

Secondary school libraries in Singapore and Hong Kong: The need for advocacy at work

By Dr Lim Peng Han

Many 21st century secondary schools in Asia are expected to be the 'information hub' of the school and support collaborative teaching and learning, including information literacy programmes. Have school libraries in Singapore and Hong Kong evolved to meet their users' requirements? This brief discussion attempts to explore some of the chronology and key factors such as school library personnel, the availability of school library standards and the leadership role of School Library Associations that affected the development of secondary school libraries in these countries.

Introduction

The modern school library movement began at the ALA Midwinter conference in December 1914 when the ALA Council approved a petition from the ALA Roundtable of Normal and High School Libraries Librarians to form as a School Libraries Section. At the June 1915 ALA Annual Conference the section held its first meeting and elected as its first leader in the high school library movement, Mary E. Hall (Pond, 1976, p. 12). In the United Kingdom the School Library Association (SLA), representing the interests of school librarians, was founded in 1937 (Colebourn, 1986, p. 8). The School Libraries Section of the Library Association (LA) was established in the same year (Cubbage, 2001, p. 59).

Professional library associations after WW2

The Second World War brought destruction to schools and school libraries in many part of Asia - the Netherlands East Indies (Basuki, 1998, p. 64), British Malaya, including Singapore (Frisby 1946, p. 139), Hong Kong (Endacott, 1978, pp. 310-3011) and Japan (Hall, 1949). The Library Association of Singapore (LAS), initially part of the Malayan Library Group (MLG), was founded in 1955 (Chan, 1980, p. 45), followed by the Hong Kong Library Association (HKLA) in 1958 (Kan and Leong 3002, 1203).

Secondary school libraries in Singapore and Hong Kong

The official need for the development of school libraries in Singapore occurred in 1964 when the Final Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Education recommended that school libraries should be in the charge of trained teacher-librarians (Lim, 1964, p. 44). In 1965 the Hong Kong Education Department accepted the recommendations of an education commission to provide library facilities in schools and for the first time funds were provided for the acquisition of library books, albeit only a token amount of money (Kwong, 1990, p. 757).

Staffing of secondary school libraries

However, throughout the history of secondary school libraries in Singapore, it was not mandatory to appoint full time teacher-librarians. In 1977 the Ministry of Education (MOE) created the post of Library Coordinator (LC), a trained teacher entrusted with the job of developing the library while performing the duties of a full-time teacher (Lee, 1992, p. 74). During the 1980s secondary schools with 18 or more classes in Hong Kong were allowed to employ a full-time teacher-librarian.

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However, the person did not have to be a graduate teacher or trained in school librarianship (Kwong, 1990, p. 757). By 1996 graduate teachers could become teacher-librarians and were sent to do two years part-time day release training (Hung, 1998, p. 64). In comparison, In the United States secondary school libraries are staffed by personnel with training in both education and librarianship (Knuth 2002, p. 265).

School library standards

The first recommended minimum standards for Singapore secondary school libraries were published in 1972 (Standing Committee for Libraries, 1972). However, these were only guidelines and were never updated to meet present requirements. During the 1980s standards for the size of library space, funding and library staff were accepted by the Education Department in Hong Kong (Kwong, 1990, p. 757). But these were not comprehensively updated to current needs. In the United States school librarianship has developed practical and research-based professional literature, including school library standards (Knuth, 2002, p. 265). The growth and development of school libraries was due in particular to these standards (Carroll, 1981, p. 8).

Role of the school library associations

The School Library Section of the LAS was established in 1970 with an initial membership of 88 teacher-librarians (Wang-Chen, 1971, p. 2). However, the Section was dissolved in 1980 after it was found that only 21 of its members were active (Lim, 1980, p. 23). The Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union (HKPTU) maintains a School Librarians' Group, run by a group of practicing teacher-librarians. However, the Union does not have membership, but serves all teacher-librarians. The Hong Kong Teacher-Librarians' Association (HKTLA) organises activities to discuss common problems among members (Hung, 1998, p. 65). It is likely that a lack of professional leadership in the School Library Section of the LAS led to its demise and apparent split leadership in Hong Kong. The leadership of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) is the accepted voice of school librarianship in the United States and as such pursues the interests of the profession (Knuth, 2002, p. 265), including developing accepted professional standards (Lowrey, 1978, p. 607).

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It is essential that stakeholders like the LAS, HKLA, HKPTU, HKTLA and teacher-librarians advocate for the development of school library standards by organising surveys, workshops and seminars. The findings of these activities should be submitted to the respective educational authorities for review and decision making.

Stakeholders in rapidly industrialising Asian countries like Singapore and Hong Kong should develop school library standards as a political tool for the negotiation of policy and resources (Knuth, 2002, p. 275), active associations will support this.

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