



World Library and Information Congress: 69th IFLA General Conference and Council

1-9 August 2003, Berlin

Code Number: 125-E
Meeting: 156. Education and Training & School Libraries and Resource Centres - **Workshop**
Simultaneous Interpretation: -

Education for school librarianship: Selected issues and trends

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Abstract

This paper explores selected issues that are derived from a discussion about the competencies that underpin school librarianship and the education of professionals who work as school librarians. The paper attempts to take a wide and adversarial position on these issues. The paper concludes that nothing much can be concluded. This is not to say that there is not value in the exercise, but rather that it is important to recognize the limitations inherent to the exercise.

A recent paper (Shannon 2002) not only stole some of our thunder but also provided a substantial introduction to our topic. Shannon undertook an 'extensive' review of the literature pertaining to the education and competencies required of school library media specialists. What is perhaps interesting, for the authors who write from outside North America, is the reality that almost all the material for Shannon's paper comes from within the North American experience. We do not suggest that the North American experience is without value; it is! But it is just one experience among many and IFLA is concerned about the many.

This is a significant and unrelenting issue; namely: how can associations, such as IFLA, project a consistent image of the school library professional in a world that boasts such an array of education systems and arguments about the role of information services in those systems. How does one do justice to the challenge when the predominant view that dominates the literature, is written in English, and usually describes the traditions of the English-speaking world?

This very theme was raised by Hannesdottir (1995) at the 61st IFLA Conference where she posed the question? ‘What do school librarians need to know?’ The problems of different systems for schooling and for the education of professionals who work in school libraries fashions a sort of maze from which there is no easy exit path. Hannesdottir posed the differences as follows:

1. *The school librarians are defined as specialised teachers. If so, teacher's training is required with or without experience in classroom teaching. In educational programs for these school librarians emphasis is placed on the role of the library in the context of cooperative planning and teaching where school librarians have an active role in classroom teaching.*
2. *The school librarians are defined as specialised librarians. If so, the basic training is that of an information specialist. The main role of school librarians is to provide the classroom teachers with information and sources that are required for the classrooms. Emphasis is on extensive information provision for the whole school and the instructional role limited to information skills.*
3. *School librarianship is defined as a separate profession. Professional preparation is separate from both librarianship and teaching but can be housed within library schools, teacher training institutions or separately. It is recognised that competencies need to be borrowed from both teaching and librarianship. Educational programs are created and developed in the view of a separate role which is distinctly different from the role of both teachers and librarians.*

Hannesdottir went on to argue that:

In view of the divergent ideas there was no alternative than to approach the issue from an entirely different standpoint. The approach which was tried and which seems to work for that particular group was simply to ask the question: "What does a school librarian need to know?" This approach meant that the Working Group could focus on the identification of the competencies which school librarians needed in order to function properly in the school setting and then leave it to individual countries or school systems to figure out for themselves what was the most efficient and effective way to create courses which would include these competencies.

If we accept the logic of the Hannesdottir proposition, and it certainly is an appealing argument, the task seems so much easier. It boils down to a codification of best practice; a comprehensive but seemingly achievable task. Or is it so straight forward? How in fact is best practice decided and described?

One way to address the issue is to frame the set of competencies in very generic form. Tilke (1999) adopted just this approach when he stated that:

The librarian in a secondary school typically employs a range of skills and competencies to enable the school library to be in a position to encourage the development of discovery and personal growth for both pupils and staff.

The downside of this description is that it is so generic that it becomes almost idiosyncratic to the point that it cannot be codified.

The fact is that when a group of information professionals sit down to consider or debate ‘*the competencies which school librarians need in order to function properly in the school setting*’ the discussion itself will be influenced by the traditions of the education system in which the debate occurs.

Consider the following statements that reflect the situation in a number of English speaking countries:

Australia: Policy Statement - Teacher librarians in Australia¹

The teacher librarian is a leader within the educational community. The valuable role of the teacher librarian focuses on:

- 1. Learners and learning*
- 2. Teachers and teaching*
- 3. Resourcing the curriculum*
- 4. Facilitating access to information*
- 5. Developing the physical environment*
- 6. Teacher librarians support and implement the vision of their school communities through advocating and building effective library and information services and programs that contribute to the development of lifelong learners.*

Canada: Association for Teacher-Librarianship in Canada²

Professional competencies

The teacher librarian :

- 1.1 places a priority on staff relationships and leadership in the implementation of change;
- 1.2 provides leadership in collaborative program planning and teaching to ensure both physical and intellectual access to information and commitment to voluntary reading;
- 1.3 knows curriculum programs mandated by the province, district and school;

¹ <http://www.asla.org.au/policy/p_tlaust.htm>

² <<http://www.atlc.ca/Publications/competen.htm>>

- 1.4 understands students and their social, emotional and intellectual needs;
- 1.5 has expert knowledge in evaluating learning resources in different formats and media, both on-site and remote, to support the instructional program;
- 1.6 develops and promotes the effective use of informational and imaginative resources in all formats through cooperative professional activities
- 1.7 provides appropriate information, resources or instruction to satisfy the needs of individuals and groups;
- 1.8 uses appropriate information technology to acquire, organize and disseminate information;
- 1.9 manages library programs, services and staff to support the stated educational goals of the school;
- 1.10 evaluates program and services.

Personal competencies

The teacher librarian :

- 2.1 is committed to program excellence;
- 2.2 seeks out challenges and sees new opportunities both inside and outside the library;
- 2.3 sees the big picture;
- 2.4 looks for partnership and alliances;
- 2.5 creates an environment of mutual respect and trust;
- 2.6 has effective communication skills;
- 2.7 provides leadership;
- 2.9 plans, prioritizes and focuses on what is critical;
- 2.10 is committed to lifelong learning;
- 2.11 is flexible and positive in a time of continuing change.

UK: Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals³

Main functions:

- The management of the school library, its budget, staffing and electronic and hard copy resources.

³ <<http://www.lisjobnet.org.uk/jobseek/school.pdf>>

- The creation and implementation of a school library policy which supports the school in meeting the targets set in the School Improvement Plan.
- Liaison with all departments in the school and with the wider learning community to ensure appropriate access to learning resources.
- Help to pupils and staff on resources to assist learning and extend patterns of teaching.
- Participation in the planning and delivery of information literacy programmes within the school.
- Support for literacy and reader development within the school.

Basic skills and competences:

- The ability to manage and disseminate information in a range of different media
- A knowledge of the current education framework
- Communication skills
- A knowledge of literature
- Strategic planning skills to support the writing and implementation of the learning resource centre's policy
- Financial management skills for management of library budget
- A knowledge, understanding and competence in ICT
- Behaviour management skills
- Learning support skills

USA : ALA/AASL: Information Power⁴

Roles and Responsibilities of the School Library Media Specialist

As teacher, the library media specialist collaborates with students and other members of the learning community to analyze learning and information needs, to locate and use resources that will meet those needs, and to understand and communicate the information the resources provide. An effective instructor of students, the library media specialist is knowledgeable about current research on teaching and learning and skilled in applying its findings to a variety of situation--particularly those that call upon students to access, evaluate, and use information from multiple sources in order to learn, to think, and to create and apply new knowledge. A curricular leader and a full participant on the instructional team, the library media specialist constantly updates personal skills and knowledge in order to work effectively with teachers, administrators, and other staff--both to expand their general understanding of information issues and to provide them with specific opportunities to develop sophisticated skills in information literacy, including the uses of information technology.

As instructional partner, the library media specialist joins with teachers and others to identify links across student information needs, curricular content, learning outcomes, and a wide variety of print, nonprint, and electronic information resources. Working with the entire school community, the library media specialist takes a leading role in developing policies, practices, and curricula that guide students to develop the full range of information and communication abilities. Committed to the process of collaboration,

⁴ http://ala.org/aaslTemplate.cfm?Section=Information_Power&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=19930

the library media specialist works closely with individual teachers in the critical areas of designing authentic learning tasks and assessments and integrating the information and communication abilities required to meet subject matter standards.

As information specialist, the library media specialist provides leadership and expertise in acquiring and evaluating information resources in all formats; in bringing an awareness of information issues into collaborative relationships with teachers, administrators, students, and others; and in modeling for students and others strategies for locating, accessing, and evaluating information within and beyond the library media center. Working in an environment that has been profoundly affected by technology, the library media specialist both masters sophisticated electronic resources and maintains a constant focus on the nature, quality, and ethical use of information available in these and in more traditional tools.

As program administrator, the library media specialist works collaboratively with members of the learning community to define the policies of the library media program and to guide and direct all activities related to it. Confident of the importance of the effective use of information and information technology to students' personal and economic success in their future lives, the library media specialist is an advocate for the library media program and provides the knowledge, vision, and leadership to steer it creatively and energetically in the twenty-first century. Proficient in the management of staff, budgets, equipment, and facilities, the library media specialist plans, executes, and evaluates the program to ensure its quality both at a general level and on a day-to-day basis.

2: New England Educational Media Association⁵

1. Information Literacy is an integral part of the curriculum

- *Information literacy skills are embedded within the curriculum of most disciplines;*
- *Teachers and students use the resources of the library media center for teaching and learning;*
- *The administration, teachers, students, and community understand and support the learning goals and objectives of the library media program.*

2. Collaborative planning and teaching

- *Library media specialists participate in building, district, and department or grade level curriculum development/assessment on a regular basis;*
- *Library media specialists work with teachers as instructional partners in unit development and implementation.*

3. Resource based learning experiences and environments

⁵ <<http://www.neema.org/competencies.doc>>

- *The resource collection is selected and developed cooperatively by the library media specialist and faculty to support the school's curriculum and to contribute to the learning goals of teachers and students;*
- *A collection development plan is in place in order to ensure that resources reflect both current and in-depth knowledge;*
- *The collection is of sufficient breadth and currency to be pertinent to the school's program of studies;*
- *The library media center provides adequate, appropriate space for program resources, services and activities.*

4. Use of resources in all formats as a valid, valuable base for learning in all subject areas

- *Learning needs of all students are met through access to information and ideas located in a multi-formatted resource collection that is supported by reliable equipment, and that is also adequate or in sufficient quantity for the student population to utilize the resources;*
- *Students are able to demonstrate knowledge in the use of a wide variety of resources and equipment.*

5. Use of technology as a tool or resource to facilitate student learning

- *The program provides electronic resources and focuses on the utilization of these resources in the information literacy curriculum of various content areas;*
- *Students use technology to foster inquiry and master skills necessary for an information literate, life-long learner;*
- *There is evidence through student ability to use technology to solve information problems, that information literacy and technology skills have been linked in content curricula to promote the transfer of information problem solving strategies across all disciplines.*

6. Professional growth and development

- *School Library Media Specialists participate in effective staff development to consistently update skills and knowledge - especially as they relate to information literacy issues and related technologies;*
- *There is evidence that the library media specialist is aware of effective practices and current research in the area of student learning and information literacy.*

7. Management of resources and access

- *The materials of the resource collection are included in a bibliographic control system which uses standardized formats for classification and cataloging;*
- *Resources are circulated according to procedures that ensure confidentiality of borrower records and promote free and easy access for students and staff;*

- *There is evidence that resources are readily accessible to students and staff because of effective acquisition and circulation policies and procedures, resource sharing, and access to electronic resources outside of the school;*
- *The collection is organized for maximum and effective use;*
- *A flexible schedule is maintained to ensure access by students and teachers at point of need.*

8. Advocacy

- *The program is promoted by school library media personnel who model the importance of information literacy in education, publicize available services and resources to students, staff and the community, serve on school and district-wide committees and participate in community projects;*
- *There is evidence that the value of the library program to students and staff is well articulated and clearly understood by administration and faculty.*

9. Ethical uses of ideas and information

- *The program promotes the responsible use of ideas and information through collaboration with teachers, administrators, and others in the development of policies and procedure that comply with current copyright and other law that pertain to intellectual property;*
- *The program actively models the ethical use of information and information technologies in the provision of services relating to the use and/or duplication of resources in any and all formats, confidentiality of records, and equitable access.*

While there is a general coherence across all of these profiles, at the micro level they are nevertheless different. This difference may be in part historical, it may be in part a question of different philosophical position, and it may reflect different school structures and sizes. But in each case these descriptions were crafted by information professionals! The similarities of course are much more significant than the differences. But this is the case about all elements of education (teacher credentials, curriculum design, key learning areas, levels of technology, pedagogy, and school structures) in these selected countries. How much more difficult the challenge of identifying what school librarians need to know across quite different systems? Do school librarians in Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, Uganda and Russia need to know the same things, both conceptually and in practice?

The descriptions given above are indeed valuable but they are just one element of a complex whole. A further part of the picture is provided by the employing authorities who determine whether or not a school will have a school library, whether it is mandated or optional, whether the school library will be managed by a professional, whether the library will be a place or a comprehensive service, and the number and level of importance of the appointments. The employing authority may or may not refer to professional statements when making these decisions.

In Australia, Canada, and Hong Kong a school librarian is a teacher librarian. In the government schools this means that the incumbent will always be a qualified teacher. This may not be the case in non-government schools. But what is a qualified teacher? The answer will be quite different in each country. In Australia, Canada and Hong Kong the teacher librarian 'may' have additional qualifications in librarianship. In fact the 'official' position in these countries is that a teacher librarian is also a qualified librarian. For example:

Australia: ALIA/ASLA. *A qualified teacher librarian can be defined as a person who holds recognised teaching qualifications and qualifications in librarianship, defined as eligibility for professional membership for the Australian Library and Information Association [ALIA] Within the broad fields of Education and Librarianship, teacher librarians are uniquely qualified. This is valuable because curriculum knowledge and pedagogy are combined with library and information management knowledge and skills. The teacher librarian plays a critical role in the development of information literate citizens who are lifelong learners.*

Canada: ATLC. *A professional teacher with a minimum of two years of successful classroom experience and additional qualifications in the selection, management and utilization of learning resources, who manages the school library and works with other teachers to design and implement resource-based instructional programs.*

It is essential that the reader understand that the official position promulgated by the professional bodies may not match employer requirements.

*For accreditation as a teacher-librarian in the NSW Department of Education and Training qualified primary or secondary teachers must have completed an approved teacher librarianship training program.*⁶

Any informed educator in Australia or Canada can verify that teacher librarians are often under-qualified in the eyes of the professional bodies. What counts as an 'approved teacher librarianship training program' in the eyes of the employer may be quite different from the view held by the professional associations. In fact many schools in these countries employ a classroom teacher to look after the library; others employ a paraprofessional, a clerk, or make use of student or parent assistants to 'manage' the library.

In the UK and in most of Europe if schools employ school librarians they are unlikely to hold dual qualifications, and may not hold any qualification. In the UK for example, the school librarian is likely to be a chartered (fully professional) librarian. This means that the school librarian is likely to perform better at the librarianship component of the role. In France, on the contrary, the teacher librarian is recruited and educated along the same principles and contents as subject teachers, with a specialization in the information field. Teacher librarians are thus considered rather more like teachers by chartered librarians, while subject teachers do not know clearly how to consider them.

⁶ <<http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/schoollibraries/resources/unicourses.htm>>

The reality of most school situations is that regardless of qualifications and experience the role expected of the school librarian, by the employing authority, is bigger than one professional person. This fact makes the argument about whether that person ought to emerge out of teaching or out of librarianship rather pointless. Indeed, much of the change agency role expected of school librarians is made almost impossible by their lack of authority within the school. Those schools, typically non-government schools, which take the role of information services seriously respond to the impossible role expectations by appointing a team of professionals that may include teacher librarians, teachers, librarians, and technical support people to manage the facility. These schools operate a mini-university library service!

That there are differing positions held by the employing authority and the professional bodies is to be expected. It would be expected that the professional bodies portray a more idealistic and visionary picture. The position adopted by the employing authority is more likely to reflect financial considerations and must dovetail with other developments affecting schooling such as moves towards school based management and school based curriculum developments. Employing authorities must consider all issues; the professional bodies just focus on one.

A trend across the world is for authority to be devolved from the school authority to the local school and specifically to the school principal. This devolution is likely to have a particular effect upon anything that is regarded as non-core. Classroom or subject teachers are always core. Just about everything else is non-core. In Hong Kong, for example, most schools have a teacher librarian, because the post of teacher librarian is a position that is mandated by the ministry of education. Furthermore, the percentage of teacher librarians with 'recognised' qualifications is growing quite rapidly and what counts as a recognized qualification is significant and therefore schools are enabled to appoint a teacher librarian who meets the dual qualification requirement set by the employing authority. In practice, however, the large majority of these 'teacher librarians' spend considerable time undertaking responsibilities that have no relationship to their position of teacher librarian. They are employed as a full time teacher librarian but for a significant proportion of the week they are actually teacher librarian in name only! This practice is not unique to Hong Kong and it is one of the dilemmas that face the profession. When qualified professionals are appointed as the school librarian but used as substitute teacher, as a storyteller or reading teacher, or as a subject teacher, they are school librarian in name only. Likewise, where an under-qualified person is appointed as a school librarian, they are school librarian in name only! There are so many incumbents of these kinds that it is surprising that anyone can actually describe a typical school librarian.

In many European countries, the development of information and communication technologies is an opportunity to re-design the role of school librarians. Because of the lack of technical support staff in schools, principals expect school librarians to be in charge of the whole information system, in every aspect. The confusion often entertained between computer science and information science has at the present time reached a crucial point. When we consider the recommendations of the European Commission in the educational field, we can see that the use of ICT is a top item. School libraries are being transformed into multimedia resource centres, where electronic materials are in pole position. School librarians could very well be transformed into computer assistants, and their participation to the development of information literacy reduced to that of the use of numeric tools and materials. This situation can frequently be found

in the education systems when new needs appear : the staff whose role is not clearly defined is supposed to be able to cope.

A further issue for school librarianship is that it is not a primary profession. Regardless of whether it is fundamentally about teaching or about librarianship, the fact is that for the overwhelming majority of practitioners it was not a first choice profession. Teaching or librarianship are the primary professions. This creates a number of dilemmas and contradictions. The Canadian competencies developed by ATLC, referred to above, cover both professional and personal attributes. But, the pond of possible teacher librarians is simply a fragment of the larger pool of teachers who have already been selected as suitable for employment by the employing authority. Likewise in the UK and other countries that employ librarians as school librarian the candidates come from an already defined pool of professionals. It will be a brave employer indeed, who would label one of these as unsuitable for the post of school librarian.

Nevertheless, in countries where school librarians are considered as teachers, the profession can be attractive to young people who want to teach but outside the classroom. The school resource centre is thus considered as a real learning environment, and an effective co-operation between subject teachers and the teacher librarian is perceived as a good lever for the implementation of innovative educative practices.

An appointment condition for the position of teacher librarian often includes a requirement that the candidate has had the benefit of a minimum of two years teaching experience. This requirement is framed in response to the argument that the teacher librarian cannot meet the expectations of the position without first having achieved experience in the classroom. This is the positive side of the requirement. However, this requirement brings with it a number of negative implications. The first is the interpretation that the position is suitable for anyone who has a mere two years of teaching experience. It is virtually open to any teacher! This pejorative interpretation, together, with an unclear promotion path for teacher librarians, results in the position being identified as one lacking prestige and influence.

The position of teacher librarian, as opposed to that of curriculum coordinator, for example, does not drip with appeal to ambitious teachers. Therefore, candidate teacher librarians do not necessarily come from the 'movers and shakers' in school. Furthermore the focus of the role of the school librarian is on teacher interaction and this means that the school librarian should be an effective collaborator. When one looks at the typical school and the typical non-school library one is bound to notice that professional practice is typified by isolation not by collaboration. This may mean that there is an inherent contradiction between the larger pool of professionals and the smaller subset of school librarians. The question is to interpret the reasons of this non-collaboration. As long as information literacy will not be a core preoccupation for the school authority, there is no way for the school librarian to convince subjects teachers of its importance for the students' personal growth.

Because school librarianship is not a primary occupation few incumbents have entered the primary workforce with the requisite qualifications required of the position. But, employers expect candidate school librarians to fund the additional qualifications that are required for the position. Again this creates a number of dilemmas and contradictions. This means that education for school librarianship is typically post-service and part time and increasingly offered by flexible delivery [See: Lombello & Visintin (2001) for a recent European discussion]. Why should well

paid librarians or teachers undertake such study at their own expense and without any guarantee of employment? Of course many do not take such a risk and this in part explains why there are often insufficient qualified candidates available to take up positions and why under-qualified people are often allocated to these posts. But will a person who has gained employment as a school librarian see the need to undertake specialist education? As long as his job is not put at stake by the evidence of non-competency. This questions the assessment of educational services and of the performance of educators.

The post-service reality of education for school librarianship means that those taking such courses do not study with people (that is classroom teachers) who will be their future collaborators. This means that the nature of such programs result in a lack of opportunity for greater understanding, among the teaching profession, of the role of the school librarian.

The discussion so far has indicated that even if IFLA were to agree on a set of competencies that are required for employment in school librarianship, such an agreement may not have any effect on common practice in the appointment of school librarians. However, the issue is even more complex and perhaps more desperate than has been suggested so far.

The offering and content of university programs that prepare school librarians are few and far between and these programs can be found in a wide variety of faculties, including Education, Information Management, Applied Science, Communication, and so on. While market forces, including the views of professional associations, have an impact on these programs major decisions will be made by the universities and not by stakeholders. The first major decision is to offer a program. Such a decision is invariably the product of a felt demand plus existing academic staff who have some interest in the field of school librarianship. The mere existence of a demand will not result in the development of a program as all programs face significant competition for funds and staff from within the university. Some universities have responded to perceived demand and have designed unique programs in school librarianship. Other universities have created a specialist strand or specialist subjects within existing programs as a way of rationalizing resources. Some universities recruit candidate school librarians into existing programs designed for generalists rather than for specialists.

The universities often perceive the economies of scale of offering credentialing of school librarians from modified offerings in library and information studies. And some academics in the field argue that this is the correct approach (Harvey, 2001). What this means in practice is that such providers do not employ a team of academics with professional and research experience and expertise in the specific field of school librarianship to design and develop quality programs. It is more likely that the provider may recruit one or perhaps two such specialists to work within a much larger team of generalists. The Australian experience suggests that such an approach ultimately leads to the elimination of specialist programs in school librarianship.

On the other hand the Canadian practice of mounting programs in school librarianship out of faculties of education and independent of any offerings in library and information studies programs creates a small, and it seems in the long term, unviable unit. It can be hypothesized that such a result is to be expected as small units within large departments or faculties are unlikely to build the research profile that is required of academics who wish to survive.

An answer to this dilemma would be to place library and information studies programs with the same faculty as offerings in education. While this may solve the dilemmas posed above it would likely create a new set of challenges such as the de-linking of a nexus among library and information studies programs and programs in information technology. The fact is, however, that such matters are beyond the influence of those who propose competencies for school librarians. It does, however, illustrate once again that deciding on a set of competencies that underpin the practice of school librarianship is both complex and largely academic. In the final analysis the preparation of professionals rests in the hands of the universities and the academic staff that they employ and their ability to deliver what is required. The question shifts to ‘What do the educators of school librarians need to know?’

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