Revisioning School libraries as Learning Hubs

The Rationale, Need and Importance

By Nooruddin Merchant

In the past decade, the growth of information and communication technologies has opened a number of avenues and provided diverse ways through which the learning could be enhanced. The society we are living in is termed as information or knowledge society where one of the success factors lies with intelligent and appropriate use of that Information. Having said that the challenges related to information access, quality of information, contextualization and use of information for societal improvement, generating information, creative and appropriate use of media and technologies are part and parcel of this innovation. His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan IV in one of his speeches at the commonwealth press union highlighted a pertinent concern.

> *One is reminded of T. S. Eliot's haunting question: "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"*

This information revolution has also brought significant changes in the learning styles of the new generation. They are more prone towards visual learning, multi sensory, interactive and on line learning. The generation NEXT is now equipped with skills through which *anytime, anywhere learning* is possible.

The information revolution has also impacted the field of Library Information Science and the libraries are no more considered to be static and isolated learning spaces. In fact, it has influenced and tried to influence the entire learning process and has positioned libraries at a locus of the learning process.

Some of the problems and concerns related to School Libraries in Pakistan especially in the public sector are elaborated by Dr. Jalaluddin Haider

> *"The current school library scenario could not be termed satisfactory by any stretch of the imagination. Despite all beautiful phrases used for the school library in government documents and the rhetoric of our educational planners and educators on the eve of library seminars and conferences, the school library is yet to be re-organized as a component of school curriculum. This is best illustrated by the fact that a vast majority of the existing secondary schools, not to speak of primary and elementary schools, do not possess any sort of book collection.*
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> *In respect of library materials a wide variation, both quantity and quality wise has been observed. It ranges from less than 100 to a few thousand of books. A vast majority of school libraries do not follow any system for the arrangement of books on shelves."*

Let's have a candid look at the state of libraries and librarians vis-a-vis schools especially in the private sector schools. The issues related to perception of librarians and library programmes include:

- The overall perception about the profession of librarian ship in Pakistan is not encouraging. As a career it has still not become the profession of choice. Although the demand for librarians has gradually increased, but still it is not pursued as a serious and exciting career.

- The ongoing professional development opportunities for librarians are available in scarcity. In fact, the majority of institutions especially schools do not believe in investing in the capacity

enhancement of librarians.

- The librarians and the entire profession of librarian ship needs to re-claim its respect. The need for acknowledging their critical role, providing space, resources and opportunity still remains a dream.

- The librarians seem to struggle in one of the essential skills i.e verbal and written communication. They struggle to communicate the needs with conviction and proper rationalization.

- Considering and engaging librarian as an active partner in developing learning programmes collaboratively is still a distant dream.

- Majority of Librarians even if they have received a specialization in School or Academic libraries, are not pro-active and updated enough to understand and respond to the learning needs of schools. For e.g. Information Literacy is considered to be one of the important skills which should be possessed by librarians as well, but unfortunately, not all of them have a clue about it.

- The young graduates of library science are not very much aware of the collection which should be recommended for school libraries according to the needs and relevance of the curricula being taught in schools as well as the needs of children.

- The libraries and computer labs are being used as isolated learning spaces, which has no or little connection with the main stream curriculum and learning standards. Infact, they are treated as sacred places which could not be opened without presence of a librarian or a computer teacher.

What bearing the global change has brought into the profession of school librarianship especially in urban schools? DEEANNE KIMMEL in her article hub for learning have elaborated on the need and importance of the roles school librarians must play to facilitate the learning processes in an out of school. She has identified the key roles as connections which librarians should try to establish with the learning community. The connections which a librarian or a library media specialist could make are:

Connect to education initiatives at museums, theaters, public libraries, and other community cultural institutions.
Connect to a range of media resources and instruct teachers and students in how to use them.
Connect to media literacy skills that enable students to become effective users and producers of information.
Connect to other educators, students, and educational initiatives around the world.
Connect to new ideas for teaching and learning in innovative, interactive ways.

For achieving and enabling the above mentioned connections, the schools must empower librarians to become a key academic leader. What are the areas for empowerment, Keith Curry tries to shed light on it.

Librarian as a School Leader

The school librarian should be encouraged and supported to view him self or her self as a school leader. As a leader, he / she should:

- Coordinate and meet with the Principal regularly
- Attend faculty and academic meetings
- Serve on key committees specially those who are responsible for developing academic programmes, budgets and learning initiatives.
- Meet with other library staff and stay connected with them.

Librarian as a programme administrator

The school librarian should be provided opportunities and exposed to enhance his or her own knowledge, skills and understanding about how to develop plans and budgets, mobilize resources, generate reports and evaluate the impact of programs on student learning. The librarian should also be encouraged and provided support especially in terms of human resources to work with students and teachers on flexible schedule.

Librarian as an information navigator

The librarian must carry out effective and efficient efforts to select print, non print and electronic resources that support the school curriculum and learning standards. He or she should be an information literate and support school community to become information literate. This includes recognizing an information need and to locate, evaluate, and apply information in critical thinking to solve a problem. Librarian could play an important role in helping students and teachers in understanding the effects of plagiarism and ways to reduce it.

Librarian as Technology Facilitator

The librarian should be seen as a person who selects licensed databases and resources, identifies authoritative free websites. He should be seen as an individual who bridges gaps between students and teachers, online information, and curriculum and instruction.

Librarian as a collaborative teacher and learner

Librarian should also continuously polish his or her own knowledge and skills related to becoming an effective learning facilitator and collaborator. This role would entail librarian as a teacher of students who collaborates with classroom teachers in design and delivery of instruction, a teacher of other teachers who supports them in becoming self-relaint users of information resources and technology, a colleague who attends local, national and international conferences and seminars. In our scenario, the librarian should also collaborate with instructional technologists or computer teachers, and work together to develop and achieve the goals of information and media literacy.

Is it really possible to achieve the above mentioned roles? Does it not very ambitious considering our own context and realities, is it based on western models of education and learning where there is no scarcity of resources. These would be some of the questions which would come directly into the readers mind. As a person who have been working with the librarians and instructional technology teachers I would say if you believe that libraries are critical for enhancing students learning and enabling them to become life long learners, then yes, it is possible. Hopefully, I would share some of the processes and programmes we initiated at the school system I am currently engaged with including the success stories and challenges in the next issue of PLISJ.

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