SCHOOL LIBRARIES AND CHILDREN'S LIBRARIES: A MIDDLE GROUND

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ABSTRACT

A great opportunity can be seen between managing school libraries and children's sections of public libraries. Both these types of libraries receive funds from the same State Government, both have similar users, both require same types of reading materials, both are equally important, but equally neglected sectors! Considering the power of digitization and networking in this backdrop, a project is conceived. A top-down plan is presented here for the necessary brainstorming.

1. INTRODUCTION

Are School Libraries and Children's Libraries different? The answer is both 'Yes' and 'No'. Focusing further, conceptually these are not different, bur technically these are two different types of libraries. This needs some elaboration.

The main difference is in the ownership. While the school libraries are funded by the school authorities or the Government, children's libraries are essentially under the umbrella of Public Libraries. There are just a few children's libraries owned by non-government institutions like Ramakrishna Mission etc. in India. The British Council and the American Centre used to have Children's sections, but these are on and off based on the prevailing policies at a given time. Both the types of libraries have more or less the same types of users, i.e. children, but to use the school library, the child has to be a student of that school. On the other hand, any child can walk into and use a children's section of a library, which is a part of the Public Library System.

However, there are many common features between the two types of libraries. The age, socio-economic and socio-psychological levels of the children is more or less the same. The types of reading resources are expected to be similar. School libraries may have to have some extra emphasis on curriculum related documents. But, in the age group of five to fifteen the children's reading needs are the same.

In addition, some more common features, which are not directly visible, have to be sensed, noticed and stated without any fear or favour. These factors offer great opportunities to the planners in this regards. In other words, both these types of libraries receive funds from the same State Government, both have similar users, both require same type of reading materials, both are equally important, but equally neglected sectors! In view of the above, and considering the power of digitization and networking, an opportunity can be seen in the form of a project. An outline or a top-down view of the plan or the project is presented here for the necessary brainstorming.

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2. A TOP-DOWN VIEW

The central idea is to write a project proposal for the State Government, which is supposed to fund both school and public libraries.

The end-product will be a children's/school library on the line of Internet Public Library (IPL). To visualize the project, first take a close look at the Internet Public Library. It has several fictions, subject related books, reference books, hobby books. There are many such Libraries available online. In addition, there are sections or zones 'For Teens' and 'For Kids'. It even contains animated stories for kids. [Please see how, for example, 'The Tortoise and the Hare' story unfolds itself.]

Kids in schools and at public libraries' children's section, can have access to all such recreation and information sources depending on their age and taste. Looking at the way smart phones and information contents are being used now by kids and laymen, one need not be skeptic about its utility. These days almost everyone is net and ICT savvy. Kids are getting access to internet, computer games, etc. Then why not take advantage of this situation to provide rich quality reading material in a cost effective manner.

Technically, what is proposed is a school cum children's library, which is digital, accessible 24/7 to anybody, in three languages, English, Kannada and Hindi. The idea can be spread to any language. It will be on the model of IPL. Initially, the proposed library has to be a harvested digital library.

The project can have three types of resources, or three phases of development. The activities of the three phases are as follows.

Phase 1

Digital Resources already available on the net and meant for kids have to be identified; just provide a hyperlink and access them from somewhere and provide to your users. This phase is not as easy as it appears. One has to choose quality material, which should be simple, illustrated. Provide brief text in any language just as subtitles in foreign language movies. There should be less text and more visual content.

Even the audio output should be provided for illiterate kids/school dropouts etc. The other regular kids also may enjoy listening more than reading. In addition, YouTube material, say, of 'Vikram and Betal' or 'Alladin and Magic Lamp' or 'Alibaba and 40 thieves' etc can be linked. This could be animated or acted version.

The types of stories to be identified include *Panchatantra*, *Akbar-Birbal, Tenali Ram, Ramayana-Mahabharata, Arabian Nights, Vikram-Betal stories,* worldwide known folktales, fables and other stories for children. The nonfiction to be identified includes sources in the series 'How and Why Wonder' books, 'How it works' series, Geographic, environment, monuments, magic, music related materials. Well, there is no end. But, at the first phase of the proposal, it is thought that 500 resources should be a modest beginning.

At this stage some permission has to be obtained depending on what is the fair use permissible under the prevailing copyright law. One can even think of having a tie-up with *Amar Chitra Katha.* Particularly, their Biography series and comics are too good to be considered.

Phase 2

Digitize the documents whose copyrights have expired, and these are in open domain. The World literature in digest form, if freely available on the net, should be identified, linked and made available to the children. These pocket size books were very popular among children.

Phase 3

Explore the possibility of obtaining permission for currently copyright protected works. The emphasis at this stage should be on children's literature available in local language. While Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling, Ruskin Bond and others have written in English, in Kannada there are authors like G. P. Rajaratnam, etc. Such works also should be made available in digital form.

3. IMPLEMENTATION

This is an ambitious project. The project cannot be carried out without Government or International funding. It has to be teamwork. The person to lead this project has to be familiar with children's information need, their psychology, etc. [Psychology is an important aspect. For example, children above 11-12 years of age no longer enjoy animal stories. They like stories with heroes and heroines of their own age. That is where, Enid Blyten and Hardy Boys come in picture.] He must also know what is technically feasible. It requires goodwill at Government level. Strong communication and public relation at all levels is essential.

The system to be developed should not be unwieldy. Hosting a site of this type is quite challenging. Dead-links may create embarrassment. Restrict the number of sources to be covered at each phase. Value addition in terms of using suitable metadata, built in dictionary and adding subtitles will be an added feature.

4. A WORD OF CAUTION…

This project should not be viewed as a substitute of school libraries and children's section in public libraries. Libraries have to be there, but look at the unhealthy state of these libraries and poor collections. Librarians find it difficult to balance between high quality, standard classy collection against the new books competing to be purchased, in the days of financial crunch. No library can afford to ignore classic collection, nor can they overlook new creative literature.

There is another important issue. Not everything is freely available on the net. For example a great work, *Masterpieces of World Literature* In Digest Form is not accessible unless the library pays some subscription fee or license fee. This document gives 3-4 page summary of the masterpiece like a play of Shakespeare, the characters, brief criticism etc. World's great masterpieces are

covered in this structure so that one can have some idea about that literary work.

This project makes the time-tested literature available to the children without cutting into the space for new books. Once the proposed digital library is made available, maintenance and security related problems are substantially reduced.

The bottom line of this project is to provide best possible literature meant for children to the kids in the form and medium they like the most, with suitable value addition at no great extra cost. This project forms a middle ground between school libraries and children's libraries