

The Changing Role of School Libraries

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One of the objectives of the Secondary Education Modernization Programme (SEMP), according to its 2002 Handbook, is “the development of teaching techniques that will produce graduates who can adapt to the rapid changes being brought about by the technological advances and globalization.” How can the school library, as an integral part of the educational system and the teaching and learning process, (a) become a change agent in helping to achieve this objective, and (b) help to produce students who can function in a technological and information-rich world?

According to UNESCO’s 1999 School Library Manifesto, the school library should: 1) provide information and ideas that are fundamental to functioning in today’s information and knowledge-based society, 2) equip students with lifelong learning skills, and 3) develop the imagination and enable students to live as responsible citizens.

It is clear, therefore, that the school library today is expected to function at a far superior level than the traditional library, which was conceived as a quiet place to study and read or to acquire books for learning and recreation. The library in this millennium is required to be a technologically based facility, which is to be used by students and teachers for acquiring information that is being produced at an exponential rate in electronic formats, as opposed to traditional print-based formats. In order to ensure that students are able to access this information effectively and efficiently, the library has to become a place where students learn how to learn.

As the focus of the library changes, so too does the role of school librarians. They now become curriculum collaborators, facilitators, and instructors. These roles do not preclude the traditional functions of reading guidance, and selection and organisation of materials. However, in a teaching environment that places emphasis on technological competence and literacy, they involve much more.

Librarians, in their role of curriculum collaborators, should be aware of, and keep abreast of, the curriculum and courses offered at the school. They should collaborate with the teaching staff to provide the best possible material for teaching and learning in all areas. Their role is to advise, source, and acquire suitable, age-appropriate information in various formats. As teaching becomes more learner-centred, the library, with the librarian at its helm, should offer a place for independent learning, where students can take responsibility for acquiring information for themselves. Librarians, too, should have some knowledge of the different learning styles, so that they can provide information catering to a variety of needs, and be able to guide students accordingly. Librarians also function as facilitators and instructors as they guide students in the use of all this new material. This “new” librarian/information specialist should be equipped with high levels of IT skills to be able to maximize the use of technology for accessing and disseminating information. They should also be able to teach teachers and students how to use technology in the teaching, learning, and research process.

Librarians should also be able to assist teachers in becoming more creative and innovative in teaching. The days of talk and chalk are behind us. Technology has changed the way we teach and learn and can make education more exciting. Librarians can help in the development of

innovative teaching techniques, utilizing the computer and multi-media equipment, by showing teachers how they can use the technology to improve and develop their teaching styles, and to become more creative in presentations.

If, as expected by the architects of SEMP, we are to equip graduates to adapt to the rapid changes being brought about by the technological advances and globalization, the library should be at the forefront of this development. This requires that school libraries be fully automated, with enough computers to adequately serve the school population, and be equipped with the most modern and up-to-date multi-media resources, which serve the dual purpose of enhancing the teaching and learning process while making the student technologically competent and information literate. If it is accepted that an information literate person is one who recognises when information is needed and has the ability to locate, evaluate, and use this information effectively then, in effect, we are acknowledging that an information literate person is one who has learned how to learn.

It is gratifying to see that educators and planners in Trinidad and Tobago are now taking a new look at the school library and the school librarian. The SEMP programme is providing the new secondary schools with Multimedia Learning Centres, which, according to the SEMP Handbook, will provide “a well-stocked library with reading material of genuine interest to students; multimedia connectivity and Internet facilities to encourage wide ranging student inquiry; mobile information technology units to permit widespread use of limited technology; and access to circulating resource libraries for students in the respective Regional Divisions.” The programme is also addressing the upgrading of the skills of school librarians, in its Professional Development initiatives, by introducing a 60-hour course “to introduce School Librarians to their school-based Pro-D duties [which] will help them provide central support for teachers and students.”

These developments will, no doubt, serve to reinforce the value and the changing role of the school library and the school librarian in a technological world. They will also provide the necessary elements to produce functionally literate students who can acquire lifelong skills to enable them to function in a modern technological world.

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