THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL LIBRARY IN EDUCATION

Usha Mukunda[1]

"Truly the heart of the school. Stimulating currents go out of it into every corner of the school" S.R. Ranganathan

1. INTRODUCTION

Leading thinkers around the world, like Amartya Sen, John Galbraith, Aldous Huxley and Rabindranath Tagore, to name just a few, have expressed their strong conviction that in education lies the key to resolving the issues of wars and violence, social inequities, economic divides and corruption in politics. Education of the right kind can illuminate and enhance the strength of a nation and its people.

It is not at all a foregone conclusion that education and awareness are more effectively communicated in developed and wealthy nations. A case in point is the United States where compulsory education and stringent measures of performance have not translated into a thoughtful, caring and contented society. How can lesser-endowed and more populated countries learn from this? I think we must begin at the level of the individual. Can there be an approach to education which would recognize the uniqueness of each individual and at the same time, convey the sense of belonging to a community to which she contributes, and from which she benefits. This intent of education, in my view, is the ground on which the National Curriculum Framework 2005 has based its guidelines and precepts. It recognizes and validates the individual, geographical, historical and cultural features of each region in the country and gives the schools the flexibility to form a curriculum against that background. However a curriculum alone cannot do the trick. Again it is the individual who can wield the magic wand. In an article published in The Hindu of June 1st 2007, Professor Krishna Kumar, former Director of the NCERT, reiterates the importance of training and empowering teachers in our task of nation building through educational reform. He exhorts universities and institutions of higher learning to bring about quality and excellence in the content and execution of their teacher training courses. I would like to add librarians to this important category of educators.

2. UNIQUE ROLE OF THE LIBRARY IN EDUCATION

This paper deals with the role and impact of the school library in this scenario of education. S.R. Ranganathan in his classic book, "New Education and School Libraries," refers to the library as the core of the school and central to its educational process. How can we bring this about?

[1]*School Library Consultant, Bangalore & Founder Member of Centre for Learning.*

In a world of accelerating information, no teacher or syllabus can hope to encompass all that is known. If the school can arouse the curiosity of the students and then provide them with the means to satisfy or at least feed that curiosity, then they have been given the gift of learning throughout their lives. It is here that the school library moves to centre stage.

This is the place where students learn to do independent study, to distinguish between fact and opinion, and emerge as thinking, self-confident young men and women. The library is a meeting place of disciplines, teachers and students, and a place where a perspective is gained. Moreover if at school level, children are familiar with using a well-administered library, they will surely go on to become confident, responsible users of libraries. The foundation laid at school will see them through their adult life.

3. INFORMATION AND LEARNING

The National Core Curriculum Framework has very intuitively differentiated between the two. In the library too we can provide children both these modes. Information is contained in books, journals, in multi-media and now is freely available on the net as well, not to mention human communication. But how does the child navigate her way around these multiple sources, and assess their relative authenticity, usefulness and relevance? This is where learning comes in with the help of the librarian. The librarian has an intimate connection with the child's reading habits as well as an on-going relationship, which engenders trust in the child's mind. This is very important at the school level when many ideas and concepts begin to take shape in the child's mind. The librarian is the one who can present an unbiased view by making available material that gives a composite picture of the matter in hand, be it a project or an essay or an assignment.

Information is certainly of primary importance. To know about events, processes, discoveries and people, is to have a sense of connectedness with the immediate environment and with the world at large. Next, information helps students to make informed decisions, be sceptical and not fall prey to rumours and superstition. Knowledge also helps to generate curiosity and raise more questions, which in an upward spiral enables young people to go further into areas and disciplines with their own original thinking. Even the brilliant scientist, Isaac Newton acknowledged the debt he owed to people whose discoveries helped him to move further. “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

Knowledge is strength. This statement may have been used so indiscriminately that it has lost its urgency. But looked at afresh, yes, knowledge is strength. When children see unfairness and bias, and more pointedly, face injustice, discrimination and oppression as they grow up, it is the knowledge that such a state is not the norm that gives them the courage to fight back and not conform.

4. KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Knowledge in all its myriad facets constitutes an enormous body of material. How is it to be

gathered, sifted, organized, compacted and then disseminated to the users in the most wholesome and useful manner? This is where Knowledge Management comes into play.

In his article, "Knowledge Management in Schools and Role of the School Library/Media Centre" published in "Information Studies," Vol. 13. No. 1. January 2007, Prof. A. Neelameghan defines Knowledge Management as "the management of the Intellectual Capital or Intellectual Asset (recorded, public, and tacit knowledge) of the organization (people, recorded resources e.g. documents – book and non-book materials, and electronic and web resources) so as to progressively and dynamically achieve the vision and mission of the organization**."**

5. KNOWLEDGE RESOURCES IN THE LIBRARY

In looking at a school as an organization, (which it is!) the cumulative knowledge available to users consists of the following :

- Resources in the library at the present time along with the possibility of further additions.
- Resources accessible through inter-library loan.
- Resources through browsing on-line, Google, Wikipedia, use of media, CDs, DVDs, CD-ROMs and digital content.
- Knowledge inherent in the teaching faculty, support staff, librarians and management.
- Potential knowledge to be tapped from parents and their contacts.
- Expert knowledge from visiting lecturers as well as from talks outside the school, attended by students and staff.
- Information and references gathered from Seminars and Conferences along with printed proceedings and hand-outs.
- Knowledge from visits to museums, exhibitions, plays, films and other special events.

We can see that this forms a formidable array of knowledge and that managing it is a thrill and a challenge. Furthermore, there is the overall intent of the school to be kept foremost in mind. While all this is the responsibility of the librarian, there are natural ways in which the work gets broken up. The management of the school articulates its vision and philosophy. Teachers of specific subjects automatically help by weeding out unnecessary material. As students get more familiar with reference work they too can give clues to the librarian about what was relevant and useful. Other professionals in librarianship are also of great value in aiding the librarian either by direct contact or through their talks and writings. But the bottom line is the librarian's to draw!

6. THE ROLE OF THE LIBRARIAN

A lively curiosity, a genuine interest in many things, a looking and listening mode, and a growing confidence will set the librarian on the right track to manage and dispense knowledge in the best

possible way. This is where the adult learns on the job by keeping her eyes and ears open. Training programmes and seminars for librarians too would be a very beneficial move, either initiated by professional associations or added to teacher training courses.

7. LEARNING

Now what about learning? Is it limited to learning how to access information? Not at all. That is only one part of it. Reading of literature, biography, travel, history, philosophy and writings in science gives a breadth and depth of understanding that is unparalleled. Children reading biographies have often identified with a young scientist, performer or inventor. The trials, and at times, hopeless beginnings that some great individuals have experienced and overcome, are inspiring and elevating. The story of Helen Keller never fails to bring awe to the faces of young readers. Their own preoccupations seem to fade away. Nelson Mandela's, Mahatma Gandhi's and the Dalai Lama's writings on freedom and their experiences, have touched even those children who resist reading. Such examples are plentiful. Fiction and literature have enormous possibilities too. Stories of racial bias or aftermath of wars open young people's eyes to issues faced by others like themselves in different parts of the world. Compassion for a fellow being, care for the environment, the nurturing of a sense of responsibility – these can and have been sparked off by stories they have read. Books on dance, drama, music and craft from all corners of the country give a glimpse of the richness of our culture that needs to be treasured and preserved. Stories from history help them get a perspective on religious tolerance. On the all-important theme of peace, examples and stories reveal the strength and power of living without violence and conflict

This is the education, the knowledge and the learning we, as librarians, can share with our youth to help them build a nation that is free from unending sorrow and inequity. To enhance and enrich the curriculum in the ways I have enumerated, is the role and responsibility of the school library.

8. THE OPEN LIBRARY

To begin with, every school must have a library that is open and accessible. The notion that it is a private treasure owned by a select body, to be disbursed to the children as and when the adult deems fit, is totally unacceptable. S. R. Ranganathan, the doyen of Library Science in India, laid this down quite explicitly in his First Law of Libraries.

Books are for use.

He followed it up with his next two laws**.**

Every reader his or her book, and Every book its reader.

In order to actualise these two laws, the collection must be of the highest quality. This requires much exploration, discussion with teachers and students, and far-sightedness on the part of the librarian and the management. But the effort will be more than worth the while because every book

that is picked up for reading will have inherent value.

The last two laws are:

Save the time of the user and The library is a growing organism.

Here are clear guidelines to the librarian to prioritize the user and his needs and lastly to look at technology and digitization for the growing collection.

The parts of the whole:

However, having good library resources that are open and accessible is not enough. There is much that can be done by the librarian or resource person to initiate activities and projects to bring the children to the resources.

If any of this is to happen, it is clear that each class must have a weekly library period which is the librarian's responsibility to conduct. She may of course take help from the class teacher but the thrust comes from her. It is an informal learning space where the student learns where to look for information, how to use the reference materials and how to gauge and assess authentic information. This is also the time when the students can browse through the books and with some guidance from the librarian, select books to borrow. Right use of the library can be conveyed at this time. Help can be taken from students in repair of books, making labels and updating the news board. The students are also taught how to create bibliographies, which in turn help other users of the library. In this way a strong bond is formed between the student and the library. If the school time- table is too crowded for a separate library hour, it can be taken from each subject on a rotational basis. If there is the will, a way can be found! After all, a well-informed child is a source of pride to every parent, teacher and the school. **The library is not a substitute for formal education but an integral part of it.**

Many librarians bemoan the fact that they are not treated on par with other staff. One reason for this could be a lack of awareness on the part of the management about the central role a school library must and can play. This can be addressed by library professionals highlighting and pointing out this vital resource through seminars and workshops with management and heads of schools. Articles written in newspapers and journals also help bring this to the attention of a wider audience. So here is a clear call for a sense of unity among library professionals so that school libraries are seen as a vital link in the chain of library services.

Another reason? “The fault, dear librarians, lies not in our stars but in ourselves!” I must ask myself:

Am I as a librarian in a school, meeting the challenges that are posed?

Am I proactive and energetic?

Do I see the absolute necessity of instilling good library habits which will remain with the students throughout their lives?

This fact that school library work is at the grass roots level and as such lays down the fundamentals of excellent, life-long use of the library, must be seen by every library professional.

9. COLLABORATION WITH TEACHERS, PARENTS AND STUDENTS

Reaching out to, and educating teachers about the rich possibilities of library use is another privilege of the librarian. The school librarian is in the unique position of being aware of all the resources of the library, having direct interaction with all users – students, teachers and management and is therefore in the best position to suggest, guide and even initiate certain approaches.

In looking at educating a child, parents sometimes fall into the trap of handing over their child to the educational system. Actually, the parents can play a pivotal role in shaping the child's thinking, values, priorities and eventual contribution to the nation. Much of this can emerge from a balanced approach to reading that can be inculcated at home. A family that reads, moves on to having healthy discussion and dialogue on all matters, whether far away or close to home. These foundations of reading, thinking and discussing help the child to grow into an independent thinking, responsible adult and citizen. So I would strongly suggest that every school library throws its doors open to parents as well. This may sound formidable at first, and I agree it is not easy. But as librarians, we must look at the larger picture and not the narrow one of chaos or disorder in the library. As librarians we will deal with that, but who will deal with the larger chaos and disorder in the world? If at each and every step, we think big, we can act in small ways which will eventually impact.

Getting students to participate in all aspects of the library is the most enjoyable task. Even from a young age, children can be encouraged to be independent, responsible and involved in the library. This will bring about a sense of pride and ownership in the library which stands the librarian in good stead. I have been asked many times if I am the single librarian. I always reply that I have more than 100 colleagues who assist me in taking care of each and every function of the library.

Mohammad Yunus, the Nobel Peace Prize winner in 2006 stresses the fact that grassroots individuals must be recognized as part of the process towards change and peace. We are the grassroots people. Let us recognize that and act in our daily lives to bring about change in children – the future of humanity.