The influence of the school library's physical environment on users/ Zehava Shemer (Shalman)

Abstract

This study investigates the influence of the high school library's physical environment on its pupil users. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between the physical conditions existing in the high school library and the behavior of the library's users, i.e., to determine how different physical conditions in the library result in different behavior by the users. This study is based on the assumption that the physical environment of the library is a factor influencing the functioning and behavior of those using its services.

The study's questions were derived from its purpose and formulated after surveying the professional literature and performing a pilot study. The questions are: (A) How does the physical environment of the library impact its users? In other words, to what extent does the location of the library, its accessibility to groups of pupils, its physical environment and its hours influence the frequency of visits to it and the functioning and behavior of those availing themselves of its services. (B) What is the relationship between the physical conditions of the library, the movement of pupils and selection of seating places within it? (C) What is the influence of the library furniture and its arrangement on the behavior of the pupils? (D) How do pupils with different learning styles utilize the various physical environments in school libraries? (E) What are the characteristics of territorial behavior associated with the library's physical environment?

Four comprehensive high schools participated in the study sample. The study was qualitative, combined with a quantitative questionnaire administered to the pupils. The qualitative section included observations and interviews with the librarians and pupils.

An architectural analysis of the four libraries was conducted after they had been observed. It included a description of their location, the division of their overall space into subspaces, the various library sections, the furniture, equipment and their placement.

The relationship between the frequency of visits to the library, the physical environment, its working hours, the duration of the pupils' stay and their activity in it were examined. Also explored was whether, and if so, to what degree is there an association between concentrations of pupils, their movement within the library and the physical conditions, as well as the influence of the library furniture and its arrangement on the pupils' behavior in the library. The observations focused on the following furniture: cubbyholes for the pupils' schoolbags, the librarian's desk, the cozy armchair seating area, the computer workstations and the photocopy machine. The relationship between the different learning styles of the pupils and the conditions in the libraries and their territorial behavior was also investigated.

The study's results indicate that a relationship exists between the library's physical environment and the frequency of visits to it. The library's proximity to the classroom and its placement on a conveniently located floor are factors that influence the number of visitors. Well-maintained libraries are rated highly by the users. Since the four libraries observed had undergone renovations and refurbishment, the pupils expressed satisfaction with them. It was found that there is a correlation between the time spent in the library and the type of activity occuring there. Lengthier stays indicate that more learning activities are taking place using the library's book collection. Pupils use the library during recess for social activity, including conversations with friends and playing with the computer.

Pupils and librarians interviewed attempted to explain what distinguishes the library from other places in the school and which conditions encourage pupils to go there and which insure a pleasant stay and productive study. They referred to the location of the library in relation to the entire school grounds and stated that the degree of accessibility and the distance from the classroom to the library influence the frequency of visits. The pupils also noted the special atmosphere prevailing there. Mentioned among the factors creating this atmosphere were: aesthetics, rugs, special colors, lighting and acoustics, the library's design and spatial division. The special furniture and equipment were mentioned as comfort creating factors that attract pupils to the library. Some interviewees explained how the physical conditions that differ from those in other places in the school are conducive to "convivial gatherings of a few pupils" and social encounters.

It is possible to extrapolate from the findings that the design and arrangement of furniture in the library influence pupil behavior there. The location of the librarian's desk or the cozy seating area also affects pupil behavior there. A concentration of pupils around them is a source of noise, yet many pupils tend to try to find seating close by. Different territorial seating and behavior patterns were observed in different locations in the library. Other sections in the library containing equipment that enables pupils to enjoy innovative technology such as computers and photocopy machines influence the users. Noise levels and concentration of pupils in the various locations of the library depend on the furniture, the equipment and their placement. The library furniture, its book collection and equipment influence the satisfaction level of the users. The areas of the librarian desks, photocopy machines, cubbyholes for schoolbags, computer workstations, armchairs and informal seating areas are all places in which the activities occuring there cause noise. Obviously, locating them in proximity to the reference and study section disturbs those pupils who wish to work in quiet.

Studying together is very popular and appropriate to the characteristics of the age of adolescence. The need for a group of friends and a peer group also suits the learning styles of these pupils. It is more prevalent among junior high school age pupils, while older high school pupils tend to study alone, seeking the most suitable study conditions. More of these pupils opt to use the carrels.

A correlation was found between the type of material studied and the learning style. The reference collection and the non-fiction books are placed in different sections of the libraries and attract pupils sitting near them for different lengths of time. Those choosing to study in proximity to the non-fiction books stay in the library for longer periods. In addition to influencing the seating choice, the type of collection also affects whether the learning process is individual or in a group.

There is a correlation between the characteristics of adolescence and pupil behavioral patterns in the various alcoves and areas of the library, particularly near the cubbyholes for storing schoolbags, the computer workstations, the armchair and the tables in the reference room. The need for "togetherness" and a peer group creates study groups in the library, influencing the future design there.

There is also a link between the characteristics of adolescence and pupil learning styles. Junior high school pupils prefer to study in groups, but as age

advances, a tendency towards individual study and avoidance of group study increases.

Several recommendations arise from the study's findings. Foremost, it is recommended that the library be readily available to the greatest number of pupils. Also, the library should be divided into sub-spatial units suited to the various activities and tailored to the needs of the users. Tables for group work should be available (approx. 40% of total seating capacity), separated from areas for quiet work (approx. 30% of total seating). Carrels and single-occupancy tables should be provided (approx. 10% of total seating), as should informal seating arrangements for recreational activity (approx. 20% of total seating). Clearer distinctions between areas would insure the learning conditions required by certain pupils, while allocating separate areas for recreational use. Lastly, providing suitable acoustic conditions will enhance learning activity on the one hand and permit informal social activity on the other hand.

System No.
525109