School Libraries in India: Present-day Scenario

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Introduction

The education system in India is based on the British system of education. The Government of India lays stress on education for all. The directive principle contained in article 45 states that the state has to provide free and compulsory education for all until the age of 14 years. According to 2001 census, 65% Indians are literate and almost every child has an access to school with around 95% of our rural education having a primary school within one kilometer of their habitation. The school education in India is at three levels-Primary (classes 1 to 5), Middle (classes 6 to 8) and Higher/Secondary (classes 9 to 12). There are two categories of schools-government schools that are entirely funded by the government and others being the public (private) schools. There are about 888 thousands educational institutions in the country with an enrollment of about 179 millions. Elementary education system in India is the second largest in the world with 149.4 millions children enrolled in the age-group of 6 to 14 years. All the states and Union Territories of India have adopted a uniform structure of school education, i.e., the 10+2 system of education. Higher education is provided by 237 universities, which include 34 agricultural universities, 15 medical institutions, 39 deemed to be universities and 11 institutions of national importance and 8 open universities in addition to 10600 colleges. Education in India is primarily the responsibility of the state governments although the central government also plays an important role in higher education. Though education is in the concurrent list of the constitution, the state governments play a major role in the development of education particularly in the primary and secondary education. Para 11.4 of NPE 1986 states that the investment on education be gradually increased to reach a level of 6% of the national income as early as possible. In spite of the resource constraints, the budgetary allocation on education has increased over the years. As part of the mid-term Strategic Plan and the Millennium Development Goals priorities, UNICEF India is also committed to ensuring quality education for all children.

Role of School Libraries

School is a gateway to knowledge and plays an important role in building up a love for reading. The school library is integral to this educational process. Encouraged at the right age, the children are sure to develop a love for books. “Catch 'em Young” is therefore the motto of the school libraries. According to IFLA/UNESCO School Library Manifesto, “the school library provides information and ideas that are fundamental to functioning successfully in today's information and knowledge-based society. The school library equips students with life-long learning skills and develops the imagination enabling them to live as responsible citizens”. It plays this role by selecting, acquiring and providing access to appropriate sources of information. The school library offers books and other resources ranging from print to electronic media for completion of various school projects and assignments, for acquisition of knowledge about a topic taught in class, for finding information about a hobby or current events and news, etc. The school librarian helps the students in finding the books/information on the topics of their interest. The librarians along with the teachers work together to achieve higher levels of literacy. While highlighting the role of the school library as the heart of school, Dr. Ranganathan stated that the school libraries should...
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act as laboratories for students and the librarians should function as guides to help the students in learning and using the books for improvement of knowledge and scholarship.

Standards for School Libraries

The school library is essential for literacy, education and information provision as well as for economic, social and cultural development of a nation. Hence, the school libraries must have adequate and sustained funding for trained staff, materials, technologies and facilities. As the responsibility of local, regional and national authorities, it must be supported by specific standards. Library standards are used to measure and evaluate the condition of the libraries as well as the degree of their development. They provide an outline for specific library activities and serve to define an ideal state of a library. The standards, which are developed professionally, indicate a direction for the libraries as to what tasks and objectives it should strive for. They provide school management with information on the management of libraries. Standards can have an international, national and regional scope. Internationally, standards are not only developed by the library organizations, such as IASL (International Association of School Libraries) and IFLA, but also by UNESCO or ISO. Keeping in view the vital role a school library plays in supporting the curriculum, such organizations have issued a School Library Manifesto whose 1998 version became a known text and is used by the school librarians all around the world. The manifesto indicates the role of school library, its mission and the most important tasks as well as the exceptional importance of a qualified school librarian. ‘School Librarians: Guidelines for Competency Requirements' was published in the series- IFLA Profound Reports as number 41 in August 1995. The Library Association (CILIP) has also published a completely revised edition of the guidelines for ‘school libraries in secondary schools' in 2002. These standards usually describe the staff requirements, acquisitions of collections, audiovisual and computer equipment as well as budgetary calculations.

School Libraries in the Current Environment

The school library is an essential partner in the local, regional and national library and information network. The school librarian has to be professionally qualified because he is responsible for planning and managing the library. Supported by the teachers, he not only inculcates love for reading amongst the future citizens of the country but also helps in information literacy. The role of school librarian as a teacher is to analyze the information needs of his clients for which he seeks help from the teachers. He must have good interpersonal skills and should be able to take on the decisional roles. The school librarian need to know what teachers like to work with and what information they need for teaching. Finally, the school librarian needs to know what is expected of the student and how and what are they being taught. In fact, the school librarians have to move away from the role of keeper of books to that of the information providers and support students in learning and using information regardless of its form and format. In an increasingly networked environment when the students at the school level are using IT skills for study, the school librarian must be competent in teaching different information handling skills both to teachers and the students. They help the teachers to use a broader range of teaching strategies and the students are helped in their project work, individual study, group research, reading and the teaching of ICT, etc. It has been observed that when the teachers and the school librarians work together, students achieve higher levels of literacy, reading, learning, problem solving and information and communication technology skills . It has also been noted that the students in schools with good school libraries learn more, get better grades, and score higher on standardized test scores than their peers in schools without the libraries.

School library professionals in the developed countries are now engaged in some exciting activities so as to remain effective in the midst of fast-moving technological changes. They are striving to provide smart researching methodologies and information literacy skill sets to students. They are using web 2.0 technologies including blogs to give updates on resources as well as to interact with users and host collaborative discussions, are connecting their readers by creating pages on social networking sites such as MySpace or Orkut, are offering RSS tools that allow users to subscribe to get new information as it goes online, are using wikis to get staff and students involved in creating online library-related resources, are using Podcasts and videocasts for the audio tours of the library , etc. As a result, school
libraries are now called "learning resource centres" and the school librarians as the 'learning resource centre managers'. Some of the examples of such services in school libraries are indicated below:

http://lhsblog.edublogs.org/ retrieved 22.1.09
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http://www.hopkintonschools.org/hhs/library/podcast2006.html retrieved 22.1.09
School Libraries in India

Although the college and university libraries have developed to a great extent as a result of the work done by UGC and INFLIBNET, the school libraries are a neglected lot in India. According to the 5th All India Educational Survey, only about 40% of the schools have libraries that too in public schools. Moreover, the situation in rural areas is worse than the urban areas. The number of the trained librarians working in the schools is still less. Although the central government has made libraries a priority to help raise the literacy rate, yet these are not receiving the right attention as revealed by the NCERT survey of 1993. Their resources in terms of staff and funds are scarce, as these have received the least priority. The school libraries neither have good collection nor sufficient space because of the financial constraints. Most of the schools have no qualified staff in their libraries. The libraries of public schools are slightly better as compared to their government counterparts. The situation is worst in case of libraries of

government primary and middle schools. As a result, the school libraries are neither able to inculcate the reading interests among the children nor do they help in achieving information literacy. The documents in most of the school libraries are kept in cabinets under lock and key and are made available to the students on demand only. A traditional card catalogue and Dewey Decimal system for classification of the documents is normally used. A majority of the school libraries have no computers in the libraries although a good number of them have set up the computer laboratories. The librarians select the documents in consultation with the teaching staff. The library acquires the magazines on current affairs and sports besides a number of daily newspapers in English, Hindi and other regional languages. The students of the primary classes have a library hour on the weekly basis when they are given storybooks so as to inculcate the reading habits. Majority of the school librarians in India do not provide any other service except the circulation of books in the absence of good library infrastructure. In 1998, the school library committee of the Indian Library Association surveyed the school libraries in Delhi and found that most of the government primary schools had no library at all and in secondary schools, the libraries were substandard. The report called for a fresh look at the way school libraries were organised. The committee also stressed that the library be made the hub of the school. Moreover, it was noted that the public (private) schools were better organised with better facilities like staff, collection and services as compared to the government schools. Such schools are continuously improving their collections and access to resources but the government schools suffer from lack of funds and staff. Majority of such schools does not even have a full time librarian and the teacher in-charge manages the library in the absence of the full time librarian. Although the number of school libraries in primary, secondary and the higher education is growing, yet there are many problems to overcome. The government has left the responsibility of school libraries to the school themselves for providing the resources and funds to establish well-equipped libraries. Most of the schools do not have a separate room for the library especially in government primary schools. Since the school authorities are not convinced about the appointment of professional staff for their libraries, they do not appoint professionally trained staff. Until a few years ago, only a few secondary schools had libraries with qualified library staff. Moreover, they are not paid well and as a result the well-trained librarians leave the school library whenever they get an opportunity to work elsewhere. Moreover, the status of school librarian is also low in India. Generally speaking, libraries in public schools are in a better position in terms of space, budget and staff than their counterparts in the government schools. Most of the public schools have appointed trained librarians and are computerized also.

Although, most of the public schools have their websites giving academic information, infrastructure available, etc, yet not much is available in the virtual space about their libraries and the services provided by them. In the current IT scenario, when the school libraries in the developed countries are being used as “school library media centers” with computer resources that enable children to access a wide variety of information, almost all of the school libraries are far from such a reality in India. The following screenshots of two popular schools clearly indicate the kind of services provided in their libraries:

http://www.kis.in/place/facilities/libraries.html retrieved 22.1.09
Web 2.0 technologies all over the world are transforming the ways in which school libraries operate and deliver their services in this fast changing online social and collaborative world. However, only one school called ‘Kendriya vidyalaya, Thiruvananthapuram’ has a school library media centre. It uses web 2.0 technologies to a great extent and is providing ask-a–librarian service, blogging, etc.
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Conclusion

A library is a storehouse of information and a key to the knowledge, but the era of information technology revolution has relegated the librarians especially in schools to the background. The audio-visual media specially the Internet has lured the budding readers away from the printed works like the Pied Piper. There is a great need for the upliftment of school libraries in India. If the reading habits of the students have to be changed, the conditions of the school libraries have to be improved. For this purpose, the central as well as the state government, the school authorities, the school librarian and the teachers will all have to work together.

Firstly, the government of India must ensure that the school library has a well-stocked active collection managed by a qualified librarian. For this purpose, a school library legislation should be passed as soon as possible.

Secondly, the positive attitude of the school principal is very important. He should clearly lay down policies regarding the school library services including its goals, priorities and services as well as its relation to the school curriculum. In fact, CBSE has recently brought out a book entitled 'Organizing school libraries – Guidelines'. It provides useful information for the school principals to upgrade their school libraries and make them more functional. They should organise their school libraries according to the guidelines provided.

The school librarians in India must play a positive role of being the information providers. Librarians must assist the teachers and students to search out their information needs, critically evaluate the materials and use technological means to synthesize their findings into new knowledge. Hence, they must become proficient in the use of the new technologies themselves first to promote them and instruct students and teachers in their use. They must expand their traditional service environment to that of computer-based data and sophisticated information-seeking strategies. He must analyze their learning...
and information needs, to locate and use resources and to communicate the same to their users. They must develop policies, practices, and curricula required by the students for information literacy. As such, they have to work closely with the teachers in planning and implementing learning programs that will equip students with the skills necessary to succeed in a constantly changing social and economic environment. They can also make use of the resources that are available on the Internet including ‘Resources for School Librarians’ (http://ww.sildirectory.com) that indicates resources on learning and teaching, information access, program administration, technology, education and employment as well as continuing education, ‘Advocacy toolkit’ of AASL (http://www.ifla.org/V11/s11/pub/s11_AdvocacyKit.html), International Children’s Digital Library (http://www.icdlbooks.org), etc. The school librarian should also make a webpage of the school library highlighting the collection, OPAC and other services provided. Moreover, the school libraries in India should also become members of International Association of School Libraries and should send their details to it for inclusion of their name in the list of school libraries that is available online at http://www.iasl_slo.org/schoollibs.html.

The library associations at the state as well as the national level can also play a very important role in the development of school libraries in India. Indian Library Association should support international initiatives to promote school library activities and should promote the importance of school libraries through their publications. These should support research in school librarianship and undertake projects to help school libraries to effective perform the information literacy program. Such an agency should highlight the basic responsibilities of the school librarians as well as the responsibilities of the teachers and the school authorities towards the library by drafting standards keeping in mind the requirements of the present day school students. Regional workshops should also be conducted to promote best practices in the school libraries. However, in the absence of set standards, the school librarians in India can use IFLA/UNESCO school library guidelines for framing up various policies.

Indian School Library Association should be established on the pattern of other such associations the world over that should bring out a directory of school libraries, hold regular conferences for interaction amongst the school librarians and must bring out a journal featuring various aspects of school libraries.

Last but not the least, a network of school libraries can also be established.

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