LIBRARIANS AS LEADERS IN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE GROUND

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Abstract. This paper discusses issues such as personnel, activities and programmes in a five-year old school library and how the library specialist could serve the school community in the roles of trainer, co-ordinator and collaborator.

Resource development is an important function of the school library. This is especially so during the early years of the development of the school library. Resources, both print and non-print have to be identified, sourced, purchased, documented and made available to staff and pupils in the school. The provision of teaching and learning resources therefore, is considered as central and the raison d'etre for the existence of a library. However, based on observations and experiences in working with those involved in library work, it is found that new libraries might be distracted from their aim of developing relevant and useful resources for the school population.

In this paper, two main reasons for the misalignment are observed in the functioning of a new school library. This paper discusses the reasons for the misalignment and analyses how a professional librarian who operates within a new school library setting can tap on the resources within and outside the organization. This paper suggests that the librarian can play an in important leadership role in resource development in secondary schools.

Methodology

This paper is based on reflections of a teacher librarian over a two year period and as a teacher who received services from the library in secondary school over a ten year period. Over a three-year period, discussions with the principal, the Head of Department of the Media Resource Library (HOD, MRL) teacher librarians, pupils and other library stakeholders were conducted. Documents related to library matters for example, instructions with regard to co-curricular matters and the use of the library were analysed.

The School Library as an Information Resource Centre

A school library is a storehouse of information and resources for the school population. In the analysis of the functioning of the library in a relatively new secondary school, it is found that libraries actually should be in a state of readiness to serve as an information resource centre. This means having the necessary infrastructure – the furniture, equipment, facilities etc. before it can truly meet its function as a resource centre. Without adequate and appropriate library furniture for example, the library will not be able to display the resources it has. However, in the new school library under discussion, the library was poorly equipped with furniture and other equipment. It also lacked the processes for effective functioning.

Many of the problems besetting the new library can be attributed to problems of misalignment in meeting the core objective, namely the provision of teaching and learning resources crucial for teachers and pupils in the school.

Misalignment of Aims of the Library

The five year old library promoted activities and programmes which were not core to the provision of the much-needed resources for the school population. For example, the library prides itself in organizing the floorball game, the Monopoly championship and partnership with students on display of toys and collectibles[1]. It placed heavy emphasis on the co-curricular activities aspect instead of the provision of information resources.

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[1] Media Resource Library Co-Curricular Activities Final Term Report 2005.

The library was also used as the venue for school events which was not appropriate. During Speech Day, the library becomes an exhibition centre for pupils' work. The library also became the choice venue as a holding area for performers in school performances. For each of these events, the library was closed for one and a half weeks.

On the other hand, the teachers in the school, like other teachers in Singapore were complaining about heavy workloads.[2] Instead of relying on the library for teaching resources, the teachers had to develop their own. They experimented with the development of websites, yahoo groups and interactive educational resources.[3] The Ministry of Education, in recognition of the heavy workload shouldered by teachers had introduced several measures such as the appointment of Administrative Managers, Operations Managers and recently the adjunct teacher scheme to lighten teachers' workload.[4]

There seems to be a contradiction – at one end, teachers develop their own resources and the Ministry is trying to reduce teachers' workload while at the other end, the library does not contribute to the area in which it can make significant impact within the school community.

The school library has misaligned its activities and programmes from its core aim of information provision to the school community.

Reasons for Misalignment in Objectives

Two main reasons for the misalignment of the objectives of the library worth highlighting are the lack of precedence or ignorance by the library management team and overambitious programmes.

First, the library coordinators or the Heads of Department in-charge of Media Resource Libraries (HOD, MRL) did not have precedents to follow. They also did not have prior experience in managing or working in a library. The lack of experiential knowledge means that they had to grope in the dark in managing the library. The teacher librarians also did not have basic librarianship certification. While this might be addressed by attending courses, the lack of relevant library-related courses for teachers shows the lack of emphasis on librarianship or library management in schools. Furthermore, teachers are encouraged to focus on enhancing their pedagogical and content area skills by their respective Heads of Department. Therefore, library training is considered to be of lower priority for teachers compared to subject-based or content-based training. A combination of these factors contributed to the lack of knowledge in managing the library.

Over the last five years, there had been changes in personnel for the different posts in the library. For the post of the overall in-charge of the library, there were two changes while the post of library coordinator had changed five times. The frequent changes contributed to the lack of continuity and improvement in the management of the library. For example, while the school engaged the help of the Parent Support Group (PSG) in 2004, it decided to stop the services offered by the PSG in 2005. However, in year 2006, it decided to work with the PSG again on library work. Similarly, the library team discussed over the same leadership issues relating to pupil librarians for year 2004 and 2006 showing the lack of continuity and improvement in that area.[5]

Secondly, due to the ranking of schools, some schools could be too ambitious in planning their programmes and activities. These programmes could be inappropriate during the early stage of development of the library. In the study, the HOD and the library management team in the school library organized visits to the Republic Polytechnic, national library and school libraries, hoping to learn from the experiences of the management of these libraries. However, in the process of trying to adopt some practices, the programmes in these 'mature' libraries were inappropriate for the 'infant' library. For example, while the mature libraries are at the stage of drawing crowds to the library, the infant library is trying to do the same when it does not have adequate teaching and learning resources as needed by students.

The school's principal and other key school management members also contributed to such ambitious programmes. The principal is keen to see the school to be on par, if not better than similar schools and expects the library programmes to be similar to those of other libraries. This decision often does not take into consideration the different stages of development of the school libraries or that the readiness of the library in terms of its infrastructure might not have been addressed. Co-curricular activities also impacts on library policy as Library is regarded as a co-curricular activity. The impact of

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[2] http://www.singaporebrides.com/cgi-bin/forumboard/discus.cgi?pg=next&topic=3&page=5717
[3] IROnline - "Resourcing" Interactively at
http://www.moe.gov.sg/corporate/contactonline/2006/issue02/sub_professionalMatters_art02.htm
[4] Shaping Lives, Moulding Nation at http://www.moe.gov.sg/speeches/2001/sp31082001.htm
[5] Refer to Media Resource Library Workplan 2005.

CCA policy can be seen with the integration of the LEAPs model in the workplan of the CCA. Under the LEAPs framework, the library management teams are required to use the **L**eadership, **E**nrichment, **A**chievement, **P**articipation and **S**ervice (LEAPS) structure in designing programmes and activities for pupil librarians.[6] The inclusion of the management of CCA as a library activity takes away the much-needed time of the school librarian, teacher librarians and the library coordinator from focusing on provision of information services.

The Role of a Librarian in the School

The librarian, by definition, is a specialist in providing information needed by the school community. Compared to the profile of the library management team discussed earlier, the librarian therefore occupies a niche in the library. The school librarian however is subordinate to the library management team in the school library. At times, the different belief on how the library should be managed might have caused the librarian to be at loggerheads with the management team. Furthermore, the focus on non-core library activities caused the librarian to neglect the core specialty of the librarian i.e. the provision of resources. Clearly, the librarian has to manage the tension between information provision and addressing the duties as delegated by the management team. In the school library, the post of the librarian has changed hands five times since the school library started its operation.

Leadership Role of Librarians

A librarian has to gain to the people she/he is working with and the nature of the organization before she/he can utilise her/his special library training.

a) *Knowledge of the School Library Management Team*

It is important that the librarian find out about the background of each member of the library management team, including the Principal. This knowledge will make the librarian aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the personnel in library management. It will also make her more accepting of the particularities of the programmes of the library. Through this knowledge, many personnel and relationship problems can be avoided. The knowledge also will give an insight on the reasons for the incompatibility of the librarian's knowledge based on what is taught in information science and the particular library the librarian serve works. This provides a reality check. A librarian's measure of competency, in this case is not measured in terms of the way the librarian exercise her knowledge and skills in the provision of information but in terms of being able to deliver what has been delegated and communicate to the librarian as important in library work.

b) *Knowledge of the Policies of the Ministry of Education*

It is also vital that the librarian keep abreast of past, current and future policies of the Ministry of Education. This understanding is important because the Ministry of Education in Singapore impacts strongly on how schools structure their programmes through a system of awards and rewards.

Recent initiatives include the COMPASS Award, which requires schools to engage the community in achieving the mission and vision of the school.[7] Such a requirement can be used to offload routine duties performed by the librarian. The librarian can lead in terms of training the PSG in performing routine roles while she can focus on the more specialised tasks.

Alumni also provide a source of manpower. The school engaged the Alumni to liaise with one of the community libraries to spearhead the Book Borrowing Project. Under this Project, the library personnel from the national library bring books identified earlier by the school community for borrowing. This helped the school library to provide the resources needed by the school community. Again the librarian's role is that of a trainer and collaborator for Alumni members.

While CCA policies might pose problems, they could be turned to advantage for the library. Under the LEAPs structure, the librarian can play a more meaningful role in training the pupil librarian to deal with day-to-day functions of the library such as issuing of books, shelving, decorating, etc. It provides the motivation for pupil librarians to perform their roles as pupil librarians more effectively as they will be rewarded with CCA points for good performance. Without the LEAPs structure, pupil librarians were known to join the library as a CCA for reasons other than that of contributing to the development

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[6] http://www.moe.gov.sg/ccab/branch/LEAPS%20Guidelines%20ver%202.pdf.
[7] http://www.moe.gov.sg/compass/compass.html

of the library. For example, some of the pupils chose library activities because the library is air-conditioned while others had medical problems and therefore could not take on a physically demanding CCA.

c) Knowledge of Other Libraries Serving the School Community

It is also important for librarians to be aware of the programmes offered by other libraries which serve the school community. The Bedok Library, for example offered the Book Borrowing Service and conducted a Book Discussion Programme. Through the Alumni, the library had successfully engaged Bedok Library to supplement and enrich the collection and was able to outsource a function such as book discussion.

The librarian should also be aware of other libraries that serve the needs of teachers especially Teachers Network library.[8] The services which Teachers Network library provide is often duplicated by school libraries. For instance, schools organize the mobile library service on their own thereby sapping the time and effort of the teacher librarians and the librarian in the school for the project. However, if the free manpower from Teachers Network is used, the school librarian will help not only to widen the collection of books for teachers but also relieve the non-core and unimportant functions to be outsourced.

d) Knowledge of Needs of Teachers and Pupils

The librarian should play an important role in reorienting the library to meet the needs of its customers i.e. pupils and staff in the school. The librarian should keep abreast of the resource needs of teachers and pupils especially in view of the Ministry's encouragement for teachers to be innovative and enterprising. This means that teachers are encouraged to create new knowledge. For the librarian, this provides a new leadership opportunity as the library is a rich source of information from which new knowledge can be produced. With the constraints of time and heavy workload of teachers, the librarian is in a strong position to play a transformative role in the areas of knowledge creation in collaboration with teachers in the school.

Conclusion

In this paper, the librarian is seen to be a specialist but which needs to work within the culture of the organization it is serving. To play a leadership and important role, the librarian should not merely depend on her specialist training in information science but also on understanding the people, the organization and other organizations which might impact on library services and programmes. More importantly, she needs to listen to her customers and understand their problems. If these problems are addressed, then the librarian will be able to serve as a trainer, collaborator and coordinator in resource provision.

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[8] http://sam11.moe.gov.sg/tn/readtn/readtn.html