Selecting materials for the school library is a complex process, and one that school librarians need to plan and develop.

SELECTING MATERIALS FOR school libraries has always been a challenging task, but it has become much more complicated in the 21st Century. A school librarian at a junior high in the late 1990s could allot a certain portion of her budget for reference books, the general circulating collection, a few audiovisual materials, and newspapers and magazines.

SIMPLE TO COMPLEX

The budget of the ’90s had the funds needed to support these areas. Each year the school librarian knew that she could purchase a new set of encyclopedias and discard the oldest set. Yes, she even gave the older set to a classroom teacher. Being well-versed in the strengths of each encyclopedias set, this school librarian provided updated materials that addressed the information needs of a wide range of students. Ah, those were the simple times when the collection was fairly contained within the school building, and the librarian knew what sources the students needed and how to allocate the funds to satisfy those needs.

That certainly is not the scenario that school librarians experience today. Selecting materials for the school library is a complex process, and one that school librarians need to
plan and develop. In this article, some of the basic tenets needed for selecting materials for school libraries in the 21st Century are discussed.

**SELECTION GOALS**

The goals of developing school library collections have not changed drastically since the early days of school libraries (Johnson 2009, 9; Roscello 2004, 6). The difference today is that the process, the materials, and the formats of these materials have changed. The American Association of School Librarians (AASL), in *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Librarians*, notes that this role is one of providing a well-developed collection in different formats that supports the curriculum and addresses the information needs of the students.

**BASIC SELECTION**

**INFRASTRUCTURE: THE PLAN**

Selecting materials is just one step in a process of collection development that includes many ingredients: a knowledge of the collection, the community, and the needs of the students and library users; selection of materials, acquisition, processing, and preservation of materials; circulation of materials; and the evaluation of the relevancy of materials (Bishop 2007, 16; Evans and Saponaro 2005, 8; Gregory 2011, 1). The process of collection development includes all of the steps from preparing a budget to eventually placing the book or material in the collection. To accomplish this in a logical and effective manner, an overall collection development plan needs to be created and part of that plan should include a selection policy.

Even though school libraries may not have a specific document labeled selection policy, it is still imperative to have the following information addressed: the philosophy of selecting materials, a statement identifying the person who is responsible for making the selections, criteria for selection of specific materials, and the process of reconsidering any items that are part of the collection (Bishop 2007, 40-47; Gregory 2011, 35-53; Johnson 2009, 76-77). This article focuses on some of the available tools that can be used to select materials for the school library.

**THE NITTY GRITTY OF SELECTION**

**THE RIGHT TOOL**

In the past, school librarians have relied heavily on reviews in professional periodicals to select books that are currently in print and materials that are appropriate for their collections. Some well-known sources are: *Booklist*, *School Library Journal*, *Voices of Youth Advocates* (VOYA), *Choice*, *Library Media Connection*, and *Teacher Librarian*. These sources are relevant today and school librarians need to understand the advantages and disadvantages of each. When evaluating these basic sources, the school librarian should ask the following questions:

- Which levels are addressed by this source: elementary, middle, high school?
- Does this source review only books or does it include other formats?
- Who are the reviewers for the materials in this source?
- How do the editors of this periodical choose the materials to review?

Reflecting on the answers to these questions helps school librarians choose the right tool for the selection process.

**ONLINE CUSTOMIZATION**

Such review sources provide purchasing information for specific materials published recently. Using these eclectic sources, however, may not always be the most efficient use of the school librarian’s time. Websites can help the librarian search by subject and grade level, as well as assist with focusing on a specific need. Amazon (http://www.amazon.com/), Follett’s TitleWave (http://www.titlewave.com/), and Baker and Taylor (http://www.btol.com/) are all examples of electronic sources that allow the school librarian to select items by specific subject area. These tools also provide access to reviews in the professional magazines mentioned above and, in the case of Amazon, reviews from people who have actually purchased the materials. School librarians can also access reviews from different sources through one website. Limiting the search to a specific topic saves times and helps the selector focus on identified curriculum areas.

**CRITERIA FOR REVIEWS**

Not all reviews, however, contain the information the school librarian needs to make an informed choice about the item prior to purchase. Bishop provides a list of criteria to help determine the value of the review (2007). These criteria, according to Bishop, include finding the exact bibliographic information; purchasing information; evaluation of the literary characteristic such as plot, character, theme, setting, point of view, and style; description and evaluation of whether this is a controversial item or not; and a description of the artistic appearance of the item (52).

**OTHER REVIEW AIDS**

Gregory provides an extensive list of other selection aids that are available for acquiring materials (2011). Some of these are *Book Review Digest*, *Book Review Index*, *American Reference Book Annual* (ARBA), and *American Book Publishing Record* (APBR) (67). These sources contain information on new items and provide reviews of selected items. School librarians can explore these tools for relevancy and cost as selection tools.
VENDOR CONNECTIONS

The sources listed above are reputable selection tools for school librarians, but the list is certainly not inclusive. School librarians should also establish relationships with book vendors specializing in school library materials, attend conferences and spend quality time visiting with vendors, and be aware of flyers and e-mail blasts that advertise materials. Oftentimes, items can be purchased at reduced cost through working with vendors and acting upon informative flyers and e-mail blasts. School librarians should focus on the needs of the members of their learning community, the assessment of the existing collection, and their budgetary constraints.

BEST LISTS

Another selection tool appropriate for school librarians is using a subject bibliography and lists of recommended titles. School librarians should be aware of the best books and recommended lists that are published by professional organizations. The Young Adult Library Services Organization (YALSA) publishes a list of Best Books for Young Adults each year (http://www.al.org/ala/mgrps/divs/yalsa/booklistsawards/bestbooksya/bbyahome.cfm). The selections from previous years are also listed on the YALSA website. The Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC) publishes award winners including the Newbery and Caldecott awards as well as honor books each year (http://www.al.org/ala/mgrps/divs/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/2011medawardwin.cfm). The National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) presents the Orbis Pictus award each year for the outstanding nonfiction books published during the year (http://www.ncte.org/awards/orbispictus).

In addition to these organizations, the majority of states present an award annually or biannually. School librarians should utilize these lists, but must also be aware of the criteria for inclusion on the lists. If the criteria for the award fits the school library’s selection policy and the funds are available, then school librarians should feel comfortable using these lists as additional selection tools.

BALANCE

The “self-contained” print collection of yesteryear made it very easy to achieve a balanced collection. Today, that is not the case and school librarians have a variety of formats to consider for purchase. These formats include print materials, electronic resources, and online databases (Harper 2011, 120). School librarians need to determine which format is the best for a balanced collection. Maintaining this balance is not as easy as it looks and many questions, like the following, need to be answered:

▶ What resources will best serve the needs of my students?
▶ What technology do my students have access to at home?
▶ Do the students learn better through access to electronic sources such as ebooks?
▶ Will the students have access to these sources at home?
▶ Is this an electronic source that should be available in the library?
▶ Does the school have enough bandwidth to handle this source?
▶ Will there be sufficient budgetary funds to support purchasing or subscribing to this source?
▶ Is this the best source to use to support inquiry learning?
▶ Is there another entity that I can share this resource with while sharing the cost of the item?
▶ Is there another entity that can provide the funds for this source?

And the list goes on. These questions are certainly not easy to answer, but school librarians need to reflect on these before allocating funds from the library budget.

WRAP UP

The 20th-century school librarians used a variety of selection tools to develop their “self-contained” library book collections. The 21st-century school librarians have a more difficult task because of the many formats available. Many selection tools, including professional reviews, online programs such as TitleWave, and electronic databases, are readily available, if the funds are available. School librarians must strive to understand the balance of the collection and the informational needs of the students. Although this can be difficult, having a collection development plan with a selection policy helps school librarians acquire the best materials in the most appropriate format.

REFERENCES:

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SCHOOL LIBRARY MONTHLY | VOLUME 28 | NUMBER 3 | DECEMBER 2011