

Aligning the Roles of School Resource Centers with Student's 21st Century Skills Development in Malaysia: A Collaborative Approach

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Abstract: The 21st century skills are embedded in the Malaysian school curriculum to optimize the knowledge, skills and competencies of its people in preparation to face the challenges of the competitive world ahead. Consequently, the education trend has somehow created a new gap that the school resource centers should capitalize their potentials beyond the traditional ways, so as to venture into new roles. As none of the library and media teachers who are professionally employed on a full-time basis, there are several issues arising pertaining to a lack of time, knowledge and competencies that have caused further shortcomings in the service provision processes including the delivery of information literacy programs. Taking into consideration of the scenarios, it is proposed through this research a collaborative approach, enabling the library and media teachers to create a strong partnership with classroom teachers and principals to fulfill the needs of teaching and learning of the Malaysian education systems.

Key words: School resource center, 21st century skills, collaborative approach, library and media teacher, teacher-librarian, school library

INTRODUCTION

School Resource Center (SRC) is the uniform name for school libraries in Malaysia. Its long history was begun as early as during the British occupation period in the 19th century formerly called "Khutub Khanah" (Jusoh, 2002). Over the years, the world of education has advanced considerably fast hence, a SRC without exemption should retain its impetus in putting forward their roles accordingly in line with the inevitable influences of globalization on teaching and learning. In this respect all SRCs are set to conform to the relentless changes of needs of the Ministry of Education (MOE) particularly in the provision and delivery of their services and resources.

As the Malaysia education system is aligned in accordance with the economic and technological growth, globally and domestically, the need to optimize the knowledge, skills and competencies of its people has become the foundation for the 2013-2025 Malaysia Education Blueprint. 21st century skills are the core elements underlined throughout the blueprint to be ingrained in the new Primary School Standard Curriculum (KSSR) and forthcoming Secondary School Standard

Curriculum (KSSM) to be launched in 2017. It is to create high-quality human capital and enhance Malaysia's competitive advantage in knowledge economy.

In fact, the most underlying issue addressed in the blueprint is the poor performance of the Malaysian secondary students in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). PISA is organized by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) which Malaysia has participated twice in 2009 and 2012. Malaysia's overall ranking in 2012 is 52nd out of 65 countries and the result clearly shows that the proficiency level of Malaysian students for the three assessments held for Reading, Mathematics and Science are well below the average score of the participating countries (Amnah and Peters, 2015).

Hugely inspired by the will to overcome the shortcoming, this is where the MOE has learned to set the goal to be the top third countries by 2025 to improve significantly from the bottom third position in PISA 2009 and PISA 2012 (Amnah and Peter, 2015). In doing so, all examinations at the national level will contain between 50 and 80% of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) questions.

Consequently, in relation to the roles of SRCs, the whole new trend in the context of the Malaysia education system has somehow created a new gap that the SRCs should be able to capitalize their full potentials beyond the traditional ways, so as to venture into new roles. With regard to this, a survey (Lo *et al.*, 2014) discovers several other roles the school librarians may be able to play, in addition to being library managers such as educators, administrators, teaching consultants, information specialists and Information Literacy (IL) teachers.

The aspect of collaboration by recognizing the role of teacher-librarians as resource specialists and IL experts is also emphasized (Kuhlthau, 2010). They are urged to research as a team with teachers that would significantly create an information environment for students to inquire, participate, create and learn, so much so to fulfil the requirement of 21st century learning standards. In order to research this out, teacher-librarians should become partners, not only with the classroom teachers but also the administrators and the community in allowing students to use ideas and information effectively Mike (2002).

Problem statement: Under the current employment of the Library and Media Teachers (LMT) in Malaysia, the reality as disclosed by local literature, unfavorably, appears to have several obstacles before the SRCs are prepared to optimize their capacity to fully support the MOE's aspiration. LMT is the official name for teacher-librarian or school librarian, widely used since 2006. All LMTs are full-fledged subject teacher's appointed by the school principals to allocate 18-20 teaching time a week to manage SRCs whilst they need to carry out classroom teaching between 6 and 8 periods a week.

Despite the fact that none of the LMTs who are professionally employed on a full-time basis (Kamal and Othman, 2012) it is also proven they do not utilize the allotted time of 20 periods to manage SRCs. Instead, they spend most of their time to perform teaching responsibilities, more than the 6-8 periods given time. Furthermore, the lack of qualified librarians is a main restriction for students to possess an ability to access school library resources (Abuzaid. and Singh, 2007) which eventually has dragged them to commit with the syndrome of plagiarism, copy, cut and paste in performing school tasks (Shamila, 2013; Halida; 2014).

A survey on online reading habits (Abidin *et al.*, 2014) to over 240 students from the secondary schools in Penang found that although 83.7 % of the respondents are online every day, their main purpose of reading is to fulfill the personal needs for entertainment. This is confirmed by the director general of education of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Dr Khair Mohamad Yusof that lack

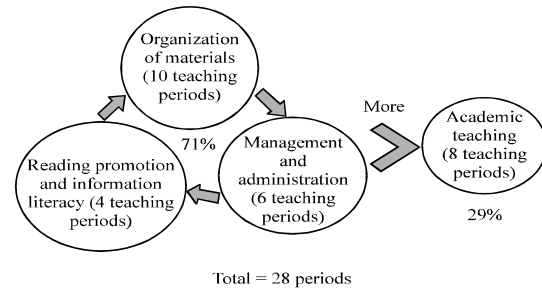


Fig. 1: Allocation of time by the MOE for LMTs between managing SRCs (71%) and teaching responsibilities (29%)

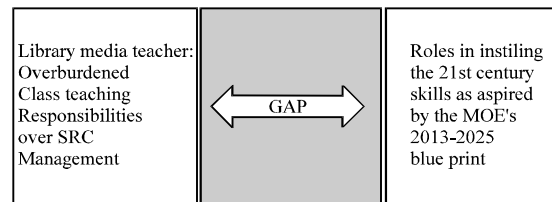


Fig. 2: Gap between LMTs' roles in class teaching and their roles in instilling 21st century skills among students, i.e., IL education

of reading or reading limited to certain genre as the cause of the weakness of the Malaysian students in answering HOTS questions, hence identified to be a contributing factor to the poor performance of PISA results.

The importance of IL is associated with the pursuit of lifelong learning and its contribution to developing personal empowerment and economic development in such a way that dependent learners are transformed into independent, self-directed and lifelong learners (Bruce, 2004). This clearly signifies the relationship between IL skills and 21st century skills which is rather complementary, if not totally similar. LMTs who are responsible for exposing school students with IL education have a huge job ahead of them. However, a worrying fact emerges when most of them are found to spend <10% of their teaching time in implementing IL programs at schools. Such finding somehow raises more questions on the ability of the LMTs to ensure the successful implementation of IL programs (Fig. 1 and 2).

In view of the above scenarios and after a thorough study of the literature, this study is to propose a conceptual framework of collaborative approach that is to involve the relevant partners within the school environment. It is to gain the benefits that collaboration is be able to offer. Teacher and librarian partnership is

needed to meet the gap in acquiring 21st century skills (Shelbie *et al.*, 2015). At its best, once a task is completed, a collaborative undertaking would enhance the community, its social fibers and get more done (Mattessich *et al.*, 2001; Haycock, 2007).

Nevertheless, when collaboration would become an answer to the aforementioned problems in Malaysian context, several issues should be scrutinized prior to its adoption into student's learning. Taking a look from several studies, collaborative approach can be rather a challenging endeavour. An issue of "territoriality", the emphasis on standardized testing and rigid measures of accountability at some points appear to have discouraging effects on collaboration (Latham *et al.*, 2013).

An exploratory study was held on the use of SRCs among school teachers (Yushiana and Norhiyah, 2011). It unveiled the lack of interest and low utilization of SRCs among teachers which could be caused by their limited awareness about the essential role of SRC in complementing the school curriculum as well as other factors such as the materials that to their perception do not support the curriculum, also lack of training, promotion and implementation of IL programs for teachers and students. Another study Mokhtar and Majid (2006) held in Singapore revealed that despite 56.3% of teachers did not have time to collaborate with school librarians; their perception towards the readiness of school librarians about collaboration somehow indicates positivity to at least get it started. This is clearly shown when 70% of teachers disagreed that school librarians are too disconnected or unfriendly to begin collaboration.

In this respect, therefore, LMTs should take the leading role to collaborate with teachers in encouraging them to widen the delivery of their lessons, not only confined to classroom and textbooks but also to utilize a variety of resources available in the SRC's holdings (Yushiana and Norhiyah, 2011). For the sake of collaboration, at least, teachers should be advised to integrate the type of teaching aids and SRC resources in their daily lesson plan.

Literature review: Literature reveals the new roles that require the LMTs to take further steps to participate in teaching role and curriculum consultant role. Teacher librarians need to promote and strengthen their roles as "information specialist", "teaching partner" and "curriculum resources facilitator", in addition to their traditional roles dealing with printed books and reading (Cheng, 2012). Likewise, collaborative instructional and curriculum planning are regarded the most important roles of the 21st century (Small, 2001).

Co-teaching is emphasized as an avenue for teacher-librarians and teachers to engage in by means of an embedded academic model whereby teachers and complementary experts would create synergy effects (Loertscher, 2014). Teachers who teach alone only manage 50% of their students either meeting or exceeding the highest expectations in learning processes while co-teaching involving teachers and teacher-librarians would enhance it by reaching a range of 70-100%. This finding is in line with (Montiel and Jones, 2011) that student's learning and academic achievement improve as a result of collaboration.

On the level of collaboration between teacher librarians and teachers, both parties should become equal partners in developing higher-level collaborations rather than to merely participate in lower level activities (Small *et al.*, 2010) such as finding resources for teachers. Among others, higher-level collaboration refers to a more central role in planning, teaching and evaluating students that teacher-librarians should play (Montiel and Jones, 2011).

A Teacher and Librarian Collaboration (TLC) Model is proposed (Montiel, 2008), simplified from Loertscher's taxonomy that underlines collaboration interactions exist along a continuum identified by 4 facets: coordination, cooperation, integrated instruction and integrated curriculum. It is an iterative process and would not succeed with the absence of two crucial traits, trustworthy and capability in developing personal relationship with colleagues. Collaboration is viewed from the socio-constructionist standpoint of learning theories (Montiel, 2008). Through collaborative endeavours the participants fall into a negotiation of meaning process by way of social relationship that would create wider opportunities for creative thinking and innovation. Therefore, collaboration promotes group goals, solicit ideas from others and eventually will be represented in the final product (Cooper and Bray, 2011).

The perspectives of school principals concerning school librarians are also uncovered by literature. A survey to gauge principal's perceptions of school librarians in South Carolina (Shannon, 2009) revealed that a huge majority from the 189 participating principals perceive school librarian's most important competencies are related to a collaborative approach with teachers. The highest rated competency of 96.81% is concerned with collaboration that is to provide students with instruction in information strategies (finding, judging and using information in support of authentic learning). Subsequently, the competency that scores the second ranking of 95.21% is also associated with collaboration pertaining to integrating library program and IL skills into school's curriculum.

Meanwhile, in order to boost the school administrator's awareness towards the roles of LMTs, a better perspective should be set in terms of a major component the LMTs can be in the process of student's learning. Sufficient amount of room should be permitted for them to participate from the beginning stage of planning related to curriculum, literacy and technology (Cooper and Bray, 2011). A visionary leadership of the LMTs is said to be helpful in increasing the school principal's roles (Haycock, 2007). Several traits in this regard should be translated into actions such as initiative, confidence, risk-taking, communication and leadership skills (Haycock, 2007).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Scoping review technique was used throughout this research particularly as a preliminary assessment of the potential size and scope of research literature (Grant and Booth, 2009). A number of literature reviews were conducted to explore previous research works that are useful to systematically map the literature on a topic, identifying key concepts, theories and sources of evidence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Conceptual framework: A conceptual framework is built upon the potentials of the classroom teachers and principals to complement the roles of LMTs, or vice versa, through a collaborative approach, to facilitate and foster student learning and acquisition of 21st century skills as embedded in KSSR and KSSM (Fig. 3).

Collaboration of LMTs and classroom teachers should involve ongoing communication about shared goals for student learning (Lai and Wei, 2013). It is

hopeful that the strengths of school librarians (LMTs) and teachers can be uncovered for the purposes of performing teaching role as listed below (Lai and Wei, 2013).

Ideally, understanding each other's roles and mutually respect one researcher's expertise/strengths will create harmonious atmosphere in the process of collaboration. The more the teachers and LMTs develop mutual trust and respect with each other, the more mature the collaboration process can be (Shannon, 2009) (Table 1).

Undoubtedly, the role of school principal to research in collaboration with SRCs is also equally important. It is disclosed in a survey conducted in an urban district to examine factors of effective school libraries. In the study, teacher-librarians and principals are found to have agreed about the importance of six issues facing the school libraries. Both the principals and teacher-librarians are found to have a fair amount of shared knowledge that significantly establishes a basis for working together which would be also workable in Malaysian context. Listed below are the six issues that open up a space for collaboration between LMTs and their principal.

- Promote literacy
- Provide physical and intellectual access to information
- Leadership in information technology
- Ensure equity and freedom of access to information
- Participate in resource access networks
- Provincial information literacy standard

Obviously, students will benefit the most from the collaborative approach among LMTs, teachers and principals. In *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs*, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL and AECT, 1998) has emphasized the role of collaboration: "The school library program promotes collaboration among members of the learning community and encourages learners to be independent, lifelong users and producers of ideas and information".

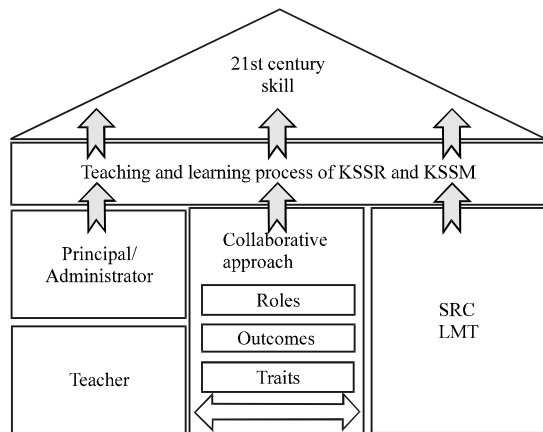


Fig. 3: Collaborative approach framework

Table 1: The required strengths of LMTs and teachers

School librarian/LMT	Teachers
Skills for accessing new knowledge	Knowledge of the curricular content
An understanding of the inquiry process and knowledge of the research process	Knowledge of the learning process
Knowledge of print and electronic resources	Knowledge of students
Knowledge of techniques for using technology to enhance learning	Knowledge of teaching strategies
A repertoire of successful practices with a variety of teachers, students and technologies	A repertoire of practices with a wide variety of students

CONCLUSION

An immense challenge to SRCs is to strengthen their roles particularly to help the nation accomplishing the 21st skills needed by the young generation as outlined in the 2013-2025 Malaysia Education Blueprint. Furthermore, several flaws identified with regard to the management of SRC also require immediate attention. Based on literature, a collaborative approach is therefore the basis for this research, enabling the LMTs, teachers and principals to align their roles in support of the provision of quality educational resources and information services. Literature has also shown the potential of collaboration involving LMTs and classroom teachers to fulfill the processes and activities of teaching and learning throughout the Malaysian education systems.

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