

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL LIBRARIAN IN IMPLEMENTING THE CURRICULUM

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What is the role of the school librarian, also known as the school media specialist or the teacher/librarian, in implementing the curriculum? What is his or her relationship to teaching and learning in the school?

The Role of the School Library in Education

In order to explore this relationship we must begin with the role of the school library in education, because naturally the role of the school librarian derives from that of the library. The modern school library stands at the very centre of the educational programme of the school. It is often referred to as the heart of the school, or as the laboratory of laboratories. This is because modern education is resource based: the resources for teaching and learning are to be found in the resource centre, another name for the school library. While the school library has other extracurricular roles, its central mission is supporting the curriculum, furthering the teaching and learning programme of the school.

What are the objectives of this teaching and learning programme? Those of you with background in teacher education know that educational objectives are often divided into three domains: the cognitive, affective and psycho-motor domains. These three domains refer to knowledge, attitudes and skills respectively. These are all very much reflected in the National Policy on Education (Nigeria, 1994), which outlines the subject areas to be mastered, the attitudes and values to be inculcated (such as scientific and reflective thinking tolerance, respect for the dignity of labour), and the skills and abilities to be developed. Among these are functional literacy and numeracy, the ability to communicate effectively, self directed learning, etc.

The Role Of The School Librarian

The school librarian has a major role to play in implementing the curriculum in all these areas. I have focused on three areas: provision of learning resources, reading promotion and information literacy.

The School Librarian as Media Specialist: Providing learning resources

In the first place, the school librarian is the school media specialist. He or she makes available the required media, the appropriate resources for teaching and learning, and so provides curricular support for classroom instruction: The school librarian advises teachers on the materials available for particular lessons, units or modules. This of course requires a sure knowledge of the library collection. He or she also consults with teachers in selecting and acquiring the needed materials. Thirdly, the media specialist has the expertise to improvise and produce resources that are not readily available and to identify and direct the teachers' attention to non-traditional resources beyond the library.

Playing this role effectively requires a number of steps, the school librarian as media specialist needs to know this indicates a need for a careful study of the curriculum modules or syllabus and the textbooks used at various levels. It also requires consultation with teachers to know their information and media needs. With this knowledge, the school librarian will be in a position to identify the required materials. What subjects or topics require more information, what types of resources would be appropriate, what project or assignments would further the set objectives, and what teaching methods or learning opportunities can be organized using these resources?

Having identified the media needs, the school librarian will be equipped to devise a strategy for acquiring materials. First, she will need to identify the books to be obtained. What books are available and accessible, from what source can they be obtained, what funds are available for their purchase, what alternative means of acquisition, such as donation or government provision are available? Beyond books, the school librarian as media specialist needs to consider non-book materials. These include both the simple and sophisticated pictures, charts, clipping files, maps, posters, models, specimens, toys and games

as well as audiovisual ICT software and equipment, such as projectors, video equipment, sound recorders, television and radio, computers, CD-ROMs, Internet connection. Where the required materials are not available, the librarian as media specialist needs to consider the possibilities of local or in-house production. This might be in the library or classroom, by staff or by students.

The Teaching Role of the School Librarian

We have been talking so far about the library role of the school librarian, his or her role as the media specialist of the school. But the school librarian has both library and teaching roles. Perhaps this recognition is behind another common name for the school librarian, the teacher/librarian. The term "teacher/librarian" is intended to emphasize a dual role as librarian and as teacher, not in the sense of teaching classes in addition to working in the library, but of having a large teaching role to play, as school librarian, in implementing the curriculum. I wish to turn now to this teaching role.

What is the teaching role of the school librarian? And how does this role support the curriculum? I have divided the teaching role into two areas: reading promotion and information skills instruction.

Reading Promotion

Reading promotion, while acknowledged to be a very important role of the school librarian, is sometimes thought of as extracurricular - encouraging voluntary reading for leisure and personal growth. However, I would argue that reading promotion lies at the very heart of the curriculum. This is because reading is the principal means of gaining access to information in school and the key to lifelong education beyond school. While the primary responsibility for direct reading instruction lies with the classroom teachers, the school librarian has a crucial role to play. In my book *Library Resource in Education*, (Dike, 1993), I listed *encouraging reading* as the first educational contribution of the school library. This is not to say it is more important than other roles, but it is the most fundamental. On this foundation rests the other roles of the school library.

Reading promotion straddles the library and teaching roles of the school librarian. A primary way he or she can promote reading is by providing access to books. As the school resource

centre, the library is the primary source of reading materials especially for voluntary reading to gain information and pleasure. These include such materials as picture books, fiction, magazines, topic books. As the media specialist, the school librarian is the person with the knowledge of the books children would like to read, the books which will meet their needs and interest, the books which will stretch their perceptions and nurture growth.

However, for the nursery or primary school librarian, reading promotion materials also include toys, puzzles, games, pictures, etc. Writers on emergent literacy, or pre-reading development, stress the use of resources that give the child opportunities to explore, converse, listen and view.

In addition to providing access to books, the school librarian provides reading guidance. She acts as a matchmaker bringing children and books together. There are many ways of doing this, but all presuppose a thorough knowledge of the books and of the users, as individuals and as a group. Guidance can take many forms, such as conversation, book lists and displays, book talks, shared reading experiences (Dike, 1998). The school librarian can also provide guidance for teachers concerning the use of books and other resources for reading promotion.

Thirdly, the school librarian can promote reading by introducing pleasurable experiences with books and reading (Dike, 1993). These include storyhours, which introduce children to the wealth of oral literature, the joys of picture books and the stimulation of a variety of resources mediated by the librarian.

Information Literacy Education

The school librarian also has a major role to play in information literacy education. Perhaps the most important objective of education today is helping students learn how to learn. The reasons for this have been explained elsewhere (Dike 1993, among others). Given the pace of change in the modern world and the rapid expansion of knowledge, students need to be equipped with the skills for a lifetime of learning. As a result, the value of the information gained in school has receded in worth, while the skills for handling information have received increasing emphasis. The school librarian is not only a media specialist but also information specialist. That is, the school librarian is the person with special training in handling information. Information literacy has been defined as the ability

to access, evaluate and use information from a variety of sources (Doyle, 1994), an apt description of the expertise of the school librarian. He therefore has a special role to play in helping users develop these skills and in guiding and consulting with teachers on how best to implement information literacy with classroom instruction. By integrating information literacy education with subject content, schools can attain objectives in both the cognitive and psycho-motor domain. The school librarian can do this through user education programmes during library periods and project work, taking place in the library or classroom, in consultation with teachers. At the 2003 IASL Conference in Durban, South Africa, Amucheazi and the author reported one such project in primary schools around Nsukka. It concerned introducing learning skills instructions into the primary school curriculum modules in English, using community resources in Science, Social Studies and Mathematics. By observing natural phenomenon such as birds and interviewing respondents, such as workers in different occupations and then recording and presenting the information obtained, pupils developed a variety of information literacy skills, reading and writing skills, observation and visual literacy skills, listening and speaking skills, evaluation and thinking skills.

Integration of the Library with the Curriculum

While the need for the school library to be integrated with the curriculum and with classroom teaching and learning is recognized, it has proved to be difficult to achieve, both in Nigeria and worldwide. The library and the school librarian are often isolated from what goes on in the classroom. Why is this so and what can be done to improve the situation? I will end up by suggesting a few areas of the difficulty and strategies for overcoming these obstacles.

Integration of the library with the curriculum depends absolutely on relationships between the key role players play in the school. The school librarian cannot do it alone. The library will only play its educational role where there is a team effort involving the librarian, the teachers and the principal or the head teacher. Without this concerted effort, little can be achieved in integrating the library with the educational programme of the school.

Yet there is often lack of cooperation, of working together and sharing between teachers and the school librarian. This

may be due in part to the “kingdom” or “domain” mentality, which also gets in the way of other forms of team teaching. Each is jealous of his or her domain and wants others to keep their distance. Some teachers do not want the school librarian to “interfere” with what goes on in the classroom, by organizing materials for learning or helping stock classroom libraries. Nor do they want to work together in planning the curriculum and guiding students doing project work in the library. Some teachers are not themselves library users and lack understanding of the central role of the library in education. This indicates the need for improvements in teacher education, both in communicating the role of library in teaching and learning and in changing the methods of teaching to those recommended by the National Policy on Education which are rarely realized in Nigerian classrooms.

Sometimes, the school librarian is seen as an outsider, not a teacher like the rest of them. This conception has been strengthened, unfortunately, by the decision to remove library studies from colleges of education, on the grounds that the NCE is only to train teachers. This view fails to realize that the teacher/librarian is an integral part of the teaching team in any school. In other cases, the school librarian is regarded as an underling, for instance, if he holds a lower qualification such as a diploma. To my mind, such difficulties reinforce the need for a dual qualification for school librarians. They need to have an acknowledged area of expertise, a specialization they can use to improve education, but they also need to be thoroughly versed in education theory and practise, to speak the language of teachers.

Another crucial relationship is that between the school librarian and the principal or head teacher. This relationship can make or break the work of the school librarian and the contribution of the school library to education. In the primary school project mentioned earlier, the main criterion for selection of a school was the library awareness and innovative educational stance of the head teacher. This was found to be crucial to the success of the project. The implication is that the Nigerian School Library Association cannot be concerned with school librarians alone, but must also get the message to school administrators. On the larger scale, the message must also be beamed to Ministry of Education and other educational officers.

Another point, which has been alluded to earlier, is the need for well-trained school librarians. Without being a specialist, without having some area of expertise, without being seen as

effective, there is little chance of school librarians contributing to implementing the curriculum. So we must continue our efforts to develop training programmes for school librarians at all levels. We must also work for establishment of positions for school librarians within schools and provide opportunities for teachers to gain library qualifications.

Conclusion

The school librarian has a major role to play in implementing the curriculum, in positively influencing teaching and learning in schools. This contribution has several facets, which encompass the library and teaching roles of the school librarian. He or she is the school media specialist, with expert knowledge of resources and their use in education. The school librarian is also a key player in the crucial area of reading promotion, which is fundamental to the curriculum and attaining educational objectives. Thirdly, as the information specialist, the school librarian is in a unique position to guide and direct information literacy education within the curriculum. This he can do both directly, in working with students and indirectly, in consulting and working with students, and indirectly, in consulting and working with teachers. In order to work effectively, attention has to be paid to relationship within the school, to cooperation and consultation between all members of the teaching team, including the administrators, teachers and the librarian, and raising of library awareness in all concerned. Only then we realize our goal of integrating the school library with the curriculum and attaining our noble educational objectives.

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