



The changing role of school/media resource libraries in secondary schools in Singapore and the need to implement mandatory standards, 1946–2010: Issues, challenges and opportunities

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KEYWORDS

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Abstract The aim of this paper is to study the development and evolution of secondary school libraries into Media Resource Libraries (MRLs) in Singapore after the Second World War and the rationale to have mandatory school library standards. It is an historical survey analysing published data about the linkages of libraries and librarianship, school library standards, education and school reforms in Singapore. It analyses historical and current documents on the roles played by stakeholders like the Library Association of Singapore (LAS) and the Ministry of Education (MOE) in the introduction and development of school library standards. The need for school libraries standards was first discussed when the Malayan Library Group (MLG) organised the first course on librarianship for school teachers in 1955, but, with no follow through. The need for school libraries standards was also mentioned by the LAS in 1962 in a memorandum to the Commission of Enquiry into Education to train teacher librarians and adopt school library standards. However, this was left out in the final report of the Commission published in 1964. The need for school library standards was discussed in a school library seminar for 150 teacher librarians in 1970. The first *Recommended Minimum Standards for Secondary School Libraries* was published two years later by the Standing Committee on Libraries set up by the MOE, but it was not mandatory for schools to adopt the standards. In 1997 the MOE launched its "Thinking School Learning Nation" vision to teach thinking skills. Students were expected to do multidisciplinary project work and be independent users of information. The MOE began to convert school libraries into Media Resource Libraries (MRLs) with print and non-print materials. However, a survey conducted in 2001 on the roles and competencies of 112 Library Coordinators (LCs) or teacher librarians revealed that they lack the skills and knowledge to manage MRLs effectively. This is because subsequent school library standards published in 1983 and 2002 did not require trained and full-time teacher librarians to manage the MRLs. Furthermore, it is essential for the standards to be periodically updated with regards to professional staff, collection development, facilities, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructure and school library programs. Otherwise, MRLs risk being "hollow shells still considered on the periphery of core educational requirements, and are run by teachers not

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professionally prepared to do the work” (Hart, 2001, p. 25). The national standards published in the United States from 1918 to 2008 are well researched and provide substantive guidelines to develop school libraries. Therefore, it is essential for the MOE to formulate MRL standards by doing comparative studies of school library standards in other countries. These standards have to be mandatory and fully adopted by the schools. It provides opportunities for stakeholders like the LAS, National Library Board (NLB), the National Institute of Education (NIE), and the Singapore Teachers’ Union, to collaborate in the formulation of these standards and take collective ownership to implement them.

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Introduction

This paper aims to study the development of school reforms from 1946 to 2010 that affected secondary school libraries to change into Media Resource Libraries (MRLs) and to examine the role and relevance of school library standards in the change process. It attempts to identify the factors that affect the changes in secondary school library standards first published in 1972. This research tries to evaluate whether school library standards support and enhance the development and management of school libraries/MRLs and provide the relevant information mix and school library programmes.

The author evaluated and analysed secondary school library standards published in Singapore from 1972 to 2010 and compared them with school library standards and policies published in other countries such as Canada, Hong Kong and the United States. The findings suggest that secondary school library standards did not evolve sufficiently to support the development of MRLs.

Schooling during British and Japanese colonial rule, 1819–1945

Sir Stamford Raffles founded Singapore on behalf of the East India Company (EIC) in 1819. In 1826 the three settlements of Singapore, Penang and Malacca were amalgamated to form the Straits Settlements (Jarman, 1998, p. v). Singapore did not have a native population and the three main races of Chinese, Malay, and Indian eventually came to the island (Saw, 1969, p. 41).

The Education Department was established in 1872 to expand Malay and English schools (Wong & Gwee, 1980, p. 11). In 1891 the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) was introduced marking the beginning of English secondary schools (Hill, 1892, p. 267). The Education Department decided to start libraries in English and Malay government funded schools in 1899 (Wilkinson, 1900, pp. 136–137).

In 1937 there were four English secondary boys’ schools (Keir, 1938, p. 57). All of these schools had libraries (Brown, 1987, p. 28; Johnston, 1930, pp. 78–79; Lau & Teo, 2003, p. 58; Watson, 1930, p. 21). There were three English secondary girls’ schools and Raffles Girls’ School had a school library (Corner, 1981, p. 158). There were three Chinese secondary schools in 1937 (Keir, 1938, p. 107) and two had school libraries (Morten, 1936, p. 75; Tan, 1991, p. 80).

After the Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945, most schools were left vacant with books and libraries looted (Neilson, 1949, pp. 553–554).

New secondary school system in the English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil streams

In 1946 the settlement of Singapore was separated from the settlements of Penang and Malacca, to become a separate Colony (McKerron, 1947, p. 11). The Ten-year programme for education was implemented in 1947 to provide universal free primary education in the Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English languages (Balakrishnan, 1978, p. 1). Each newly built primary school had 14 classrooms, one staff room, a principal’s room and a storeroom with no plan to build a school library (Cuthbertson, 1951, pp. 31–42).

After the first local government took office in 1955, the Ministry of Education (MOE) was established and replaced the former Education Department (McLellan, 1957, p. 1). By 1963, MOE established a common primary and secondary education system in the four language streams (Seah & Seah, 1983, p. 241).

Formation of the Malayan Library Group (MLG)

The period of modern school librarianship began with the formation of the Malayan Library Group (MLG) in 1955 (Chan, 1980, p. 45) which was the first library professional group to be established in Singapore and Malaya. The MLG organized a course “in the rudiments librarianship...intended primarily for teacher librarians” (Lim, 1955, p. 34). The participants requested that the MLG represent the MOE, principals and teachers’ organizations with regards to setting school library standards and addressing poor supervision and facilities (Lim, 1956, pp. 47–48). As a result, the need for school library standards was first mentioned in 1955.

First survey on English and Chinese secondary school libraries

The LAMS was dissolved on 27 February 1960 and the Library Association of Singapore (LAS) was inaugurated (Chan, 1980, p. 45). In the same year the LAS conducted the first survey on secondary school libraries in Singapore (Eu & Anuar, 1971, pp. 31–32). The key findings from this survey of 77 out of 120 respondents were as follows:

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