function of the book (p. 514).

In “The Nature of the Readers’ Advisory Transaction in Children’s and Young Adult Reading,” Pauletta Brown Bracy (1996) presents a case study analysis of transactions between adult patrons who sought book selection advice on behalf of a son or daughter

from public library staff members. When asked for another book like Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976), librarians frequently asked the age of the child, asked at what level he or she was reading, then moved on to genre preferences (other Newbery Award winners or African American authors), or often just automatically assumed that the child wanted other books by Mildred Taylor (p. 25-26). Only one librarian instantly questioned the child's likes and dislikes and interest in the author. That librarian then utilized the OPAC and reference sources to come up with a "wide array of appropriate recommended titles and author." Though no questions concerning reading level were posed during the interview, the librarian's recommendations were all on a comparable reading level (p. 27). Ultimately, Bracy concluded that "an approach characteristic of best practices is one that seeks first to determine the patron's preference based on appeal and second to focus on recommending appropriate titles based on that appeal" (p. 41).

### ***Recreational Reading Book Selection in the Elementary School***

In, "Formula for Failure: Reading Levels and Readability Formulas Do Not Create Lifelong Readers," Betty Carter (2000) articulates school libraries' dual purpose – to complement the curriculum and to encourage lifelong reading. The goals of the media specialist are different than those of the classroom teacher who does not necessarily promote reading for pleasure. In Carter's opinion, "Reading behavior – the practice of lifelong readers – extends beyond the ability to pronounce words or select the main idea from a passage. Rather, the desire to read grows from the knowledge that print offers something wonderful and meaningful in a person's life" (p. 34). A lifelong reader

chooses reading material independently and without the limits of leveling. Thus, “readability formulas and reading levels don’t belong in the library” (p. 36).

Carter argues that a child’s reading level varies with the amount of interest he or she has invested in a text – in essence the “reading task” is changed depending upon the child’s interest in the text at hand. The linear progression of stages in leveled reading is not indicative of true reading acquisition skills wherein readers sometimes move up and sometimes move down levels (p. 37). Further, content can sometimes render a book unreadable even if it might be on a child’s reading level according to vocabulary level or word count. For Carter, readers’ advisory is the answer to selecting pleasure books for children and “it’s an art” (p. 37). “Readers’ advisory involves knowing books and knowing children” and takes into account “what children liked previously and what they want at this particular moment” (p. 37).

As articulated above, the education literature pays little attention to selecting books for recreational reading. As a result, it might be argued that many elementary school reading teachers do not differentiate between the selection of books for reading instruction and those for recreational reading. As such, a large body of education literature exists concerning selection of books for children (often focusing on the use of readability formulas and commercial leveling systems) with either purely instructional goals in mind or based on the faulty premise that no benefit can be found in books that cannot be read independently. The literature below illustrates the few studies that acknowledge the difference between reading for pleasure and reading to learn the mechanics of reading.

In their study of first graders, Donovan, Smolkin and Lomax (2000) note that many speak about the importance of “what level of difficulty of what type of book is best for beginners,” yet they “speak to this question without having any knowledge of the levels and types of books the beginning readers themselves might choose...” (p. 309-310).

Ultimately, they found that low- and average-ability (and, to a lesser extent, high ability) first graders selected books beyond their reading level. They found that familiarity influenced selection – if a teacher had done a read aloud of that book the low ability readers were more likely to select it. Students also frequently chose stacks of books on the same topic to share with peers (p. 325, 328). Ultimately, Donovan, Smolkin and Lomax conclude,

We believe, in this age of ‘balance’ in reading instruction, that great care must be taken by researchers as they discuss and suggest appropriate texts for children in first grade classrooms. We neither question nor dispute the importance of controlled-vocabulary texts for children’s beginning reading. But we are concerned when colleagues ... imply that these are the only texts that should be available during first graders’ self selection periods.... Allowing children to select the books they prefer, regardless of their reading level, as *one* aspect of the total reading program provides children opportunities to build background knowledge and vocabulary...this may be a very important way to maintain children’s interest and motivation to read for a variety of purposes... (p. 330).

Their conclusions thus acknowledge the varying needs that can be fulfilled during recreational reading in addition to acquisition of technical reading skills.

In “Comparing Recreational Reading Levels with Reading Levels from an Informal Reading Inventory,” Smith and Joyner (1990) ask, “When a child selects a book purely for pleasure reading, to what difficulty level does that book correspond?” When allowed to self select books for recreational reading, second grade students selected books above

their independent level 60% of the time (p. 297). Ultimately, they concluded that the level at which students choose recreational reading books is so varied (they go from easy to challenging and back again depending on purpose or interest) that, “It is inappropriate for educators to base statements about the difficulty level of books students should select for recreational reading on the concept of independent level as determined by an Informal Reading Inventory” (p. 299). In their use of the term “independent level,” Smith and Joyner are referencing Emmett Betts’ (1946) independent, instructional, and frustrational reading levels. Betts’ levels are very frequently quoted in debates concerning the appropriate reading levels for instruction as well as recreational reading and are roughly defined as follows:

- A book at a child’s *independent level* can be read “with ease and comprehension.”
- A book at a child’s *instructional level* can be “read with understanding when given sufficient help by the teacher.”
- A book at a child’s *frustrational level* “is so difficult that it will immediately be frustrating and the child will be unable to comprehend it (Burns, Roe & Smith, 2002, p. 368).

In reaching this conclusion, Smith and Joyner acknowledge the difficulties that arise when children’s recreational reading practices are forced to fit into narrowly defined labels of readability.

In a rare occurrence, Carver and Leibert (1995) melded the study of the classroom and school media center in their research study “The Effect of Reading Library Books at Different Levels of Difficulty Upon Gain in Reading Ability.” They found no gain in reading level in students who read relatively easy material (independent level or arguably below independent level). Due to experiment design they were not able to claim conversely that reading level would have improved if more difficult texts – instructional

or frustrational level – had been read. Quite importantly, the deficiencies in the research design that resulted in the inability to make such a claim, occurred because the researchers used a leveling method to determine the level of books to be read by the student participants. The books that they had determined to be at instructional or frustrational level according to the leveling system used proved to be at a much lower level than intended. Carver and Leibert’s study highlights one instance of the resulting inaccuracies of including leveling in a reading decision and demonstrates the vital need for more research into the connection between school media center and classroom in readers’ advisory services.

In “The Linguistic Assumptions Underlying Readability Formulae: a Critique,” Bailin and Grafstein (2001) highlight a key dilemma for the readers’ advisory interview. When faced with the “formidable task of selecting reading material for children of widely diverse cognitive and reading skills” educators and librarians have frequently “welcomed and endorsed tools that claim to use objective criteria to make selections and recommendations” (p. 286). These researchers attempted to discern if readability formulae are actually indicators of what they purport to be – difficulty of a text – and ultimately concluded:

The developers of readability formulae treat the issue of readability as if it were a monolithic phenomenon. The underlying assumption is that how easy a text is to read is always based on the same criteria, that it is measurable by a statistical formula, and that it is reducible to a score returned by that formula. We believe, on the other hand, that there is no single, simple measure of readability. How easy a text is for an individual to read is the result of the interaction of a number of different factors. It is a multifaceted phenomenon, reflecting both properties of texts and readers and the interaction between them (p. 292).

Bailin and Grafstein then present alternative criteria for determination of a book's readability, which include aspects of grammar, style, background knowledge, text coherence, and the "theory of repair." This theory of repair accounts for the multiple ways in which readers are able to bridge gaps of understanding when a communication gap occurs between text and reader (pp. 297-298).

Although the literature discussed provides a base for the readers' advisory interview in the school media center, much of it misses the distinctiveness of the school media center readers' advisory interview highlighted in the introduction to this study. For example, providers of readers' advisory in the children's section of the public library do not hold the same responsibilities as their colleagues in the school community. Issues of preemptively considering a parent's opinion when recommending a book become less of an issue as, in the public library, children are more often accompanied by an adult. Further, public librarians are often able to devote greater amounts of time to individualized readers' advisory services because they are not simultaneously teaching classes. Likewise, studies of the adult readers' advisory interview discount the myriad issues involved in recommending a book to a child. In *Guiding the Reader to the Next Book*, Shearer (1996) notes that in readers' advisory work in children's and young adult services, "the focus is on connecting the reader to the literature in meaningful ways that foster cognitive as well as psychological and social development" (p. 21). Again, the education literature focuses on the classroom rather than on the unique setting and mission of the school media center. It quickly becomes obvious that the existing literature

contains only scarce information on research-based practices for the readers' advisory interview in the school media center.

## **Methodology**

In conducting personal interviews with participants, rather than sending out surveys, this research study was approached in a qualitative, rather than quantitative manner.

Interviews were chosen in order to elicit the depth of response required to articulate fully the steps taken during the readers' advisory interview in the school media center and the issues that influenced the media specialist' philosophy on recreational reading. After gaining approval from the Academic Affairs Institutional Review Board at UNC-Chapel Hill for the methodology to be followed, ten currently-practicing elementary school library media specialists were interviewed, all of whom hold Masters in Library Science (MLS) degrees and are certified as school media specialists in the state of North Carolina (076-school media licensure). The participants were selected at random from two school districts located within an 80 mile radius of three graduate programs in information and library science, labeled "Red School District" and "Blue School District" for discussion purposes. Participants were selected from these two districts for three reasons: 1) Their proximity to three graduate programs heightened the chances of finding participants in possession of NC licensure and an MLS. 2) By selecting media specialist participants from two, rather than one, district the generalizability of the study increased while the chance that findings would be idiosyncratic to one district decreased. 3) As the size, socioeconomic makeup, and school media center budgets of the two school districts are vastly different, it was hypothesized that practices of the media specialist participants might divide across district lines.

All participants were initially invited to participate via e-mail, while a few required follow-up phone conversations. At the outset of each interview, participants were presented with an informed consent form outlining their rights as a study participant (See Appendix A). All participants were interviewed within the physical space of the media center in which they work, aside from Media Specialist D who was interviewed in a bookstore prior to an author event. Length of interviews ranged from 30 minutes to one hour.

Each participant was provided, upon invitation, with a set of guiding interview questions to enable preparation if desired (See Appendix B). The guiding interview questions were designed to assess the impact of certain variables on the readers' advisory interview.

Based upon issues isolated in the literature review, the variables underlying the guiding interview questions were:

- readability
- leveling
- developmental characteristics
- student interests
- teacher philosophy on recreational reading
- parental opinion
- use of reference sources
- direct instruction
- follow-up

During the actual interview session, however, the format took a less formal shape in order to allow the interview to flow in the direction of participant response. Each interview began first with a question verifying the participant's possession of an MLS and North Carolina licensure. The length of time the media specialist participant had been in her

current position as well as total years spent working as a media specialist was then addressed. Though not asked directly, each participant also provided an overview of her professional background outside of school media work (See Table 1). Each interview then evolved from the overarching research question, “What are the steps taken by elementary school media specialists in the readers’ advisory interview to help second grade students select reading books for pleasure?” and incorporated parts of the guiding interview questions along the way, rather than moving in a linear progression through the questions.

Second grade students were chosen as the subject of the research question as students at this level are typically still receiving systematic, direct reading instruction in the classroom, but are also beginning to emerge as independent readers. Meanwhile the discrepancy between reading abilities due to the speed at which reading skills are acquired can lead to vast differences in reading ability. These characteristics were deemed important due to their potential for eliciting issues in the school library media center readers’ advisory issues that may not be as prevalent at other, less transitional, grade levels.

All interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed. I took detailed notes during the interviews in order to ensure accuracy and to enable consideration of body language and facial gesture. Following transcription, interviews were coded to isolate steps taken during the readers’ advisory interview and to uncover patterns or themes contributing to the media specialist’ recreational reading philosophy.

**Table 1. Overview of Participant Demographics**

<b>Media Specialist</b>	<b>School District</b>	<b>Years in Media Center Current</b>	<b>Years in Media Center Total</b>	<b>Prior Experience</b>	<b>MLS</b>	<b>NC Certification</b>
<b>A</b>	Red	1.5	10	Reference librarian (10 years)	Y	Y
<b>B</b>	Blue	1.5	1.5	Middle School teacher	Y	Y
<b>C</b>	Blue	.5	23	Classroom teacher (head start, middle, high school) Public Library	Y	Y
<b>D</b>	Blue	.5	.5	Student	Y	Y
<b>E</b>	Red	6	6	Stay at home Mom (9 years) Classroom teacher (8 years)	Y	Y
<b>F</b>	Blue	7	7	Academic, Medical, Public Libraries (16 years)	Y	Y
<b>G</b>	Blue	9	9	Public, Academic, Special, Corporate Libraries (19 years)	Y	Y
<b>H</b>	Red	1	1	Media Center Volunteer	Y	Y
<b>I</b>	Red	7	28	Classroom Teacher (5 years)	Y	Y
<b>J</b>	Red	2	4	Academic Librarian	Y	Y

## **Results**

The results of the interviews with media specialist participants are reported below.

Common practices and themes that emerge throughout the interviews will be addressed in the following discussion section.

### ***Media Specialist A (Red School District)***

Media Specialist A reported that she begins the readers' advisory interview with a series of questions. If she doesn't know already, she will ask questions like,

- What have you read recently that you like?
- What do you like to read about?
- Do you like to read stories or do you like information?

She notes that each question inevitably leads to more questions and the child's interests and needs become more and more clear. She is aware that often students have something very specific in mind even if they are not answering her questions. When she encounters a student who can't provide answers to her questions, she will start pulling books off the shelf, asking "Does this sound interesting to you?" This continued offering and questioning typically helps media specialist and student "go places."

Media Specialist A circulates during book checkout period and approaches those students who are wandering around the media center without a book at the end of the period. She admitted, however, that the children who run straight to the shelf and pull off a book

without thought are the most difficult to pinpoint and may not be approached for a readers' advisory interview.

Media Specialist A said that she does "sometimes" consider readability during the readers' advisory interview, but it depends on the situation. Many children have no intention of reading the book by themselves; in which case they don't have to be able to read it. How she determines readability depends on the kinds of answers received to the questions concerning what they've read or enjoyed reading recently. If these answers indicate that they would like to read something on their own and she doesn't know what kind of reader they are, she uses the five finger rule. The child reads through a page in the book and holds up a finger for each word he or she doesn't know, if he or she holds up five fingers, it is an indication to try something else. At the same time, said Media Specialist A, "I would never deny a child a book that they really wanted just because they missed five words on a page."

Though a few teachers may use *Accelerated Reader (AR)*<sup>1</sup>, use is minimal and as a general rule it is not present in Media Specialist A's school. Teachers tend to provide books at the students' reading levels in the classroom. When they come to the media center, the teachers want their students to pick something out for pleasure. Media Specialist A, however, notes that this has not always been the case in her career. Her previous school was heavily invested in *AR* and the students came to the media center with a requirement that they have a book at a particular reading level or number of points and expected her to find their books in this way. Media Specialist A expressed frustration

at this approach and a great reluctance to use this method for finding books. In this situation she instructed students to go down their list (of *AR* books) and find one they might like. Once they had identified a title, she would help them find the book, but she generally wanted students to find such books on their own. She notes that *AR* is not the way she finds books, nor what she cares about when it comes to finding books. She encountered some teachers who were adamant that their students be able to read the books they checked out of the library rather than anticipate that someone would read the book to the child or that the child might still benefit from the book in other ways. A few teachers would even stand a child up in front of the class and say, “Look at what he picked out. He can’t read this book.” But, luckily, it is not that way at her current school. Teachers at this school want students to come to the media center and find something pleasurable because they are already forcing them to read certain books to improve reading skills in the classroom. The teachers generally are not that concerned that kids are able to read the books they check out for recreational reading because they can typically get help at home or from a tutor.

“I’ve read several things lately about how we beat the love of reading out of kids by forcing them to read what we want them to read and at a level we want them to read at,” noted Media Specialist A. She wants students to like, not hate, reading and thinks it is okay for them to stretch above and also to read below their reading level. When she does booktalks with fifth graders, for example, she will often pick out some books that are below fifth grade reading level. She does this, in part, to cater to struggling readers, but also because “sometimes all of us need an easy book to read.” Thus, Media Specialist A

believes in reading above and below one's reading level. She has never taken a reading class, nor has she been a classroom teacher and she does not know what the reading level of a book is unless it's printed in the book somewhere. She doesn't know a number to assign to a student's reading level either. She did note that the Red School District has recently signed a contract for a trial deal with *NoveList*<sup>2</sup> and the district's media specialists have received preliminary training. With *NoveList*, if a child has a successful reading experience with a book, one can type in, for example, the terms "adventure books" and "boys" and determine appropriate books 50 lexile points above and below the lexile value of the book successfully read. She believes this system might be helpful "from time to time," but once again reiterated that she's afraid reading has become so drill-oriented that much of the fun has been lost.

Media Specialist A commented that there are certain developmental characteristics she will consider in the readers' advisory interview. There are some books she might, for example, try to talk a second grade student out of due to their adult content. But she will not steer a student away or tell them they "can't" without helping them find something else she feels would be better. She added that during her experience in the public library, it was definitely not her job to tell a child "yes" or "no," but considers it to be a little bit more her job as an elementary school media specialist as the parents are not present to help guide them.

Her point regarding parental presence led to discussion of the impact a parent's opinion will have on the way in which she conducts a readers' advisory interview. She reported

that this particular school is “wide open” and she has never run into trouble with parents. She has had one parent come in and show her a book his third grade student had checked out that he thought was inappropriate, but he was not seeking recourse, only a more suitable recommendation. And she agreed with his evaluation. “I hadn’t read it,” she notes, “and it had a lot of profanities.” She respected the parent’s concern and the fact that some parents might bring such a thing to her attention, but without making an ugly scene. Media Specialist A’s main concern regarding parents during the readers’ advisory interview came into play when choosing books for Spanish speaking students. Often Spanish speaking students want to bring home a book in Spanish that they can share with their parents who cannot read English. If a Spanish speaking student approaches her, she might ask if they would like a book in Spanish to share with their parents or not. Some parents have even let her know ahead of time, through teachers, that they would like such a book so that she can preselect it.

Though *NoveList* may be something Media Specialist A uses in the future, her media center does not own any reference sources to which she can refer for readers’ advisory. She has a minimal budget that does not leave any room for such purchases, but she uses other students as the primary outlet when she has depleted her own knowledge of a certain subject area. If her media center does not own a particular book, she will direct children to the public library located in the same neighborhood as the school.

Media Specialist A received her MLS twenty five years ago and cannot remember whether she ever received formal instruction in conducting a readers’ advisory interview.

She does remember direct instruction in the reference interview and believes many of the same skills are transferable to readers' advisory.

***Media Specialist B (Blue School District)***

The way in which Media Specialist B begins a readers' advisory interview depends heavily on the number of children in the media center at the time. She has instituted flexible scheduling and open circulation in the media center, but because these policies were both newly instated upon her arrival a year and a half ago, teachers are still adapting. Though they can send students down individually or in small groups at any time, some still tend to bring down the entire class at one time for book checkout. With a larger group, crowd control gets in the way of individualized readers' advisory services. She has tried to cut down on this some, by requiring that teachers come with their students if the entire class is coming to the media center. The principal has been very supportive of this requirement. Still, she finds a small group favorable for conducting readers' advisory interviews.

Media Specialist B first asks,

- What kind of books do you like?

If this question stumps the student, she follow up with,

- What is the last book you read that you liked?
- Tell me a little bit about it.
- Would you like an everybody<sup>3</sup> book or a chapter book?

Because at the second grade level she has children who are barely reading and others who are reading at quite a high level, she prefers to ask the last question, rather than “What level are you?”

Media Specialist B and her Media Assistant circulate constantly during book checkout times and ask students, “Can I help you find something?” She finds that by circulating and “hovering” even those students who initially claim that they don’t need assistance will often ask eventually. Media Specialist B has observed that students have very strong reading preferences and that she is faced only rarely with a student who does not have a specific kind of book or interest in mind.

“I’m a big believer in free choice,” stated Media Specialist B. “I’ll let them take just about anything for recreational reading.” If a younger child brings up *Harry Potter* and he or she obviously can’t read it, she’ll ask if there’s someone at home to read it with them. Media Specialist B noted that many teachers will teach their kids to ask the question, “Is this a just right book for me?” with the help of a visual aid representing the decision making process which shows the five fingers of a hand, each with a different criterion to consider. She hasn’t had training in this method (which seems to be a more detailed version of the five finger rule), but she repeated the importance of teacher presence in the media center if they wish their students to be able to read the books they check out. She doesn’t see the students as often as the classroom teacher. They “whisk in and out of the media center” and even if they’re in frequently for reference instruction or a story time, she doesn’t know what they can and can’t read. Because she cannot tell, she

has a hard time telling a child that he or she cannot check out a book. She believes this will change the longer she is in the school and the better she gets to know the students and their abilities.

When Media Specialist B first came to the school at the beginning of the last school year, there were times that a student would check out a book and the teacher would stand at the door and tell the child that he or she couldn't keep it because it was above the child's reading level. She has now instructed teachers that they need to monitor this; if level is something of importance to them then they must talk to their students before they arrive at the circulation desk for checkout. Any leveling that needs to be done is expressly the responsibility of the classroom teacher.

There are some teachers in the school who use *AR*. When those children come in, she notes that leveling does become more of a consideration during the readers' advisory interview. She prefers, however, to break down levels only into the major classification areas of the media center, such as pointing students to either an everybody book or a chapter book, rather than to a specific level. She finds this method less threatening. The teachers who use *AR* (scattered through 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> grades) typically say that students must have one *AR* book, but they can always have a second for recreational reading.

Though some students in these classes will not take out a book without an *AR* sticker, she at least ensures that classroom policy allows for one book checkout for pure recreation and no restrictions.

Media Specialist B will steer the child in a certain direction if a parent has come to her and asked her to do so. She honors parental requests that their children not check out books on particular topics. And, when she asks a student during the readers' advisory interview whether they intend to read the book with a parent, she does not ask this just in regard to their ability to read the book independently, but also in relation to the book's content. For example, she had a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade student come in recently who wanted to check out *Deenie* by Judy Blume. Because she knew the content was something a parent might question for a student at this age, she called the parent and asked if she was okay with this particular book after giving a brief rundown of the content. She notes, however, that in this situation, she had an advantage because she goes to church with the family and knew the parent well enough to call and then talk about it after it had been read.

Typically, if she wonders whether a parent will approve or not, she'll address the classroom teacher who usually knows the parents better. Then, if a recommendation is made with which the parent is not happy, the classroom teacher will "take the heat" – something for which Media Specialist B is grateful. There can also be nuances, though, as her media assistant (who is currently working toward her MLS) commented. For example, when a student recently asked for a book on explosions, she purposefully steered him toward more benign books that deal with explosions – the volcano books.

Media Specialist B does see slight differences between recommending nonfiction books versus fiction books. Nonfiction, she said, might be easier because choices are more limited and because students are more interested in the subject, they won't be as worried about whether the book looks like a "big kid book" or not. Further, it can be quite

difficult when a child has a specific book in mind but cannot remember much information about it other than, for example, “a friend had a it out near Thanksgiving” or “it was about China.” Such directed readers’ advisory interviews, however, rely on a similar barrage of questioning to uncover the book for which the student is searching. Media Specialist B commented on the trends or fads that influences readers’ advisory in the school media center. Many times it becomes cool within a class to read one particular book or series of books, when this happens, her job can become as simple as directing them toward the next book by that author or in that series, or more difficult when there are not enough copies to go around and children must be enticed to try something similar.

When she finds herself momentarily stumped, Media Specialist B does not use a reference source at that time, though she might refer to one afterward. She will extend the readers’ advisory interview past the class period by telling the student that if he/she will come back later, she will have found a book in the area the were seeking. Most likely she will consult the other media specialists in her district over e-mail as they have a very active and supportive network. To keep up on “what’s out there” she typically watches what books are checked out most frequently, listens to what children are recommending themselves and will monitor LM\_NET.<sup>4</sup> She also attempts to have a different collection development focus every year as a direct reflection of readers’ advisory services. For example, last year boys were requesting sports books and “icky things” books so this year she’s working on those areas to support her readers’ needs.

Media Specialist B reported that the most limiting aspect in regards to readers' advisory is not having read everything in the media center, but noted that she works at this by taking books home and reading them. In addition to her own knowledge of books, she values other people's expertise. Many times she finds this through conversations with her students when following up on how they liked a particular book or not. She also tries to read genres she doesn't personally like and visits the public library to obtain recommended book lists to help in the construction of her own book lists.

Media Specialist B has learned to tell the children if they don't like a book they've checked out to bring it back and that it will not hurt her feelings. Or she might acknowledge that she has not read a particular book, so she can only tell them what other's say and can't be sure. In this way, students learn to accept their own judgment and learn to give honest opinions, which will allow Media Specialist B to gauge her successes and failures in the readers' advisory interview better.

Media Specialist B did not have formal instruction in conducting a readers' advisory interview. She learned her methods through her internships during graduate school, both in an elementary and a middle school with "spectacular" librarians. The only instruction she remembers that addressed anything related to readers' advisory work occurred in her reference class. Throughout the interview, Media Specialist B expressed pride and a feeling of accomplishment when recalling interviews that uncovered *the* book the child was looking for at that time. She used phrases such as "Yes!" and "one I was particularly proud of" frequently when describing her readers' advisory interview successes.

*Media Specialist C (Blue School District)*

Media Specialist C first noted that the reader's advisory interview occurs "rapid fire."

When beginning the readers' advisory interview, Media Specialist C first asks herself whether she knows the child or not. If she has helped him/her before and knows what suggestions she gave previously and the child has returned and said, "I really like this," then she's set. If she can't remember what she recommended previously, she will ask what she recommended before. When she doesn't know the child, she must start from scratch and must quickly determine his or her interests using questions like:

- What are you interested in?
- What kind of books do you like to read?

If she doesn't get an answer, she might expand her question to address interests outside of reading:

- What kinds of things do you watch on TV?
- What games do you like to play? Do you have Xbox?

She commented that the greatest trouble lies in the students whose interests are way above their reading level. When a kindergartner wants to learn to play basketball or a third grader whose reading level is still low wants to read *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, she strives to find something for the child that will take care of the emotional part – (in the Harry Potter case, that all of his friends are carrying around chapter books) – to help him or her fit in. She recognizes that saving face is extraordinarily important and the media specialist can play a role in supporting this.

Media Specialist C purposefully arranged her media center to account for such “saving face” during recreational reading recommendations. Books that she might typically consider to be transitional chapter books or easy readers are shelved within the fiction section with other chapter books. Thus if an older student is still on a lower reading level, he/she can still locate books (such as *Nate the Great*) on the same shelves to which she is directing other students. She adds that this is especially a concern in Blue School District where a great emphasis is placed by the community on being gifted.

Media Specialist C uses the “five finger” test (one finger for each missed word) to determine readability. Media Specialist C finds this the easiest and quickest method of determining readability during the readers’ advisory interview. Yet she also believes she is able to intuit reading ability fairly quickly through interaction with the child due to her years of experience as a classroom teacher. Typically if she is given the title of the last book the child has read independently, she can locate a book on a comparable reading level. She noted that the latest trend is the “just right book.” The “just right book” is defined as a book that the student can read or is slightly challenging. Such criteria should ensure that the child will enjoy the book. To her, if the child comes back for more, she’s done her job and *that* book is a “just right book.”

If a younger student cannot read a book, and here she notes the oft-used example of a lower ability reader in kindergarten or first grade choosing *Harry Potter*, she will say “no.” She tells them that there are a lot of books in the media center, many of which were bought specifically for them. And she indicates that she worries that if they don’t read

those books she has bought for them now, they never will. She says that the book in question (e.g. *Harry Potter*) is one she bought for them to read later in their elementary school career, but not now. An older student, however, who is reading below grade level, would be allowed to take out *Harry Potter* or any other book above reading level, in accordance with her belief in saving face and books serving needs beyond readability.

Lexiles<sup>5</sup> are very important in Media Specialist C's school as they're using the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) to identify which children in each class are those who need to pass the end of grade tests (EOGs). SRI gives a lexile level for each student so one can tell whether they're reading at, below, or above grade level. "I'm finding lexiles easier to use," she noted. In her opinion, because lexiles present a range, they do not pigeonhole readers like many companies do by ascribing a 2.5 or 7.2. Media Specialist C regards lexiles more highly than the other commercial leveling systems to which she referred. Yet, while she now utilizes lexiles in recommending books, she still believes that children have much to gain even from books they cannot read. This, she thinks, is especially true for nonfiction where children can learn from pictures. She will always ask in such a case if there's someone who might help them to read the book at home – in a covert manner so that it doesn't seem like she suggested it.

She volunteered that the classroom teacher's input into choice for recreational reading can sometimes be a burden. Although teachers know their students, they do not know the media center collection or have the same body of knowledge as the school media specialist regarding genres, titles, and theories. Because of this disconnect, classroom

teachers sometimes make impossible requests. She does not, however, find a clash with classroom teachers in regard to the recreational reading students should be taking home. The teachers want their students to have the right book, but they leave it up to her. Media Specialist C exhibits a strong desire to please the classroom teacher in regard to the books children check out. She hopes to work with students to avoid situations in which the teacher returns a student with a note reading “too easy” or “too hard.” On the flip side, teachers can be an important ally in readers’ advisory. For example, Media Specialist C recently gave a booktalk to a class in which there were a few students whose reading ability was considerably below grade level. She integrated some lower level books into the booktalks for the whole class, so that afterward she would not need to make a show of giving these particular students lower level books during the readers’ advisory interview.

But, “nothing makes me madder than teachers who don’t give kids choice,” she explained. It is always possible that a child is capable of reading a harder book because of their high interest in the subject or they have a tutor to help them read it. Once she has located a book for a student, she asks them to explore it, to take it and sit down and see if it feels good – to read more than a paragraph to get a feel for it. She credits this philosophy to her own professional storytelling, an occupation in which one must get to know the feel of a story to determine whether to add it to one’s repertoire or not. She likens the process of choosing a book to the storyteller’s story choice – “if you want to keep reading and not leave the media center, then that’s the book for you.”

When asked if she keeps the parent in mind while conducting the readers' advisory interview, Media Specialist C stated her philosophy on parents, "My job is to find something your child really wants to read. I will do everything in my power to find something your child wants to read. If it is for a book report or another assignment I will go with what the teacher says and their parameters. I will help your child find the right book. If you are not happy with that then please take advantage of the wonderful children's section at the public library." She added that she cannot be all things to all parents, but she will do all she can to make sure kids are reading what *they* want to read. By keeping up on what good literature is out there for children and by paying close attention to the reading level or lexile level of books, she is doing this.

Though her challenge in a previous school district was finding books for children who were reading below grade level, in her current position she is faced with a largely upper middle class population where parents push for their children to read books much above their age level. If a parent wants their seven year old to read Dickens, she asks them to consider that although their child can read Dickens, whether they are emotionally ready for such books. Thus, during the readers' advisory interview she sticks to what she believes to be good literature for a child not only of a certain reading level, but also of a certain developmental or emotional level and does not consider parental requests that children read classics. Even if a student can read at a lexile level of 1140 it does not mean their interest level might not still be *Time Warp Trio* (a popular series by Jon Scieska typically considered an introductory chapter book). She frequently has had to educate parents as to how the reading lists are generated for SRI. Just because a book is

coded at what appears to be the appropriate Lexile level, does not mean that everyone on an 1140 should be reading *The Autobiography of Malcom X*. She believes that as long as children keep reading, even if its below their reading level, they are picking up vocabulary, syntax, and exposure to expository writing and are not regressing in reading skill. She has students who have not read Dr. Seuss because their parents skipped over it as too easy and she tries to bring them back to take a second look at Dr. Seuss and points out that much of his writing is very deep and there is much to be gained from it.

ESL students pose the greatest challenge to Media Specialist C's readers advisory skills as she can't always tell if she is communicating adequately, if she is helping or not. In such cases, she often utilizes the friend the student came in with to help uncover his or her interests or needs. She uses this peer influence and observation of the interaction between students with all of her readers' advisory work.

Media Specialist C does not believe she learned how to do the readers' advisory interview explicitly in library school coursework, but does remember coursework addressing the research (reference) interview, a process she sees as parallel to the reader's advisory interview. Her experience as a children's librarian in a public library where readers' advisory has a real emphasis as well as her classroom teaching have allowed her to evolve her approach. "After working with children all day long for so many years, you start to know how their minds work." Essentially she sees the combination of reference interview skills, a base knowledge of children's books, and knowledge of a child's

reading level (including comprehension) as the core of a successful readers' advisory interview.

***Media Specialist D (Blue School District)***

Media Specialist D's school is "an AR school" so her very first question will be to ask whether the book is purely recreational or if they want an AR book. In some cases they don't care, but since she has run into it problems many times after having gone through the process of recommending a non-AR book, she now asks first. At the same time, however, she does not see this preemptive question as contrary to her final recommendation as there's such a large range of AR books so that she is still able to find something fun for them to read. This question merely helps her "know how big the pond is."

She then follows with the question, "What have you read lately that you liked?" This gives her a feel for the child's level and tastes. If the first answer doesn't help spur a recommendation, Media Specialist D will ask the child to name three or four of their most recent favorite books. If it is a series that they have enjoyed, she will ask if they are looking for another one in the series. Perhaps her biggest challenge has been the students who have latched on to a particular book or series, such as the *Captain Underpants* books, but there are none available when they visit the library. The question, "What else do you have?" is a tall order, yet also a good opportunity to recommend another good book, in this case with similar quirkiness.

Earlier this year, Media Specialist D had a student in the situation described above – she was an avid *Captain Underpants* fan, but none she hadn't read yet were left in the library. Media Specialist D recommended *Bunnicula*, yet the classroom teacher later sent the student back to find something else with the suggestion that she could read *Bunnicula* next year. While Media Specialist D was glad that the teacher said “next year” instead of telling the student directly that the book was too hard for her, she was frustrated that the teacher had gone over her head. She reported the advice of a reading expert who recently visited her school for an in-service attended by herself and most of the first grade teachers. “Kids just need to read and it doesn't matter what level – even if it's too easy.” In the spirit of this sentiment, she feels that students should self-select. If they are in the mood for a challenge, they will find it. If they just want to look cool by taking out what their friends are reading, that's fine. She also encourages students to return books if they don't like them and not to be afraid of leaving a book unfinished.

She noted that second graders are often so eager to please that she always tries to appear as if she doesn't care whether they like a particular book or not. If possible, she will give them a couple of choices so they don't have to say, “No, I don't want your book.” In a similar manner, Media Specialist D approaches students who are browsing and asks if she can help them find anything, but once she makes contact is sure to give them space if they're not interested in her assistance immediately.

She expressed further frustration with a few classroom teachers whose philosophy toward recreational reading stood at odds with her own. One first grade teacher wants books only

at the student's reading level regardless of purpose. Media Specialist D finds this very difficult to fulfill at that age and refuses to enforce it. Yet she is continually frustrated when this particular teacher takes a child aside and asks them to use the five finger rule (described earlier) to determine whether or not they will be allowed to check out the book or not. Media Specialist D expressed her dismay at this practice. "We don't do that here (in her media center)," she said. Ultimately, she would like to be able to have a self-selected reading program, but as a brand new media specialist she is still working toward this. In the meantime, she will continue not to enforce teacher rules she does not agree with when recommending books.

Media Specialist D expressed a similar hands off approach when it comes to preemptive consideration of parental input during the readers' advisory interview. A mother in her school, for example, does not like *Goosebumps*. She has not talked to this mother's children, though she does notice they don't check these books out. She used this example to support her stance that if parents have books that they do not want their children to check out due to religious beliefs or otherwise, then it is up to the parents to tell their children not to check them out. She does not see it as her role to decide for the student if a book is appropriate or not. At the same time, she will not recommend a book about middle school to second graders, not because she's afraid their parents won't like it, but because she doesn't believe the content would interest or motivate the child to read. Lastly, she mentioned one student who is reading way above grade level, but who is particularly sensitive. Media Specialist D has been approached by his mother and in this case, will try to shape book recommendations according to parental guidelines.

If in need of support, Media Specialist D relies on the OPAC, where she will look up the topic of interest with the student and then wander around with the child to the shelves to look at the books and talk about them. She feels that her knowledge of what is out there gets broader and broader every day. She does not resort to any reference source or tool, such as *NoveList*. If a child is having a particularly difficult time finding something, she will frequently point them to the new books. She finds that reluctant readers are especially attracted to new books. There's something about being one of the first people to have a book. In all, though, she just tries to spend a lot of time reading the collection and keeping up with reviews which she believes has helped her make connections between the children and good books. She does attempt to gauge successful recommendations by following up whenever possible, yet she added that since she moved her desk away from the circulation desk she has limited interaction with the students as they check in and out.

Because her emphasis seems to be so much on self selection, I asked Media Specialist D if she gives students direct instruction in this area. While she did do a lesson "Can it be for me?" adapted from a lesson used at the media center in which she interned, she tends to be wary of doing too much direct instruction in this area. Once again, she believes that kids just need to be around books. In a school library, the collection has been developed for them, and they will be able to find something. Perhaps one of the hardest things about being in a school setting is that everyone is always rushing. This rush doesn't help

facilitate leisurely browsing. Because of this, she has upped the number of books students can check out to four, so the odds are higher that they will find a book that they like.

Media Specialist D noted that race and language sometimes play a part in her recreational reading suggestions. She believes that all children should be exposed to a variety of authors and does not automatically presume a certain kind of book for a certain student, but if she has been given notice that a certain child is disaffected in some way, she often makes the effort to ensure the child sees a reflection of him/herself in the book she recommends. She cites one such fifth grade African American girl, a reluctant reader, to whom she recommended a number of books by African American authors, and who has now greatly expanded her reading interests. Similarly, there are a large number of dual language students in her school. For these students she will always ask if they would like an English or bilingual book or a book in their native language. Often if they want to read something with their parents at home, bilingual books are perfect and they encourage family literacy. She strongly believes that reading is reading and it doesn't matter what language. Children should not lose the ability to read in their native language, she added.

Media Specialist D reported an experience in third grade that has possibly shaped her hands off approach to the readers' advisory interview. She recalls an episode from her own childhood in which she was trying to find a book for herself in the school library and every book she found the teacher said "no." Finally, young Media Specialist D decided to just get a book she had read the year before since the teacher wouldn't be able to tell her she wasn't ready for it and once again she said, "no." The librarian, however, went into

the card catalog and determined that she had in fact checked it out the previous year. As a result, Media Specialist D never wants to assume or underestimate her student's abilities as readers.

Another guiding influence on her approach is a reading course taken at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill taught by Dr. James Cunningham that emphasized self selected reading. She noted, that although she has been frustrated during her first year in the media center as far as getting the volume of traffic she'd like in the media center for instruction, it has had unanticipated benefits for readers' advisory services and the additional time she has been able to spend working one-on-one with individual students. She feels there was not enough attention paid to reading in her coursework and that it is underestimated as part of the library science curriculum. She believes that even though everyone is concerned with Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), if children read all the time, they will do just fine.

***Media Specialist E (Red School District)***

When approached by younger children looking for a good book to read, Media Specialist E's first question is, "Are you looking for a story or a true book?" Students at that age, she notes, care a lot about this differentiation. Sometimes she will ask them to name a book that they have read recently that they liked and then to talk about it. At this point she has a few things to go on and can go the shelf and start asking if the books she is offering are too hard, too easy, or about right. Although she thinks about the readability of the book, she is not conscious of leveling because she doesn't see a grade level

assigned to a book as indicative of an individual child. She noted that while you might know the grade level assigned a particular book and the grade level of a child, you might also know that they can't read that book. Sometimes if she sits with the child and they start reading the first page together and it becomes evident that the child cannot read the book, she will ask if there is someone at home to read it with them. If so, it's a good choice. Reading with someone else is a very valuable experience especially since the children's interests are often above their reading level. At the same time, after sharing books with children for so many years, she does feel that she has a good sense of which books appeal to a certain grade. Certain books may be asked for over and over again by first graders and even if the second graders are reading at the same level, for some reason developmentally it falls flat with them. She is ever mindful of their interests. For example, as noted above, for many younger readers the distinction between a story and a true book (fiction or nonfiction) is very important and there are further considerations as to whether they will accept a book as true or not. For instance, a nonfiction book with drawings rather than photographs may not be acceptable to a younger student.

Especially during open circulation prior to the start of school in the morning, Media Specialist E circulates throughout the media center and offers assistance to browsing students. She, too, noted that many students will say "no" and then very soon after ask for assistance if she is still standing nearby. She also mentioned that they try to keep track of circulation records in order to discern if a child has not checked out a book in awhile. Often this child has avoided checking out because of an overdue or missing book and Media Specialist E can rectify the situation by talking to the classroom teacher.

Teachers will sometimes see a child's choice and say he or she can't check it out because he or she can't read it. To this, Media Specialist E shrugs, "we have to compromise and try to respect [the teacher's opinion]." At times, students come in with specific directions from their classroom teacher, such as to get a chapter book. Media Specialist E's school does *AR* and she has been trying to back away from it since she started. Though she has seen its power to motivate certain children very well, it is not her favorite program. She feels limited in her recommendations during the readers' advisory interview if a teacher says the student must have an *AR* book. She prefers to let children choose whatever interests them, but she indicated that she will compromise if the teacher specifically desires that they have something they can read independently. Despite being an *AR* school, Media Specialist E does not assume that a child is looking for an *AR* book and will not enter this factor into the equation until the child requests it. She does not catalog *AR* books with point level, but has blue stickers to show an *AR* test exists for that book.

"Children should be able to choose from the school library whatever they want to read." Media specialist E is also a big advocate of picture books throughout the elementary grades because vocabulary and content can range widely from introductory and basic to challenging and mature. Only when she has specific directions from a teacher to steer a child away from an easy reader or picture book, will she do so. Because children are provided with material at or above their reading level in the classroom, she would like to think that when they come to the media center they can be freer to choose books of interest to them. By allowing students to check out two books, she compromises – one

book can be chosen according to parameters set by the teacher, if needed, and the other can be a purely personal selection.

In regard to considering the parent during the readers' advisory interview, Media Specialist E notes that there are almost 900 children in her school. She tells parents that if they would prefer that their child not take out a particular book that they must let their child know their wishes. If she has been notified and notices the child checking out the book in question, she can direct them elsewhere, but ultimately it must come from the parent. It was this attitude she took when one family objected to *Junie B. Jones* last year. Recently she had two kindergarten boys who were very interested in the *DK Eyewitness* books which they can't read on their own, but they love the pictures so she was encouraging them to check them out. Their mother asked her to steer them in another direction, toward a book they can read independently and though she tried, they kept returning to them. Ultimately, she told the parent that she didn't want to dissuade them and she and the parent ended up laughing about it. At the same time, she may not immediately recommend a book that has generated a great deal of controversy, such as a book of Halloween poetry that some parents have objected to. She lets children find these books on their own.

If stumped but believed good possibilities existed in the media center's collection, she would first go back to Athena (OPAC) to find a book of which she might be unaware. She then will show the student how to generate a list of titles and where to read the description part of the catalog record to determine if the book might be worth

considering. When she has run out of books in a particular interest area, she will take a few different routes. "This recently happened with a second grader," she said. "She's read everything on dolphins and last week she found one kept in the professional section."

When Media Specialist E runs out of new titles on dolphins, she will attempt to get her interested in another topic, but may need to show her the link on the media center's homepage to the public library catalog. "I'll take the child over and do a search on their catalog." She will then ask if the child if there is someone to take him or her there.

Sometimes she will find something on the Internet if she hasn't been able to find a book related to the interest elsewhere, but usually that's not what students are looking for.

"They want something they can hold, put in their backpack, and take home." Though she is aware of a number of reference sources designed to aid readers' advisory, she does not use them.

She has done instruction on book selection. Often teachers will ask her to do lessons on determining readability for which she provides students with a five finger bookmark.

Teachers often request this at the second grade level because these students are in a transitional period moving from easy readers to chapter books. On an individual level, she shows students how to use the OPAC to aid in book selection by pointing out features such as the reading level or book summary in the catalog record.

Media Specialist E commented on the challenge of following up on book recommendations in a systematic manner. Though certain children will approach her after reading a book she has recommended to give their opinion, many will not.

Though she did not receive any direct instruction on the readers' advisory interview at the graduate program she attended, it was addressed in a class she took at a nearby university's graduate program, but she did not remember the details of the instruction.

***Media Specialist F (Blue School District)***

First, Media Specialist F asks what books the child has read and liked. Depending on the kind of answer she gets, she will suggest more books in that series, or on a similar reading level. She is very careful not to use the words reading level, however. She'd rather say something like, "Let's find something just right for you." Sometimes she will say, "This is something a lot of children like; let's see what *you* think."

Much is intuited in regard to readability in the first few minutes. If a child says "I've read all the *Bailey School Kids*" or "I like Roald Dahl" this gives her a clue as to the child's reading fluency. If a child makes no response or mentions something significantly below grade level, she sees this as an indicator of ability as well. An example of this is an encounter she had recently with a fourth grade child whose teacher had been recommending a lot of books, but none interested him. When asked what books he'd enjoyed reading recently, all were picture books and were much younger than fourth grade in terms of reading level and content. She took this answer as a cue that this child is not ready for books at the content and reading level previously suggested – at least for recreational reading.

Media Specialist F's school does not do *AR* or any other "canned" reading program. She knows they are using Scholastic Reading Inventory in many classrooms, but she has not worked with it. There are leveled book rooms<sup>6</sup> in the school, but those are not under her jurisdiction. She added that there has been a district-wide initiative to create a list of "core titles" organized thematically and media specialists were asked to play a role in the creation of this document in 2001. The list was organized to provide books below, at, and above grade level that are used in particular grades. Accompanying reading level and lexile were provided. Yet, she believed, it was an attempt to do too many things at once as it also integrated character education themes into the thematic organizational scheme of the document. It was an attempt to address equity and consistency in use of materials across the school district. This list does not factor into Media Specialist F's decisions during the reader's advisory interview, but it does sometimes influence student requests (prompted by the classroom teacher). It has also forced her to add books she might have previously deemed inappropriate for the collection. Because the list required a certain number of books for each grade level that were considered, "below," "at," or "above" and books were chosen according to reading level or lexile, content was often ignored.

Media Specialist F believes that levels must be taken with a grain of salt and are secondary to content. She is mostly concerned with content appropriateness. She recently received a book order in which she had ordered a book labeled grades 3-6, but the book portrays violence, contains numerous profanities and was inappropriate for content reasons. She has never had requests that she find books at a certain commercial leveling system number, but she has had requests for books "on a second grade level." She also

takes issue with the five finger rule used by a number of teachers in her school (and, as has been seen, by many media specialists in this study). The five finger rule, in her mind, does not consider content either. If you're asking a child to find a book that's challenging according to this rule, often they will get to the point of content inappropriateness. "But to say you have to find something where you don't know all the words – that's a problem. Adults don't do that."

For Media Specialist F, determination of readability during the readers' advisory interview depends on whether it is a private moment or not. She has found that as a result of the media center's flexible scheduling, small groups, rather than whole classes are coming to the library for checkout. This has greatly increased her ability to offer individualized recommendations. "When we were on a fixed schedule, they were coming in groups of 25 kids and after class you'd have seven minutes for everyone to pick something out and you're trying to help 25 children find just the right book." If it is a private moment, she can pull a book out and she and the child can read it together. If the child is stumbling over every word, unless he or she is absolutely taken by the book, she will ask them to look at another book.

She said that the arrangement of books in the collection is conducive to finding books at the appropriate reading level. Transitional readers or early chapter books have been removed from the fiction section (chapter books) and shelved in the "ER" section. Though "ER" technically stands for "easy reader" Media Specialist F refers to them as ER or short chapter books and wishes to change the label. Because the range of these

books varies so widely, she is able to pull out different levels to gauge their ability. *Zach Files* books, for example, provide a lot of illustrations, have a good deal of white space, and are short – all traits that appeal to reluctant readers. A child’s reaction to a *Zach Files* book suggestion will tell her a lot about the child’s ability. Sometimes she can even see a physical reaction, such as a pulling back, if the book is not at the child’s level.

Sometimes she will take into consideration whether the child plans to read the book independently or with an adult. She commented on the value of children spending quality time with parents. Because Media Specialist F’s media center doubles as a public library after school hours, she will often direct the child to pick out a book during school hours to read by him or herself with the addendum that after school mom or grandma can pick one out that they can read together. In the youngest grades, it is important to provide books that parents can read to their children, a primary impetus behind Media Specialist F’s efforts to develop the media center’s Spanish collection for dual language learners.

If a child cannot read a book, that is fine with Media Specialist F. Second graders have a “book in a bag” program through classroom libraries and the leveled book room. Thus, the teachers are sending home a leveled book every night. Though there are some who use the library to locate that book, the library fulfills a different role – to provide for pleasure reading, according to Media Specialist F. Adults don’t censor their reading based on whether it is too difficult or too easy to read, but based on their interest in it. To balance the curriculum and the media center’s role as a provider of pleasure reading material, Media Specialist F has come to an understanding with 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teachers that

she will do her best to ensure that one of the three books checked out by students will be at their independent reading level.

When asked if she will approach non-approachers, Media Specialist F answered “all the time” and offered an apt metaphor for those students who will not approach her on their own for a book recommendation: “If I was in the gym I wouldn’t run quickly over to the ropes because I couldn’t possibly ever climb them.” A child who hasn’t been a successful reader will not “come bursting in” the media center. She tries to approach these students tactfully and will make an effort to recommend a book they’ve read before, a non-traditional format (e.g. a comic book), or a series book to make reading easier and less threatening.

She will frequently tell students to bring a book back if they don’t like it to encourage an atmosphere of free choice. Maintaining free choice sometimes entails that she allow a child who cannot read *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* to take it out in order to fulfill a need, to take it home and flaunt it. “Better a book than the biggest gun...” she says. She learned this through an experience with a second grader a few years ago who despite his obvious inability to read *Harry Potter*, strongly desired to check it out. Because it was in high demand at the time, she tried to substitute *The Secrets of Droon*, ostensibly a “knock off” series for younger readers. Yet despite pointing out the likenesses between the main character and Harry plus other similarities, the child was clearly not going to be happy with anything but *Harry*. She realized that neither of them were gaining anything by her forcing him to check out something other than what he wanted. Most of all she

wants her students to learn as they grow up that the library is a place where they can go and pick out whatever they want.

In regard to consideration of parental opinion during recreational reading recommendations, Media Specialist F noted that her media center is in a unique position. Because the media center doubles as a public library after school hours and has an adult collection as well, a child who approaches the checkout desk with a big fat book, is often a clue that the book is inappropriate. In this case she does refuse to let the child check it out because nowhere else would such books be housed near an elementary school collection. If a child chooses something from the elementary collection that is clearly above their level content-wise, she will tell the student that the particular book is intended for fourth and fifth graders for projects. "What is it you were looking for?" she will ask and often finds the book in question was not at all what they were searching for. With fiction, she finds it much easier. If it is contemporary fiction and she knows it is a violent book and/or possibly more appropriate for an older reader, she will have a conversation with that child telling him or her that she knows he or she *can* read the book, but that she bought it with fourth or fifth graders in mind because the characters are twelve and thirteen. "I think you'd enjoy this more when you're in fourth or fifth grade," she will say, "Can we look at some other books I think you'd really like?" Sometimes, if there's a child who really wants the book regardless, she will consider calling the parent although she has only done this once or twice in seven years. She also faces the opposite problem where parents want their children to read books that are well above them in regard to content just to provide them with more challenging material. In this case, Media

Specialist F really tries to stay with book recommendations that she believes are developmentally appropriate and will explain her decision to the parent. Similarly, she has a few parents who will, for example, ask why the collection includes comic books. Media Specialist F believes that reading materials, such as comic books, are a real enticement for some children. While she might tell a parent that she encourages all kinds of reading from their collection, she will not shy away from recommending such nontraditional materials during the readers' advisory interview.

If she is unable to locate a suitable book in the collection, she will often direct students to the suggestion box and ask that they sign their name to the request so that she may send the book in that student's direction when it is added to the collection. In the meantime, if a child has depleted a certain subject area she will attempt to guide him/her to something similar. For example, if a child loves fiction about cats, she might suggest a nonfiction book about cats like, *Koko's Kitten*, the true story of a gorilla and her kitten. Sometimes this strategy works and other times it doesn't. When stumped, she does not typically turn to a reference source other than the OPAC due to the lack of time available. She will sporadically use *NoveList* or Jon Scieszka's website, [www.guysread.com](http://www.guysread.com). Any instruction on self selection is done on an individual basis rather than in an organized lesson. She will teach students to look at the new book shelf, where to find nonfiction versus fiction, and how to locate different genres according to their spine sticker.

Media Specialist F does not follow up her book recommendations in a scientific manner. Even if she observes that a child has returned a long book they checked out the day

before, the book may have served to bolster the student's self esteem even if it wasn't read for enjoyment. She frequently asks students questions such as,

- Did you like it?
- Did it work?
- Do you want something else?
- Since you liked this book, do you want another like it?

Though she can't follow up with every student she does make an effort to monitor circulation for students who have not checked out in a long time or who have been holding onto the same two books for a long period of time. In this case, she will alert the teacher.

Media Specialist F does not remember ever receiving formal instruction in the readers' advisory interview and has developed her approach through observations of other people who are really good at it. She tries emulate the way others inspire students to be excited. She aims always to be respectful of children and to understand their desires, even when they irrationally *only* want the book the child ahead of them just checked out. Lastly, she added that she also considers the audio book medium when giving recreational reading suggestions. She believes strongly in an audio book's ability to deliver content appropriate experiences to children reading at too low a level to have had such experiences previously with printed literature. She has even had an article published in *School Library Journal* regarding her advocacy of audio books not only for reluctant readers, but for readers of all abilities.

*Media Specialist G (Blue School District)*

The steps Media Specialist G takes to start a readers' advisory interview vary depending on whether she has worked with the child previously or has no idea as to the child's abilities and interests. If she doesn't know the child, she first asks herself "Who is his or her teacher?" Some of the teachers in her school are very cognizant of what their students are reading. If this is a child she doesn't know, the teacher could give valuable input as to reading level, comfort, and interests. Without such input, she will ask,

- What books have you read in the past?
- What kinds of subject areas are you interested in?
- Do you want fiction or nonfiction?

The answers to each of these questions will help her discern a pattern. And if a child likes a particular area, such as fantasy, this will suggest to her that she might use this as an entry to a related genre, such as mystery. Though she will approach students who have not approached her first and are wandering around the media center, she wishes that more time was available to do so.

At the 2<sup>nd</sup> and even 3<sup>rd</sup> grade level, students are still figuring out what they like. She has a program for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> graders called "Can it be for me?" The library has a policy that one of the books checked out has to be a "just right" book or a book that can be read independently. "Can it be for me?" helps them to make good choices from both the everybody books (picture books) and the eager readers (transitional chapter books) before they get into traditional novels in the fiction section. Thus, if a second grader has an eager reader that he or she can read quickly and easily and also wants a *Redwall*, it is fine that

he or she takes both home. Part of “Can it be for me?” asks the children to debunk the five finger rule. According to these guidelines, even one word that can’t be read disqualifies the book as a just right book. “These books are not challenging. They are comfortable.” And “Can it be for me?” also addresses content, not just readability. As a child goes through the process he or she will ask,

- “Does the cover excite me?”
- “Am I hooked by the first page?”
- “Is this an author I know?”

This becomes a difficult process at the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade level as interest in nonfiction is high, yet interest often exceeds reading ability. As a result, Media Specialist G has made it a goal to build up her collection of easy reader nonfiction and is deciding the best way to tag these books to assist in self selection. She cautions that all of these guidelines are just guidelines. If a child has two books that aren’t just right, but they really, really want them, then that’s okay. “The guidelines can be bent.”

Media Specialist G takes leveling into account during collection development, but defines levels much more broadly when it comes to readers’ advisory. She exclaims, “Do you know how many leveling systems there are? At least 5 or 6 major.” And even though she uses Follett’s *Titlewave* to help determine approximate reading level when doing collection development, she said that she has to laugh when the same book by the same publisher is given a different level in hardcover than in paperback. With fiction, she tries to read titles before ordering them and is able to do so due to a reviewer friend who shares review copies. But once again, when working with a particular child she will not

then go to the catalog to see what grade level a book has been assigned. She might look at how big the type is or whether it is housed in everybody, eager reader, or fiction, but will not go through and analyze the book's "level" by the difficulty of the words it contains. Sometimes she will sit with the child to determine readability, but relies heavily on "Can it be for me?" and its methods of asking questions and reading an excerpt to ensure not only decoding ability, but comprehension. Overall, she tries to take the stress out of reading by introducing students to the philosophy that it is okay to read a book a day and be very comfortable with it and, on the other hand, to bring home harder books to read with mom and dad. She continually likes to remind children of the joy of picture books.

The school does have a leveled book room that shares space with the media center's work room but is not within the media specialist's jurisdiction. Though she feels that classroom teachers understand the distinction between leveled reading and the recreational reading that children do in the media center, she does not think they understand that leveling "is such a mess. The bottom line is, the teacher needs to read the book and know her students because all of these readability frameworks say something different from the next." The reading specialists in her school have been around for a long time and have a very prescribed program. Such prescribed reading, she believes, does not support the kind of reading that kids do naturally where interests go up and down and all over the place. They do not support the child who is temporarily infatuated with books about bridges. The reading specialists in the school, for example, were averse to Media Specialist G's efforts to introduce an audio book collection. Despite her

advocacy of the benefits of listening stations and the power of listening to words, the reading specialists balked – this practice “won’t teach them to read.”

Media Specialist G stated that she believes motivation should come from within the child. “I am a firm believer in free choice. If this is a child who wants books on bridges, then we’re going to give the child as many as we possibly can. Equally, we’re also believers that if the child only wants to read nonfiction then that’s okay, too, and we’re going to try and supply that.” She finds this philosophy to be a struggle with parents in a few cases. Ideally, she would like parents to check out books on their own as a supplement to, rather than substitute for, their child’s choices. Thus, she might encourage the parent to check out a “stretch” book to do as a read aloud, something she believes to be very powerful, but will encourage the 2<sup>nd</sup> grader to keep checking out picture books. If a younger student is looking for a more challenging book, she will try to steer him or her toward a book with appropriate content, not because of concern regarding parental feedback, but because of a personal belief that 2<sup>nd</sup> graders don’t need to be reading books like *The Lord of the Rings*. She believes there is a great deal of good literature written at a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade level. Additionally, classics or even new books like *The Tale of Despereaux*, this years Newbery winner, have no “age issues” and are perfect recommendations for the high ability young reader.

If a child is heavily invested in a particular subject area and she has run out of either suggestions or books in the collection, she will attempt to focus them on a new, but related topic. She’ll ask, “Do you want to focus on a different animal?”; “Do you want to

focus on a different hobby?"; "What do you do at home?" She believes that kids "just aren't that narrow." While they may stick with those two cat books each time, the media specialist can usually help them branch out. Simultaneously she feels that some children just need time to be with a certain type of book or just nonfiction and she's comfortable with that. Although she has a few reference books that she loves, *The Newbery Companion* and *Books Kids Will Sit Still For*, Media Specialist G finds that she uses them mainly for lessons or parent readers' advisory rather than in interactions with the students. Typically she sticks with Alexandria (OPAC), but will also use *NoveList* which enables her to search in a manner different from Alexandria's topical arrangement.

Media Specialist G noted that because of her many responsibilities, especially teaching lessons, she is unable to spend much time at the circulation desk while students are checking books in and out. Whereas at a public library she might be able to follow up on book recommendations more regularly by situating herself at the circulation desk, she is not able to do so in the school media center. To follow up, then, she attempts to get to know the kids and to talk to them about what they're reading. She also has a "favorites area" where students are encouraged to place books they've read and especially liked. This allows her to gauge more generally how successful her suggestions have been and how they match the students' favorites.

Media Specialist G attributes her readers' advisory methods to her own voracious reading as well as many years of reference experience. In library school she had a course in genres taught by the author of the first edition of *Genreflecting*. Though it was more

helpful providing adult fiction recommendations, she sometimes will turn to *Genreflecting for Young Adults* when looking to find the next book in a series.

***Media Specialists H&I (Red School District)***

Media Specialists H and I work together in one elementary school media center. Media Specialist H works three days each week while her colleague, Media Specialist I, works full time.

Media Specialist H said that her approach to the readers' advisory interview may very well be different from that of Media Specialist I because her colleague has so much more experience. Her first questions are;

- What kind of books are you interested in?
- What type of story?
- Or do you want nonfiction?

She noted that a lot of boys want nonfiction. Once the student gives her a topic, she will take them to the computer – something which she points out is probably different from the methods of Media Specialist I who started the collection and is better aware of its contents – and do a search with the child to reinforce how he or she can find a book on their own. She'll read through the topics to see if there's any she recognizes to suggest. She will try to make several suggestions and accompany the child to the shelf. Once the child has selected a book, she will walk them through the five finger method to see if they can read it and if it interests them.

Media Specialist I believes that she follows essentially the same pattern. First she narrows down the subject. If a child is having a difficult time coming up with a subject area of interest, she will suggest books that other 2<sup>nd</sup> graders are currently enjoying. She might say, “This book just came in from one of your classmates and he really enjoyed it.”

Both reiterate that the five finger rule is their main method of determining readability as it places responsibility on the child rather than making it the responsibility of the media specialists and/or the classroom teacher. They begin teaching children to use this method in 1<sup>st</sup> grade and even pass out a bookmark teaching the five finger rule. In second grade they teach a lesson, “If the shoe fits” to give instruction on selecting a book. They try to convey the philosophy that if “the book is a good fit for you, it’ll be a joy, not a chore, to read.” Students are told to look for something else if they read a page and it’s not something they are interested in.

Both media specialists state that they do not use leveling as a criteria during their readers’ advisory interviews. Media Specialist H looks at books with a “range” approach rather than at such specific levels. Because of the discrepancies between different leveling formulas, she relies on the five finger method. “1.3 doesn’t mean anything,” she said. Yet Media Specialist I added that they do deal with leveling when doing their second job of assisting with the curriculum. Media Specialist I often uses *Matching Books to Readers* by Fountas with 1<sup>st</sup> grade parents, for example. In 1<sup>st</sup> grade parents are introduced to the district’s literacy levels and when they have a conference with a teacher will be told, “Your child is at X reading level and they should be at 16 by the time they leave 1<sup>st</sup>

grade.” To support these parents and the curriculum, Media Specialist I has evaluated books in regard to the district’s literacy levels using *Matching Books to Readers* in order to educate parents as to what a book at a certain level looks like. Although the media specialists try to add some of these leveled books to the collection, they largely leave it up to the leveled reading room, not under the media center’s jurisdiction.

Media specialists H & I agreed that their checkout policy enables children to check out more than one book. Thus, if a teacher asks them to read a specific genre at a certain time, as is often the case in 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade, they can still check out another self selected book to read for fun. There are a few 1<sup>st</sup> grade teachers who still use *AR*, but Media Specialist H’s request from a child for an *AR* book a few days prior had been the first all year. Media Specialist I notes that since *AR* has been generally discarded as a school wide reading program, the school’s reading levels on the EOGs have gone up. Thus, a child who comes in looking for an *AR* book is an anomaly and *AR* levels, though still in the catalog, do not enter into either media specialist’s decision making process when selecting reading books for pleasure.

If a child comes up with a *Harry Potter*, they can steer him or her toward a second book that is readable. Students do receive an orientation in which they practice finding a book they can read. They are told to ask the librarian if they are having trouble doing so on their own. And if a child takes home a book he or she cannot read, they try to recommend that he or she reads it with an adult. They never try to disallow a student from checking out something they’re interested in.

Media Specialist I believes it is very important to remember to point out illustrations when doing readers' advisory. Good illustrations are a big criteria for her, especially because their school has such a good art teacher and art program. Also, she recognizes that illustrations can be very important to the child. She had a student come in recently who asked for a book about a family, but after many failed attempts to present him with a book, it was ultimately uncovered that he wanted a family, as illustrated by Jerry Pinkney.<sup>7</sup> His need was very specific and relied heavily on the book's illustrations, rather than either content or readability. Media Specialist H added that this situation highlights how difficult it can be sometimes for children to articulate their reading needs and interests. She also noted that she will often steer children toward award winning books in order help them associate the sticker with quality in their selections.

Once in a while, these media specialists will take the parent's opinion into account during the readers' advisory interview. Media Specialist H said that she will not suggest a controversial book to a child, but rather leaves it to the child to find such books on his/her own. If a child asks for a scary book, she will recommend it, but would not choose that genre if not explicitly asked for it. Media Specialist I corroborates this approach and added that if a very young child were to approach her asking for a scary story, she might ask, "Do your parents let you read scary stories? Do they read them with you? I know my Dad wouldn't read scary stories with me." She believes that they are in a special situation regarding consideration of parental input because both she and Media Specialist H live

and attend church in the community. Also, having been in the school district for 33 years, she has even taught some of her student's parents.

While Media Specialist I doesn't believe the parent is a consideration very often, she related a recent episode in which a young boy came in seeking a true book on the tooth fairy. In this case, parental opinion was very high in her mind. He would not consider any picture books on the tooth fairy because they were not housed in the nonfiction section. In this case, Media Specialist I kept him busy browsing a pile of books and went to his classroom teacher to gauge how she should work with this student. Ultimately, she was able to diffuse the situation without undermining anyone's beliefs by presenting the child with a nonfiction book about customs around the world when a child loses a tooth. But she wonders what she should have done had that book not existed. She did speak with the guidance counselor who said that a belief that comes from the home should be handled by the parents. Media Specialist I did note, though, that the strategy she used – going to the classroom teacher to discern any issues going on in the background or relating to family life – is a favorite recourse for her. She will often do so if approached with a somewhat controversial or unclear request in order to see what is going on beneath the surface and if there are any special needs to which she needs to cater. Media Specialist H added that this is necessary because many times children ask for something that is not at all what they want. They are unable in many cases to articulate their needs or are too shy to state their wishes outright. Thus, the media specialists just “keep digging” through questioning and also use each other. “If they come in and say, ‘I want the purple book,’ and you have no idea, usually we can figure it out between the two of us.”

Sometimes considering parental input in book recommendations can be misleading, they added. Recently, Media Specialist I had received a call from a 4<sup>th</sup> grade parent who wanted her child to be encouraged to check out a science fiction book and an autobiography in order to complete a classroom “tic tac toe” game designed to get students reading different genres. After selecting books for the child and calling her down to the media center, however, she found that the child had actually already read in those genres and had not communicated this to the parent.

Both media specialists indicated the impact of time constraints on their ability to follow up regularly with students. They reiterated Media Specialist G’s comment that they are not frequently present at the circulation desk to monitor check ins and check outs. They run reports to monitor circulation and systematically send these to classroom teachers in an attempt to pinpoint students who are not checking out books. Media Specialist H expressed a desire to send postcards to students who have not checked out in awhile rather than just periodically sending classroom teachers circulation reports. Once again, time constraints have kept her from instituting this practice, but as she’s only in her first year at the school media center she is hopeful that she will in the future.

Though Media Specialist I cannot remember whether she ever received instruction in conducting a readers’ advisory interview, Media Specialist H believed the instruction she received in reference class added to her current methods. As part of this reference class, she visited a public library in the county in which Red School District is located. The

children's librarians there told her about the readers' advisory interview they use which closely paralleled the reference interview presented in her class. And she tries to listen to her experienced colleague, Media Specialist I, while she's interviewing children, to pick up technique.

These media specialists believe that the students in their school are interested in everything and it is their job to provide for pleasure reading, to find books that are of interest to these students, not just to support the curriculum. Media Specialist H concludes, "Worst case scenario, they don't read the book, but at least we haven't turned them off reading."

***Media Specialist J (Red School District)***

When approached by a 2<sup>nd</sup> grader looking for a good book, Media Specialist J will ask;

- What other books have you read?
- What have your favorite books been up to this point?
- Is this for a school project or your own reading? (Clarify the book is for recreational purposes.)

Based on the answers, she will ask whether the student wants more of the same kind of book or something different. If they don't know, she will recommend something other 2<sup>nd</sup> graders are reading, like *The Series of Unfortunate Events*. She will read aloud a chapter or an introduction to see if they like it. She factors in readability unconsciously. Because she is aware of what grade the student is in, she will generally steer them in that direction. "Am I going to give that child a *Harry Potter* book? No. Sometimes I'll ask if this is a book they're going to read with mom and dad. That often makes a difference.

Generally I try to give what I think they might be able to read.” She adds that their answers to what they have read before, also serve to gauge reading ability.

“Students in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade are still working with pretty concrete things,” she noted.

Additionally, students are beginning to “shun picture books because those are baby books.” She makes an effort to steer them back to picture books at this age and will work with teachers as well to encourage them to use picture books with their students and model that these books are still appropriate.

Media Specialist J’s school has a leveled book room used frequently by kindergarten, first and second grade teachers. She expressed relief that this book room is not under the library’s jurisdiction. She does run into problems with students who come in to the media center seeking a leveled reading book. “But, we don’t organize our books that way.”

Though Media Specialist J noted that she wants to become more familiar with Reading Recovery<sup>8</sup>, the reading program at her school, she is not worried about getting a child a book at exactly their level and it doesn’t factor into her suggestions. She finds that this is not a problem with teachers, but rather parents and children who are anxious that they be reading on an exact reading level. Though she has a lot of interaction with parents on this issue, she attempts to educate them in regard to leveled books rather than preemptively considering the parent’s opinion during a readers’ advisory interview. She will suggest ways for them to read with their children and encourage them to keep reading to their children even when the children become able to read on their own. She tries to get parents to read the book and then have their child read it rather than worrying about a

particular level. In regard to considering parental opinion of a book's content, she will not do so unless a parent has explicitly stated that his/her child be steered away from certain books.

“As a general rule, I don't limit what the children want to pick up and check out. That's the philosophy of the principal as well and she's stated that explicitly.” Media Specialist J stressed the importance of this principal's philosophy and belief that the library is for children to come and pick out their *own* materials. If the teacher wants to take an active role in their book selection then she must come to the media center with the class and do so, “but it's not my job.” If a child wants *Harry Potter*, but couldn't read it she would discuss it with them. She would suggest it as a great book to read with mom and dad and might mention that she read it with her kids.

Media Specialist J does not give formal instruction in self selection, but touches on aspects of self selection during a general media center orientation at the start of the school year as well as mini-lessons on different sections of the library, browsing, and OPAC use. She also reminds students to ask her if they need help selecting a book. Media Specialist J finds it difficult to systematically follow up after giving a book recommendation. She noted that her school has 650 students, but she tries to follow up whenever possible.

As a final note, she mentioned that she believes that developmental stage and particularly gender issues are vital aspects of the readers' advisory interview. Because boys tend to

like information books, she makes a particular point to address that need. She believes such interests are undervalued in the classroom where emphasis is placed on picture books or stories. By presenting boys with materials such as *Car and Driver Magazine* or *National Geographic*, she is attempting to honor their interests.

Media Specialist J remembers formal instruction in the reference interview, but nothing addressing readers' advisory in particular during her masters program.

## **Discussion**

This study was designed to articulate the distinct steps taken by media specialists during the readers' advisory interview as well as to identify the various influences on the media specialist's negotiation of dual roles during the readers' advisory interview process.

Based upon the preceding interviews, it is nearly impossible to separate the steps taken during the interview from the issues that emerge as considerations for the elementary school library media specialist during the process of conducting a readers' advisory interview. The backbone of every readers' advisory interview consists of 1) a questioning process, 2) a book recommendation, and 3) follow up, yet the content and influences on each of these basic steps is determined largely by any number of variables. The following pages outline the issues that emerged for each stage of the readers' advisory interview in the school library media center:

### ***1) Questioning Process***

**Table 2.**

<b>Media Specialist</b>	<b>Starts with Questioning</b>	<b>Line of Questioning</b>	<b>Other Variables</b>
<b>A</b>	YES	-Recent favorite reads -Reading interests -Fiction or nonfiction	
<b>B</b>	YES	-Recent favorite reads -Reading interests -Everybody book or chapter book	-Number of children in media center (flexible scheduling, open circulation)
<b>C</b>	YES	-Outside interests -Reading interests	-Relationship with child
<b>D</b>	YES	-Recent favorite reads	-AR a first consideration
<b>E</b>	YES	-Fiction or nonfiction	

		-Recent favorite reads	
<b>F</b>	YES	-Recent favorite reads	-Number of children in media center
<b>G</b>	YES	-All time favorite reads -Subject interests -Fiction or nonfiction	-Relationship with child -Input from classroom teacher
<b>H, I</b>	YES	-Reading interests -Genre -Fiction or nonfiction	
<b>J</b>	YES	-Recent favorite reads -All time favorite reads -For own reading (or school)	

Every media specialist begins the readers' advisory interview with a series of questions designed to determine interest area and preferences and often to gauge the student's expectations regarding readability. This initial importance placed on student interest echoes recommendations found in readers' advisory literature (Dickey and Jones, 1994; Saricks, 2001; Bracy, 1996). The successive, rapid nature of these questions was frequently noted – each question leads to another until the child's interest area is revealed.

Two media specialists noted the impact the number of students in the media center at the time can have from the start of the interview. The institution of flexible scheduling and a policy of open circulation as well as an accompanying policy that classroom teachers must accompany their class if the entire class comes to the media center has had unexpected, but welcome, benefits for the amount of individualized attention given the small groups that come to media centers where these policies are in place.

## ***2) Book Recommendation***

### ***Readability***

**Table 3.**

<b>Media Specialist</b>	<b>Readability a consideration?</b>	<b>How determine readability?</b>	<b>Deny if can't read?</b>
<b>A</b>	-If independent reading desired -Will ask if intend to read with parent	-Based on recent reads -Five finger rule	-No
<b>B</b>	-If desired, teachers need to be present.		-No
<b>C</b>	-Yes -Will ask if intend to read with parent	-Five finger rule -Correlate books recently read. -Lexiles	-Yes, if a younger child -No, if an older child
<b>D</b>	-No		-No
<b>E</b>	-If independent reading desired. -Will ask if intend to read with parent	-Five finger rule.	-No, but will attempt to redirect.
<b>F</b>	-If independent reading desired. -Will ask if intend to read with parent	-Correlate books recently read. -Read together. -Judge student's reaction to suggestion.	-No, but will attempt to redirect.
<b>G</b>	-For "just right book." -Will ask if intend to read with parent.	-"Can it be for me?"	-No
<b>H, I</b>	-If independent reading desired. -Will ask if intend to read with parent	-Five finger rule	-No
<b>J</b>	-Yes -Will ask if intend to read with parent	-Correlate books recently read	-No

Whether or not participants care if a child can actually read the book is situational and dependent on the child's intentions in regard to that particular book. If the child has no

intention of reading the book independently – he or she is only interested in the pictures or intends to read it with a parent or other adult – the media specialist typically does not care if the child cannot read the book. If, however, the child indicates a desire to read the book independently, the media specialist almost always attempts to determine readability. Methods used to determine readability varied.

The five finger rule made recurring appearances throughout the interviews as a method of determining readability. Simply defined, the five finger rule is often used as an informal method of determining readability wherein the child reads a page of the book in question and holds up a finger for each word he/she cannot read or understand. In its simplest form, the five finger rule would reject a book if five fingers or more are raised by the end of the page. Media Specialist F, interestingly, looked at the five finger rule from another angle. She indicated that some teachers will use this rule as a means to ensure that students check out a book that is difficult enough for them – unless they find a word or two that is too difficult, the book is too easy to check out, according to these teachers. When used in this fashion, the five finger rule can frequently result in a book that is way above a child's level in regard to content. Media Specialist D emphatically objects to any method that tells a child whether he or she should or should not take a book; this disrupts the atmosphere of pure self selection she advocates. Thus she does not use the five finger method.

A broad, but frequently noted method of determining readability, is that of simply gauging the child's reaction to the amount of text, white space and length of a book when it is pulled off the shelf as a potential suggestion. The other most frequent method

indicated was to recommend books at a similar reading level to those named by the child as already read. This ties into a study cited earlier by Bracy (1996) wherein the most successful readers' advisory interview in the study resulted in books on reading level despite any questioning related to reading level.

Every participant indicated a value in sending home books both above and below a child's reading level as high interest can sometimes fuel comprehension above one's reading level. Illustrations are an extremely important part of the reading experience, and everybody needs easy books to practice on, gain confidence, and relax with on occasion (Carter, 2000; Bransford and Johnson, 1972; Kragler and Nolley, 1996; Powell, 1994; Vacca and Vacca, 2003). Further, it was evident that the participants value picture books across the grade levels due to the illustrations as well as the frequently high reading level and deep themes.

Almost every participant, except Media Specialist D, will ask whether a child intends to read a book with his or her parent, while a few indicated that they do so, but only in a casual way to make the child think it was his/her decision to share the book with a parent or caregiver. Frequently, this question is posed not to discern if the child should be taking a book that he or she can't read independently, but with the family in mind. This is particularly the case in the media centers whose schools have large Hispanic populations. Not only do Hispanic families tend to prize whole family activities, but the current emphasis on the importance of family literacy and maintaining English language learners' native language skills heightens the need for such a consideration. The media

specialists indicated that they like to ask whether or not the child wishes to read with a parent to determine whether they should recommend a Spanish, English or bilingual book.

In considering readability, three themes emerged as additional factors during the readers' advisory interview – free choice, “just right” books, and saving face. Comments about each of these appear below.

#### Theme of “Free Choice”

Few participants would deny a child a book if they exhibited an attachment to, or desire for, it. (Although Media Specialist C firmly stated that she would deny a child a book that was way above reading level, she later added that if a child wanted to take out a book to fulfill a need, she would.) Interestingly, but not surprisingly, due to the omnipresence of a certain bespectacled boy, every participant referenced *Harry Potter* in making this case. All have had children whose reading ability is way below that of *Harry Potter* want to check it out. Many media specialists will ask if the child has someone to read it at home with, but even if the answer is negative will not deny the child the book. Media Specialist H indicated the philosophy underlying this approach, “Worst case scenario, they don't read the book, but at least we haven't turned them off reading.”

#### Theme of “Just Right” Books

Another recurring catchphrase throughout the interviews was that of the “just right book.” The definition of the “just right book,” however, varied not only between the media specialists interviewed, but ostensibly also varied sometimes between these media

specialists and the teachers in their respective schools. To some, the “just right book” is one that the student can read independently – sometimes this independent readability level is determined through a formal process whereas other times it is determined in a less systematic manner – and to others the “just right book” is simply a book that captures a child’s attention and excitement at a particular time. Thus, participant attitudes toward their role in helping find the “just right book” were mixed. Although all were determined to find the “just right book” in regard to excitement generated in the child, not all were willing to ensure the child could read the book, whether formally or informally.

Media Specialist B noted that if the teacher wants the children to select such a book then he or she must be present to aid in selection. She does not see it as the media specialist’s role. Media Specialist F uses the term “just right book” to indicate illicitly a book that can be read independently without having to discuss a child’s reading level directly. But in other media centers, such as those of Media Specialist G & B, “just right” indicates a systematically determined book (in the latter not something with which she deals – in the former, something on which she provides direct instruction.) Media Specialist G has a formal instruction program for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> graders giving a set of criteria designed to find a just right book called “Can it be for me?” Regardless of their differing interpretations and uses of the term “just right,” media specialist, in varying situations, were willing to help find books at a child’s reading level.

Kragler and Nolley (1996) found that while algorithms (such as the five finger method) might be helpful in guiding student choices, “it is imperative that students not be made

afraid to choose a book for fear of not getting just the right selection” (p. 363). Though students need guidance and assistance from media specialists and teachers, continually questioning their choices or putting too much pressure on perfect book selection will disempower them whereas providing students with meaningful reading experiences at varying reading levels will help them “become truly literate people capable of making sound decisions regarding their reading” (pp. 363-364).

#### Theme of “Saving Face”

Many of the participants talked about the need to help students maintain image in regard to reading. All seemed concerned to keep reading pleasurable and far removed from any other stigma producing activities that might occur during the school day. In Media Specialist C’s media center this is often done by ensuring lower level readers are included in whole class booktalks prior to checkout time so that recommendations at that level will not stand out. Media specialists also frequently referenced the “*Harry Potter* for the lower level reader situation” mentioned above as fulfilling a particular non-reading (image) need and the acceptable nature of this need. Others catalog books in order to enable this saving face during readers’ advisory – for example housing many transitional chapter books in the regular fiction section in Media Specialist C’s media center.

#### *Leveling*

**Table 4.**

<b>Media Specialist</b>	<b>Role of Leveling</b>	<b>Opinion of Leveling</b>
<b>A</b>	-To be done in the classroom -Lexiles in <i>NoveList</i> might prove useful	-Love of reading can be lost if children are forced to read at a particular level

<b>B</b>	-If desired in media center, to be done by classroom teacher -School has <i>AR</i>	-Prefers to break down levels by major classification areas of media center – e.g. everybody books or chapter books
<b>C</b>	-Uses lexiles in media center, but cautions lexile use without consideration of content maturity/interest level	-Prefers lexiles and the range they support rather than single number leveling -A tool to help school meet EOG goals -Not defining factor in book selection
<b>D</b>	-Will not enforce	-Advocate of self selected reading
<b>E</b>	-Will compromise and assist in locating book according to <i>AR</i> level, but advocates book selection according to more specific criteria	-Level assigned to a book is not indicative of individual child
<b>F</b>	-Leveled bookrooms in school, but for classroom use; not relevant in media center	-Does not use word “reading level” with students -Content appropriateness more important
<b>G</b>	-Leveled bookroom in school, but for classroom use; not relevant in media center	-Notes inconsistency of leveling systems
<b>H, I</b>	-Not used in media center -will educate parents about levels	-EOG scores have gone up since <i>AR</i> removed
<b>J</b>	-Leveled bookroom in school, but for classroom use; not used in media center	-Wants to become more well versed so can aid students, parents, but does not want to use in book recommendations

Though determination of readability was frequently valued, as seen above, all media specialists were wary of the use of commercial leveling systems in the school media center. Most saw the classroom as the place for leveled books (where children learn the mechanics of reading) and the school media center as a place for free choice and independent selection. A few recalled past situations in which this philosophy was not widely accepted by classroom teachers. Media Specialist A, for example, worked in a school previously where all students came to the media center with explicit instructions

to only check out books at a particular *AR* level. She expressed a great reluctance to select books in such a manner. Others expressed situations that were less rigid in regard to a school wide *AR* policy, but recounted specific situations in which a teacher would send a child back to the library and/or stand them up in front of the class after checkout to point out that a certain book was above their reading ability and thus could not be checked out.

Media Specialist C was the greatest advocate of a commercial leveling system of any media specialist interviewed. Her school is heavily invested in the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) and she has become willing to work with lexiles and recommend books utilizing lexile levels because they present a wide range of materials rather than assigning one narrow arbitrary number to a book's reading level.

The debate over leveling and the tension it frequently generates between classroom teachers and media specialists undoubtedly occurs as a result of numerous factors related to the current climate of reading instruction. Krashen (2002) best articulates the research-based beliefs held by media specialists on the limitations of leveling as indirectly expressed by participants in this study,

- “There is an easy way to select texts that does not involve the use of readability formulae: try reading them. Recreational readers will not continue reading texts if they are not comprehensible or if they are dull” (p. 29).
- “...teachers and librarians don't have to know every book out there, but they should be able to pick up a book and get a feel for it quickly, and they have numerous resources, including reviews in professional journals, the advice of colleagues, and of course the reactions of children to help them. I value these resources far more than the results of any readability formula” (p. 29).

- “The use of systems such as the Lexile Framework can limit choices. Studies show that children often select books both above and below their current reading level, and this is a good thing. Children can often understand large sections of books that are "too hard" because of their interest in and knowledge of the topic, and "easy" books often provide valuable background in a new genre that encourages subsequent reading and makes it more comprehensible. Left on their own, children engage in a ‘back and forth movement’ between easy and hard books, reading both below and above their current reading levels. In addition, children gradually read books that are more challenging, without the use of reading levels. The back and forth movement is actually a sine wave that gradually moves upward” (p. 31).

As indicated earlier in the literature review for this study and reiterated in a new publication by Krashen (2004), current approaches to reading instruction, as seen in the 2000 National Reading Panel Report, advocate a return to “skills based approaches” over whole language and “systematic phonics instruction” (p. 1). Media specialists suddenly find their approaches, that fit so neatly into the whole language approaches to reading instruction championed over the previous two decades, to be at odds with popular approaches. Media specialists have strong beliefs in regard to leveling and its misplacement in the school media center. Even if adamantly opposed to leveling, however, most are willing to compromise and accept its use in the classroom.

### ***Teachers***

As introduced through the media specialists’ attitudes toward leveling, the influence of the classroom teacher on the media specialists’ approach to the readers’ advisory interview can be underlined with tension and ambiguity. Media specialists routinely expressed frustration at an invasion of the leveling used in the classroom into the media center realm. They recalled with displeasure incidents in which teachers disallowed students from checking out books that the teachers deemed too easy or too hard or sent

students with strict instructions to check out books only according to a strictly defined leveling system.

Yet in contradiction to the frustration expressed, the media specialists also looked to classroom teachers as important allies in the readers' advisory interview. Because classroom teachers know their children so well they can notify the media specialist ahead of time about individual students' special reading or emotional needs. Further, classroom teachers' relationship with parents can help media specialists manage parental requests and opinions. Media Specialist I actively visits classroom teachers in the middle of a readers' advisory interview, if needed, to discern whether any other issues exist beneath a difficult readers' advisory question. Because children at this age cannot always articulate their needs, another professional's insight can be helpful.

In his study, "The Impact of School Library Media Centers on Academic Achievement," Lance (1994) found a positive relationship between the time spent by media specialists collaborating with classroom teachers and academic achievement in the school. Yet the frequent tension underlying the relationship between classroom teacher and media specialist could have adverse implications for potential collaboration. Some media specialists (notably the more experienced participants) could clearly articulate a philosophy about recreational reading and the different approaches to be taken in the media center and the classroom. Though they too expressed frustration, it seemed to have less impact on actions in the media center and thus lent greater authority to their practices. Media

Specialist J noted the importance of strong administrative support and continual reiteration of this philosophy to create clarity for teachers.

### *Parents*

A subtle tension also underlines the media specialists' relationships with parents. Almost every media specialist indicated that they would steer children away from a particular book if the parents had asked them to do so, but added that it was ultimately not their responsibility to "stand guard" believing that it was up to the parents to let their children know of their wishes and for the children to adhere to them. Most mentioned that they would not recommend a book with fifth grade or controversial content to a second grade student, but this was not due to fear of parental displeasure, but because a child of this age would not get the reading experience they were aiming for from a book beyond the child's developmental level. Media specialists in Blue School District, a largely upper middle class school district, noted their frequent collision with parents over the level at which their children are reading. This was not mentioned as an issue by media specialists in Red School District. Again, some media specialists were able to articulate more clearly than others their policies in regard to parental input and its place in readers' advisory.

### *Developmental Characteristics*

Two somewhat contradictory beliefs emerged in regard to consideration of a child's developmental characteristics during the readers' advisory interview – both of which were often held by each individual media specialist. Nearly every media specialist discounted the importance of developmental characteristics in the traditional "stage"

sense. All indicated that they largely consider every student as an individual. Rather than citing developmental characteristics, such as those defined by Erickson or Piaget, many participants preferred consideration of what might be called a “literary interest stage.” Many noted that second graders typically like informational books and nonfiction books. Through years of working with children, the more experienced media specialists know the idiosyncrasies that certain aged children have toward certain books. Certain books, for example, despite reading level or content-related reason, consistently fall flat with second graders, but are hits with first graders. Additionally, many participants pointed out the ways in which literary preferences can differ at certain ages by gender.

### *Ready Reference Use*

**Table 5.**

<b>Media Specialist</b>	<b>Used During Interview</b>	<b>Sources Used</b>
<b>A</b>	-No	-Possibly <i>NoveList</i> in future
<b>B</b>	-Not at time. Possibly later.	-LM_Net -District media specialists' listserv -Recommended reading lists from public library -Own lists
<b>C</b>		
<b>D</b>	-only catalog	-OPAC
<b>E</b>	-only catalog	-OPAC -Public library catalog
<b>F</b>	-Not usually.	-www.guysread.com - <i>NoveList</i>
<b>G</b>	-Not usually	- <i>Genreflecting for Young Adults</i> when seeking series information
<b>H, I</b>	-OPAC -Public Lib	- <i>Matching Books to Readers</i> (for parent)
<b>J</b>	-No	

Aside from frequent use of the OPAC during the readers' advisory transaction (as indicated most frequently by the least experienced media specialists interviewed) none of the participants regularly rely on or use ready reference tools for readers' advisory during the interview itself. Red School District has recently subscribed to a trial license for *NoveList* and several participants mentioned it as a tool they could see using in the future. Blue School District has access to *NoveList* and while it was mentioned as an available resource, all media specialists asserted that time does not permit use of these sources during the readers' advisory interview. Ready reference tools may be used after students leave, if a need was left unfilled, to find something for a later time, or for read aloud selection or advisory service for parents and teachers.

In an interview in the *Journal for Youth Services in Libraries* (2001), Virginia A. Walter, author of *Children and Libraries: Getting It Right*, states,

Readers' advisory for kids is an art because in addition to knowledge of the books and a knowledge of the child, it requires a kind of instinctive and creative ability to put the two together. Children's readers' advisory depends on far more than adult readers' advisory on "knowing the books." Adult services librarians are far more likely than children's librarians to rely on access tools for their recommendations to adults. Children's librarians access their own memory banks and use their intimate knowledge of books themselves when making connections between a child's often unspoken desire or need and the book that will suit (Salvadore, 2001, p. 43).

Yet an article by Saricks (2001), cited in the literature review of this paper, highlights the importance of simultaneously using both ready reference tools that not only serve to deepen the media specialist's "knowledge of the books" (Salvadore, 2001, p.43) but also to validate and add weight to the question. Use of a ready reference tool tells the child that his or her question is important enough to consult an outside source (Saricks, 2001,

p. 393). Saricks further explains the importance of modeling as a means by which to leave the patron with the feeling that he or she can now find a book on his or her own. Though Saricks' recommendations have adult public library patrons in mind, one can quickly extrapolate them to a child-specific situation. In a school setting, it is not only preferable that media specialists leave children feeling empowered, but it is a requirement of their role as a teacher to provide the child with the tools by which to find his or her own book.

### *Direct Instruction in Self Selection*

**Table 6.**

<b>Media Specialist</b>	<b><i>Direct Instruction?</i></b>
<b>A</b>	
<b>B</b>	-Only on an individual basis.
<b>C</b>	
<b>D</b>	-Taught "Can it be for me?" lesson, but does not advocate too much, if any, instruction / largely believes students should find on own.
<b>E</b>	-Yes, on determining readability, as requested by teachers.
<b>F</b>	-Only on an individual basis.
<b>G</b>	-"Can it be for me? (systematic instruction)
<b>H, I</b>	-Yes
<b>J</b>	-Only on an individual basis

Most media specialists interviewed indicated that any instruction given in self selection occurs as embedded into students' media center orientations or in instruction on the parts of the library or the use of genre stickers on books. Media Specialist G was the only participant to articulate well defined systematic instruction on self selection in the media center, "Can it be for me?" The "Can it be for me?" lesson is introduced in second and

third grades and guides students to ask a series of questions of themselves in order to locate the right book. A few media specialists indicated that they have provided instruction on various aspects of self selection as requested by classroom teachers. As noted above, the less experienced media specialists interviewed spoke to a greater utilization of modeling the use of the OPAC during the readers' advisory interview.

### 3) *Follow-Up*

**Table 7.**

<b>Media Specialist</b>	<b>Do you follow-up?</b>	<b>Constraints</b>	<b>Methods</b>
<b>A</b>	Yes		
<b>B</b>	Yes		
<b>C</b>	Yes		
<b>D</b>	Yes	-desk not near circulation desk	
<b>E</b>	Yes	-not always at circulation desk	-monitor circulation records; talk to classroom teacher
<b>F</b>	Yes	-not always at circulation desk	-monitor circulation records -suggestion box
<b>G</b>	Yes	-not always at circulation desk	-“favorite book” area
<b>H, I</b>	Yes	- number of students -not always at circulation desk -time	-monitor circulation records; talk to classroom teacher -send postcards to students who have not checked out recently
<b>J</b>	Yes	-number of students	

While all participants indicated that they attempted to follow up with as many students as possible, it is very difficult to do so in any systematic manner. This is exacerbated by the media specialists' frequent absence from the circulation desk at the time when children check books in or out as they are frequently busy teaching a class. In order to improve

their ability to follow-up, most media specialists ask students to let them know whether they like or don't like a book after they've read it. A number also indicated that they also forewarn students that it is okay not to like a book even if they have suggested it. Saricks (2001) notes the importance of suggesting rather than recommending – “recommending places the librarian in the role of expert” – whereas suggesting puts both parties in a more egalitarian relationship (p. 3). Nowhere is it more important to break down the power relationship between instructor and child than in a school setting where power relationships often form the basis of all interactions. A few participants noted that they checked circulation records periodically to find which students were not checking out books in order to be sure that no child was overlooked. Saricks (2001) observes, “Many fans will return for repeat readers’ advisory interactions once we have communicated our interest and excitement in helping them find books they enjoy” (p. 394). This suggestion indicates that enthusiasm during the readers’ advisory interview itself will assist in bringing students back for follow-up.

Aside from these general methods, a few media specialists indicated very specific methods instituted or plans to strengthen follow up in the face of time constraints and large student populations. Media Specialist H noted that although she has not yet been able to (this is her first year as a school media specialist), she plans to send postcards to the students who have not checked books out in awhile. Media Specialist F provides a suggestion box. To follow up on general student interests better, she asks students to sign their name to suggestions in order to better match them up with books they desire in the future. Media Specialist G’s media center has a “favorite book area” where students can

place “favorites” after they have been read. Each of the above methods not only enables the respective media specialist to gauge her successes and the interests of her students, but empowers the student readers and strengthens their ability to evaluate the literature they read. Media Specialist B provided an example of an extremely strong lesson in evaluation through the “Ugly Book” project she did recently with fifth graders, a particularly appropriate activity for media centers with aging collections. She asked students to choose books with ugly covers, read them, and then evaluate them. The students received direct instruction in evaluation and the role of the publisher and book reviewer and, as a result, were equipped with tools for use in self selection.

#### *Formal Instruction in Readers’ Advisory Services*

Finally, the following table illustrates participant response to the question regarding formal instruction on conducting the readers’ advisory interview:

**Table 8.**

<b>Media Specialist</b>	<b>Formal Instruction – Readers’ Advisory Interview</b>	<b>Formal Instruction-Reference Interview</b>	<b>Other Influences on Approach</b>
<b>A</b>	No	-Yes -Sees skills as transferable	
<b>B</b>	No	-Yes	-Internships
<b>C</b>	No	-Yes	-Experience in public library and in classroom teaching
<b>D</b>	No		-Experiences in media center as a child -Reading course by Cunningham
<b>E</b>	Yes/No		-One assignment addressing at

			graduate program other than one attended
<b>F</b>	No		-Observation of others who inspire
<b>G</b>	No	-Yes	-Reference experience -Graduate course on genre preferences
<b>H</b>	No	-Yes	-Observing experienced colleague
<b>I</b>			
<b>J</b>	No	-Yes	

A few participants noted the parallels between the readers' advisory interview and the reference interview, which was addressed in graduate school coursework. Most saw their particular approach to the readers' advisory interview as the result of years of observation and practice.

### **Constraints and Limitations**

As stated in the methodology, this study was designed to be qualitative in nature. In order to guard against leading participants, the interview questions were viewed as a guide rather than a template and were not asked systematically of each participant. As a result, new questions emerged during successive interviews that were not addressed earlier. Due to the use of this qualitative approach in addition to the face-to-face, individualized nature of the interviews, the representations of each participant responses cannot be seen as comprehensive. For example, if participants had been given the opportunity to answer the questions posed in a group setting, consensus may have emerged on a number of issues, policies and practices not articulated here might have been remembered.

Further, observations have been made in this study (and conclusions based on them) in regard to particular trends that have not been controlled for in the study design. For example, a difference was observed in the perceived authority and articulation of the media center's reading mission by the senior media specialists interviewed and a stricter utilization of OPAC use modeling by less experienced participants, yet the study was not designed to isolate the variable of experience. Again, the qualitative, free form nature of the study must be remembered in the interpretation of all interviews and findings.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The results of this study illustrate that the readers' advisory interview in the school media center is a unique transaction, dependent on any number of variables, issues, or influences related to its placement within the school learning community. Each media specialist clearly interprets these variables differently as well as frequently contradicts stated beliefs concerning a particular issue. These contradictions likely stem from the frequent imposition of opposing demands on the media specialist. Due to this contradictory nature, it becomes vital to draw both from the methods championed by existing literature and the best practices of the media specialists interviewed in this study in order to clarify readers' advisory policies that media specialists can adopt regardless of circumstance.

This study is predicated on the media specialist's need to fulfill dual roles, but unless these roles are understood and articulated by the media specialist and subsequently supported by classroom teachers and administration, they will not be fulfilled successfully. Judy Freeman (1995) writes;

Many schools don't miss having a good library because they don't know what it is they're missing: a professional librarian who keeps up on all the thousands of books published each year, orders materials that fit and extend the school's varied curricula and interests, knows what children like to read and has techniques to expand their tastes and knowledge base while keeping them interested and motivated, presents a coherent library skills program linking reading and the search for information, and creates an inviting and stimulating environment in the library that makes students, staff, and parents want to come back (p. 73).

The media specialists who exhibited the most comprehensive understanding of their role in recreational reading were able to articulate these roles clearly through media center policies. In many cases, for example, the media center's checkout policy served as a clear indicator of the clarity of the media center's mission in regard to recreational reading.

While the amount of books allowed per student varied from school to school and often from grade to grade within a school, it was the stipulations regarding the number of books to be checked out that most highlight this point. Many media specialists make it a policy that at least one book checked out must be a completely free choice for that child – readability is not a requirement. They then go a step further to ensure that the classroom teacher is aware of this policy and upholds it in his or her directions to the class in regard to recreational reading. These school library media specialists expressed a deep desire for children to see the media center as a place of free choice, where their interests would not be squelched by lack of ability or the opinion of others; they recognized the need to institute policies to support this in practice and to articulate this belief to the learning community.

If the responses received from the media specialist participants in this study are any indication, there is clear support for Shearer and Burgin's study indicating a lack of attention to the readers' advisory interview in graduate education programs. Though every media specialist interviewed holds an MLS and North Carolina school media licensure, not one could remember receiving direct, formal instruction regarding the readers' advisory interview – whether in the school or other library setting. This observation supports the current research (Shearer and Burgin, 2001; Wiegand, 2001;

Crowley, 2001; Watson, 2000) that library and information science graduate programs often fail when it comes to preparing new librarians for readers' advisory services. Further, the participants' frequent statement that they learned their methods through practice and observation of mentors during internships highlights the great importance of the student teaching portion of school media preparation. Because the readers' advisory interview is an integral tool in fulfilling the media specialist's dual missions of reading encouragement and curriculum collaboration, learning how to conduct a readers' advisory interview must become part of both academic and practical portions of library graduate programs for school library media specialists. Further, it is vital that the role of the media specialist find a place not only in education literature, but also in teacher and administrator preparatory programs as well. Such an institutionalization would go far toward raising awareness and clarifying the unique role to be played by media specialists in recreational reading and across the elementary school curriculum.

The Commission on Reading's 1984 report *Becoming a Nation of Readers* states, "increasing the proportion of children who read widely and with evident satisfaction ought to be as much a goal of reading instruction as increasing the number who are competent readers" (p. 15). In the years following this report, research has continually reiterated the validity of this recommendation. Cosgrove (2003) notes the "plethora of research" (Wilson and Hall, 1972; Spiegall, 1981; Nodelman, 1992; Dwyer and Dwyer, 1994) that supports the equal importance of "instilling positive attitudes about reading" and teaching the mechanics of reading (p. 29). The findings of Cosgrove's surveys of children, parents, and teachers reiterate the importance of focusing on attitudes toward

reading as she found that reading done without interest, “even though intended to apply isolated skills to reading, may help teach students to read but never very effectively or with lasting benefits” (p. 34). These “lasting benefits,” the creation of lifelong learners is clearly the ultimate goal of all media services (AASL, 1998). Further, a correlation has been found between students who score better on reading tests and use of the library media center (Lance, 1994). Yet a recent study on “Student Learning through Ohio School Libraries” (2004) found that despite the vital role played by Ohio school libraries as an “agent of independent reading and personal development,” reading related services were still ranked comparatively lower by students than other library services in terms of overall helpfulness. The study expostulates that these lower overall scores indicate a student experience wherein research and curriculum requirements trump “pleasurable reading pursuits.” They note, “It may be that independent reading is a casualty of intensely academic and test-oriented schooling” (Todd, 2004, p. 5). Kiefer (2001) emphasizes that there are many ways that children become literate, “but to become lifelong readers, they really need to be invested in the power of books within a community of others that love reading” (p. 49). And, while this belief may be “axiomatic” to school and children’s librarians, they are often still unsure where this fits into the overall scheme of reading instruction (p. 49-50).

These perceptions and ambiguities, combined with the frequent existence of tension between media specialists and classroom teachers over the appropriate factors to use in selecting recreational reading materials for children, threatens to undermine the vital role of the media center in supporting and championing recreational reading unless steps are

taken by individual media specialists to define and reaffirm the value of these services and practices.

Based upon the literature reviewed and interviews conducted, the following recommendations, both specific and broad, emerge for the readers' advisory interview in the school media center:

- Articulate and publicize the mission of media center to the learning community. Underline the difference between media center and classroom roles in reading instruction. Highlight the media specialist's unique training, knowledge and skills.
- Institute policies of flexible scheduling and open circulation to enable more individualized readers' advisory services.
- Create flexible checkout policies that reflect the media center's mission. Reserve at least one book for self- selection, if the classroom teacher has stipulations for another book.
- Require teachers to accompany classes to the media center to make them a partner in finding the right book for their students. Recognize teachers as a source for greater background information on a child's unarticulated needs.
- Recognize that there are various needs to be fulfilled by reading – not all contribute to the development of reading ability – many do.
- Ask questions to determine the child's expectations in regard to readability. He or she may not want to be able to read the book independently, but may intend to read with a parent or enjoy the illustrations. Recognize the importance of reading at all levels.
- Attend to the child's interests from the start. Question, question, question.
- Consider the child's native language, culture, and home situation.
- Don't limit questions to recent or all-time favorite reads. Ask what the child's interests are outside of school.
- Always respect students' interests and desires in regard to recreational reading.
- Be a champion of free choice.

- Model and provide direct instruction in self-selection. Empower students.
- Help students “save face” by instituting practices that support rather than single out or identify struggling readers.
- Use ready reference tools when stumped. Model their use.
- Recognize the imperfections of commercial leveling systems and readability formulae. Base suggestions instead on the results of a paired reading with the child, the child’s reaction to the book, other recently independently read books and most of all, the media specialist’s own deep knowledge of content.
- Recognize the role of the media specialist in both promoting reading for pleasure and supporting the reading curriculum.
- Inspire a passion for reading by instilling the readers’ advisory interview with an excitement fueled by a deep knowledge of children’s literature.

Though these recommendations are by no means comprehensive, they provide general guidelines for grounding the readers’ advisory interview in research based practices for encouraging reading. The last recommendation is a direct result of the most heartening theme that recurred throughout the interviews – the pride and enthusiasm expressed by each media specialist when discussing readers’ advisory in the school media center. Each described the experience of getting the right book in the right child’s hands as a satisfying, rewarding, almost magical experience. Perhaps the most important means by which media specialists can fulfill the media center’s recreational reading mission and become a school’s reading champion is to publicize and trumpet these very specialized skills and literary knowledge with passion.

### **Further Research**

While this study provides a preliminary glance into the practice of the readers' advisory interview in today's elementary school library media centers, there is much research still to be done to add to the body of literature addressing the readers' advisory interview in this specific setting. For example, a study comparing students' experiences with the readers' advisory interview to perceptions of and methods used by their school media specialist would help to determine the success of readers' advisory methods used.

Interviews with classroom teachers, reading specialists and administrators could clarify how well the mission of the school library media center is articulated and supported.

Further, the readers' advisory interview is only one small part of readers' advisory services in the school media center. The readers' advisory services that reach out to those students who will not converse with the media specialist about a book recommendation, such as readers' theater, displays, booktalks and readalouds, are vitally important. This study has only determined whether or not participants will approach those "non-approachers" to engage in a readers' advisory interview, but has not documented other outreach strategies. On a micro level, the inspection of individual components of the readers' advisory interview could help clarify the process. For example, one media specialist noted that she tries to act like she doesn't care whether the child likes the book she recommends or not. Though this strategy is defined to bolster the student's self confidence in his/her own opinion of a book and to empower the student to accept recommendations or not in the spirit of free choice, this approach might manifest itself as

a lack of enthusiasm. Are students better served when media specialists simply ask to hear the child's opinion of the book after they read it? A study comparing these two approaches could reveal nuances of the readers' advisory interview with children.

Research addressing any of the areas articulated will go far to assist school library professionals in the perfection of what is arguably their most vital skill – the ability to turn students on to reading.

## **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> *Accelerated Reader* is a reading program that labels books by grade level through use of a readability formula. It is based on the premise that students are motivated to read if they are tested on the content of the books they read and are rewarded for passing corresponding tests. Through this program, students take a computer test after completing each book read. Many schools then provide a prize based on levels reached through *Accelerated Reader* testing.

<sup>2</sup> *NoveList* is a web-based readers' advisory resource that allows "readers to use a favorite author or title as a template to locate other authors and titles of interest" (*NoveList*, 2002, para. 2).

<sup>3</sup> Many school library media centers have labeled those books traditionally called "picture books" as "everybody books" in order to downplay the false stereotype that picture books are only appropriate for young readers.

<sup>4</sup> LM\_NET is an international listserv for school library media specialists.

<sup>5</sup> Lexiles are determined through *the Lexile Framework for Reading*, a product designed by MetaMetrics, Inc., an educational and measurement technology firm. Using this framework texts are analyzed for "syntactic complexity" and "assigned a numerical level called a Lexile rating." Once a student's Lexile reading level has been determined he or she can be matched with a text of the appropriate Lexile rating (Rosen, 1998, p. 240).

<sup>6</sup> Leveled book rooms provide elementary school teachers with sets of leveled books for use in guided reading instruction.

<sup>7</sup> Jerry Pinkney is an award-winning children's book illustrator, renowned for his illustrations of multicultural and African American subjects and themes.

<sup>8</sup> Reading Recovery is a popular short-term intervention for struggling first grade readers developed by New Zealand educator and researcher Dr. Marie Clay.

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## **Appendix A: Informed Consent Form**

Dear School Media Specialist:

You have been selected as a participant in a research project that studies the readers' advisory interview in the elementary school library media center. You have been selected as a participant because you are an elementary school media specialist working in Wake County Schools. The ultimate goal of this study will be to isolate the steps taken by elementary school media specialists when recommending a reading book for pleasure to a second grade student. By highlighting the criteria inherent in a successful readers' advisory interview, I hope to address the myriad issues involved in recommending books for pleasure, including issues of leveling, readability tests, and student interests.

Participation in this study requires that you take part in a short face-to-face interview. By conducting an interview rather than using a survey, I will be better able to capture the depth of your answers. I ultimately hope to conduct 10-12 interviews. In order to give you a clear picture of the project's scope, you have previously been provided the questions which will guide the interview. The interview will be kept short, will require no more than a half hour of your time, and has been arranged at a time and place convenient to you.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you will be placed at no risk. You may skip any question asked during the interview session for any reason and may withdraw from participation at any time. All information you provide will be completely anonymous. The only identifying information attached to your responses will be that of an elementary school media specialist in North Carolina. Your signature at the bottom of this form indicates your informed consent to participate in this research study.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this research study, please contact me at (919) 824-1929 or [jheritag@email.unc.edu](mailto:jheritag@email.unc.edu), or my faculty advisor, Dr. Evelyn Daniel, at (919) 962-8062 or [daniel@ils.unc.edu](mailto:daniel@ils.unc.edu).

The Academic Affairs Institutional Review Board (AA-IRB) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has approved this study. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant in this study, please contact the AA-IRB at (919) 962-7761 or at [aa-irb@unc.edu](mailto:aa-irb@unc.edu).

Once again, thank you for your participation in this project amid your demanding schedule. Upon completion of my research, I will provide you with an abstract and link to the final research paper.

By your signature below you are agreeing to participate in the study:

**Signature**

**Date**

**Appendix B: Guiding Interview Questions**

1. How long have you been teaching in the school media center?
  - a. Do you have your MLS?
  - b. Are you licensed as a school media specialist in NC?
2. If a second grade student approached you and asked you to recommend a book (for pleasure rather than a school-related assignment), what steps would you take to reach a recommendation?
3. Do you consider leveling as one of your criteria when selecting books? (Either as designated by the publisher or by another source?)
4. How do you determine readability?
5. Do you consider the characteristics (developmental or otherwise) of a typical second grade student? If so, what characteristics do you consider?
6. How important are the student's interests? How do you determine where the student's interest lies?
7. Do you take into account the classroom teacher's philosophy concerning reading and take home books?
8. Do you consider whether the child wants something to be read independently or with a parent?
9. Do you take the parent's opinion into account?
10. Do you have an opinion on whether the child should bring home books at independent, frustration or instructional level? If so, does this come into play during the readers' advisory interview?
11. Often the biggest obstacle to getting students involved in reading for pleasure is not those who approach you asking for a book, but those who do not. What methods do you use to get "non-approachers" interested in reading? Do you approach them individually?
12. When you've depleted your knowledge of a particular genre or subject area do you use a reference source? What tactic would you use to find the right book for this child?
13. Do you follow up? How do you gauge success?
14. Do you give instruction on self-selection?

15. Did you have formal instruction in conducting the readers' advisory interview? If not, how did you learn it on your own?

16. Do you have any other criteria that you take into account when recommending books for pleasure to second graders that you would like to add?