

The Fate of School Media Discards in North Carolina

Jacqueline Gladney

What happens to materials which, although discarded from North Carolina school media centers, have value to someone in the community? In order to determine how many volumes are discarded yearly and how many of them are believed to be useful to the community, a questionnaire was mailed to fifty randomly selected school librarians in the public schools in North Carolina.¹ Thirty responses were usable. However, more study was warranted. The questionnaire consisted of four items designed to assess how much material that is valuable to someone is being discarded yearly, and the ways in which these materials are discarded.

The largest collection size reported contained 54,000 volumes, and there were 3,000 volumes in the smallest, which was a newly organized collection. One (3%) center listed 20,000 volumes; two (7%) centers between 15,000-17,000 volumes; and six (20%) between 9,000-10,000 volumes. The plurality of responding centers had 7,000-8,000 volumes with ten (33%) reporting numbers in this range. Three (10%) listed 5,000-6,000 volumes in the collection and seven (23%) listed 3,000-4,000 volumes.

Approximate Percentage Discarded Yearly

Many librarians reported an approximate percentage of volumes discarded yearly. These figures are taken from their inventories of the previous year. Paperbacks were counted with the discards from the regular collection. Eight school centers listed 1% of their collection as being discarded yearly. Seven listed 2% as being discarded, three reported 5% and three reported 6%; two schools listed 4%; two listed 3%; two reported 0% as being discarded.

Many librarians stated that the weeding process is often neglected; the lack of personnel and the lack of qualified workers make the work difficult to do. Larger libraries may be relatively well funded, and in smaller libraries the funds may be more scarce, but the collections often remain nearly the same for many years. Weeding is a tedious job, and trying to determine what should be discarded and what should be kept is time consuming.

Percentage Useful to the Community

Some respondents replied that books which are worn and have been rebound several times are discarded by throwing them away. These materials are usually old or out-of-date before they are discarded. Indeed, seventeen (57%) of the centers indicate that **none** of the discards are of use to anyone and that their discards are in such worn condition that they were not worth

saving. But six (20%) of the centers stated that all of their discards are valuable, and could be used by many people in the community, although no longer suitable in the media center itself. Some of these books were old and a little worn but in good enough shape to be used for information. Two listed 60% of their discards as being useful to someone in the community. One center listed 77% of discards as being useful, a second listed 75%; the third 55%; the fourth 50%; and a fifth reported 10%.

Ways in Which Materials Are Discarded

The librarians listed several ways in which they discarded books from their collection. They were asked to choose from five following means of discarding indicated on the questionnaire, plus an open-ended choice: (1) Recycle; (2) Exchange; (3) Sell; (4) Give Away; (5) Throw Away; (6) Other (please specify). Table I shows that twenty-nine (97%) of the librarians responded by stating that they used another method of discarding books than/or in addition to the five methods specified on the questionnaire. From a review of the literature this high response to item six was unexpected. It possibly indicates how little research has been undertaken or at least, published on this subject. An unanticipated way which respondents specified discards were used was by placing books in the classroom of teachers who asked for the discarded books. Many librarians used discards for producing items, sometimes referred to as "minibooks," which can be used with the younger students who like to read stories but do not like to check out the larger books. Stories torn from the discards were placed in small folders for individual use. These minibooks can be made into attractive books on almost any subject or topic.

Give away and throw away both had eight (27%) responses. The librarians stated that contests are sometimes held and the students can pick some of the old books for their own use. Many books are marked "discarded" with all visible signs of the school library ownership removed. If the books end up in the media center after being thrown away the respondents will usually burn them. Much of the material that is old and out-of-date is thrown away.

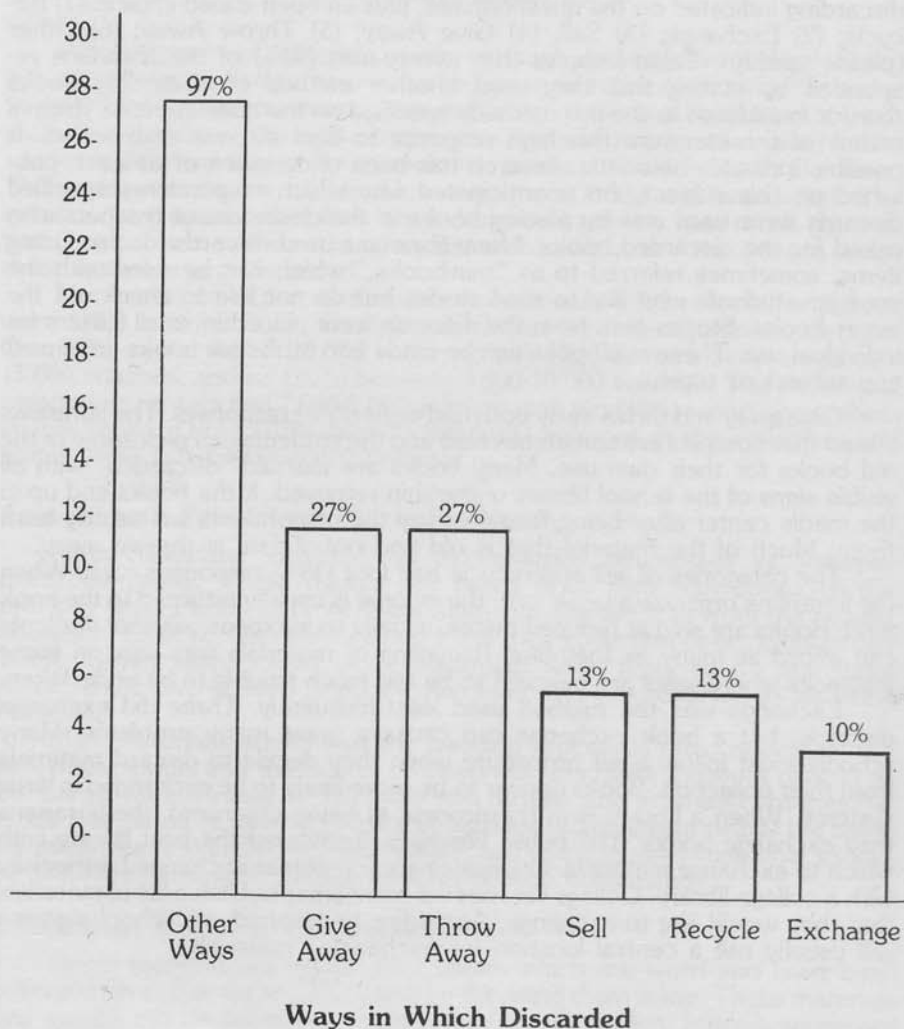
The categories of sell and recycle had four (13%) responses each. When the librarians organize a book sale, the income is usually returned to the book fund. Books are sold at reduced prices, usually so inexpensively that students can afford as many as they like. Recycling of materials was used in some instances where sales are believed to be too much trouble to be undertaken.

Exchange was the method used least frequently. Three did exchange discards, but a book exchange can cause a great many problems. Many schools must follow a set procedure when they decide to discard materials from their collection. Books appear to be more likely to be exchanged in large systems. When a library is in the process of being organized, the librarians may exchange books. The public library is considered the best library with which to exchange materials. Duplicates are sometimes exchanged, especially with a college library. College libraries will sometimes publish a list of materials that they would like to exchange. According to respondents school systems will usually use a central location for exchanging materials.

Conclusion and Interpretations

All in all school librarians in North Carolina are often inventive in handling discards of value to someone else, but which are no longer appropriate for the media center.

TABLE I
Percentage and Number of Volumes Discarded
(30 Respondents)



Further research is needed to probe reasons for the variations uncovered and to explore how book sales, minibooks, exchanges, and classroom discard affect the recipients. Every effort should be made to get books no longer useful for media center purpose into the hands of those who can benefit from using them. Children without books in their homes can usually benefit from book ownership. We should think carefully before burning or tossing away a book that might help a child.

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¹Gladney, Jacqueline. "What Happens to Materials That Are Discarded From a School Media Center That Are of Value to Someone In The Community." (M.S.L.S. research paper, School of Library Science, North Carolina Central University, 1978.) This article is based on the research report cited here.

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