

Transforming secondary school libraries to meet the needs of the twenty first century learner: The case of Trinidad and Tobago

Grace Achoy

Librarian IV, School Library Services Unit, Educational Library Services Division. achoyg@nalis.gov.tt

Rachael Greene

Librarian III, School Library Services Unit, Educational Library Services Division. greener@nalis.gov.tt

Abstract

Secondary school libraries in Trinidad and Tobago have undergone a major transformation through the successful execution of a Secondary Education Modernization Programme. (SEMP) This paper documents the achievements of the programme in upgrading the libraries' learning environment to meet the needs of the twenty first century learner. The efforts of the Secondary School Libraries Unit to continue to provide for the learning needs of the nation's twenty first century secondary school students through the implementation of a Library and Information Literacy Curriculum, provision of online databases, enhanced physical facilities and information resources are also discussed.

Introduction

This paper seeks to examine the overall development in secondary school libraries in the context of rapid technological changes, as Trinidad and Tobago strives to create an enabling environment for the 21st Century learner. It also seeks to review the Secondary Education Modernization Programme (SEMP) intervention in the transformation of school libraries, specifically in Trinidad.

The objectives of this paper are to discuss the developments, challenges and constraints as secondary school libraries attempt to meet the needs of the 21st century learners, to evaluate these changes against national and international standards and to provide recommendations for future progress.

The twin island republic of Trinidad and Tobago, which is located in the Caribbean, is 11 kilometers north of Venezuela. Trinidad is 5,128 square kilometres in area while Tobago is 300 square kilometres and lies 34 kilometres off Trinidad. The combined population of these countries is 1.3M. The peoples comprise of descendants of Africans, Indians, Chinese, Syrians, Lebanese, and Europeans. The capital city is Port of Spain and it is in this city the head office of the National Library and Information System Authority (NALIS) is located. NALIS is the body incorporated by Act No. 18 of 1998, with the responsibility for developing all library and information services in Trinidad and Tobago.

In Trinidad and Tobago there are 123 secondary school libraries managed by the National Library and Information System Authority.

The Secondary School Library Services Unit is the department of the Educational Library Services Division with the mandate to "*develop, manage and monitor*" (Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education, 1993) library and information services in all secondary schools. Staffed by professionals who are employees of the National Library and Information System Authority (NALIS), (the supervisory body for all libraries under the NALIS Act), the offices are based at the Rudranath Capildeo Learning Resource Centre of the Ministry of Education. The current relationship between the two parties is governed by a legal agreement with accommodation for future adjustment or amendments and documented as the *Memorandum of Understanding on Library Management between NALIS and the Ministry of Education*.

National standards, based on international professional recommendations, have been documented and are being used to establish and monitor School Library Media Centres throughout the country. The most recent manual of operations, *The School Library Media Centre (SLMC) Manual* was completed in 2009. In the foreword to the document the current Executive Director of NALIS, Mrs. Annette Wallace noted that “...Through the SLMC, students are now exposed to 21st century developments in the delivery of information services, where they learn to search online catalogues, use electronic information resources and wireless services...”

[Trinidad and Tobago School Library Services Unit, 2009]

The Ministry of Education of Trinidad and Tobago in partnership with NALIS has been engaged in planning strategically and working assiduously to ensure that *21st Century learning environments* are created in all secondary school libraries. The learning environment of the 21st century has been defined as “the structures, tools and communities that inspire students and educators to attain the knowledge and skills the twenty first century demands of us all.”

[Partnership for 21st century skills, 2011 p. 3].]

The 21st century is well upon us so that the characteristics of this century are easily identifiable. A phrase that best describes the major characteristics is *rapidly changing technology*. The information explosion has moved the world economies from being termed industrial to knowledge economies (Drucker, 1969) and continuous, lifelong learning is now necessary if citizens of the twenty first century are to successfully manoeuvre the dynamics of a technologically driven environment. Youthful citizens are said to be “digital natives” (Prenkys, 2009) who, while comfortable with technology, still need to be taught the necessary skills for success.

What then are the identified skills that learners need to have in order to live successfully? Partnership for 21st century skills (2011) identifies 21st century learners as students/graduates who are:

- Critical thinkers
- Problem solvers
- Good communicators
- Good collaborators
- Information and technology literate
- Flexible and adaptable
- Innovative and creative
- Globally competent
- Financially literate

An enabling environment would therefore facilitate the 21st century learner and learning process with the services of an equipped, physical space for individual and group activities with information resources in a variety of formats, and allow the use and mastery of existing and emerging technologies.

Historical Development of School Libraries

Expansion of Secondary Schools

Before the mid 1950's, the Ministry of Education concentrated on providing universal primary education. The secondary schools comprised mainly denominational schools established and managed by the religious organizations of Trinidad. By the late 1950's and early 1960's the Ministry began to focus on the expansion of the secondary level by establishing Government Secondary schools throughout Trinidad. This was followed by the construction of Composite, Junior Secondary and Senior Comprehensive schools in 1970's and 1980's.

Administrative support for the establishment of school libraries was demonstrated in the construction of planned designated physical facilities devised as a large open plan room with the flexibility for design layout. The libraries were also provided with seating accommodations for staff and students, shelving for books and periodicals, display boards and information resources in print format. The Senior Comprehensive schools were staffed with one Librarian I, and two Library Assistants, while one Library Assistant I served the Junior Secondary and Composite schools.

Establishment of the School Libraries Division

In 1978, the School Libraries Division was originally set up as the administrative arm for libraries in schools and colleges with sixth form classes. The services were extended to all secondary schools. Administrative support was provided through school visits and training programmes conducted for staff at both the secondary and primary level. Professional advice was provided to both the staff of the school libraries and the Ministry of Education to further support the work in school libraries. In 2001 the School Libraries Division was renamed "School Library Services Unit." In March 2002, NALIS assumed responsibility for the staff.

The Origin of the Secondary Education Modernisation Programme (SEMP)

The economic downturn during the period 1985-1993 resulted in severe cuts in all programmes, including education. With the decrease in activity, the inefficiencies in the system became obvious as a large number of students were graduating from secondary schools with low examination scores in key subject areas such as English Language and Mathematics. Literacy and numeracy skills were minimal to the extent where many students were considered functionally illiterate. The National Task Force on Education Policy Paper (1993) noted then:

"Our learning systems over the last two decades have not generated the expected quality of graduates in the proportions which our level of expenditure per pupil has led us to hope for, and it is generally recognized that they do not cater as efficiently as they might for those who are educationally at risk and for individuals in our communities with special needs."

The report of the National Task Force on Education was accepted by the government in 1996, and in an effort to improve the secondary education system an IDB loan of One Hundred and Forty-five Million US dollars (\$145,000,000.00 USD) was sourced to fund a programme which became known as the Secondary Education Modernization Programme (SEMP). Several other reports and studies on the education system were used as a basis for the SEMP initiative.

SEMP: Goals, Aims and Objectives

The Secondary Education Modernization Programme was originally a seven-year programme which began in 1999. The programme aimed to ensure that all students of Trinidad and Tobago received quality secondary education. Its overall objective was the reform and expansion of the secondary school system. The programme was in keeping with government's policy on education in areas such as universal secondary education, school based management and decentralization.

Under this programme the school library was seen as one of the key areas for modernization to provide support to the new teaching and learning strategies embraced by the Ministry. The concept of the school library as being at the core of the Multi-media Learning Centre was developed.

The Learning Centre would be comprised of an enhanced and enriched library, a computer laboratory, a multi-media classroom and a materials preparation room where Teachers can plan and develop learning resource materials specifically designed for providing quality learning experiences for their own students. [GORTT/IDB Secondary Education Modernization Programme (1998)].

To achieve this target, one of the major objectives of the SEMP was to develop and implement a plan for the establishment of Multi-media Learning Centres in all schools. This would be accomplished through a Technical Upgrade Programme to improve the physical facilities in each secondary school.

The planned Learning Centre would be adequately stocked with materials in all formats - books, journals, magazines; audiovisual materials such as audiotapes, videos, CD ROMs and computers with internet access. In addition, the multi-media learning centre would be staffed by a qualified librarian, an assistant librarian and a technician.

The SEMP was therefore the change agent through which opportunities would be provided for integrating information technology, development of library and computer research skills, access to the latest information through the internet, broadening the understanding of other cultures and countries in the world, for strengthening literacy skills and for developing attitudes and skills required for lifelong learning.

[GORTT/IDB Secondary Education Modernization Programme (1998)]

In effect, through the SEMP, 21st century library environments would be created for students to become effective learners.

Planning and Implementation Process

To ensure the effective and efficient implementation of the programme, the Secondary Education Modernization Programme Co-ordinating Unit (SEMPCU) was established to act as the facilitating and supporting agency to the Divisions of the Ministry of Education with the responsibility for the leadership of SEMP's four major components:

1. Improved Educational Quality
2. School Building and Upgrading
3. Institutional Strengthening
4. Enhanced Sector Performance.

The school libraries were placed under Improved Education Quality, headed by the Director of Curriculum Development of the Ministry of Education but was significantly impacted by the other three components. Hence, the School Library Services Unit worked with SEMPCU and Director of Curriculum Development to implement the strategies for the transformation of school libraries. The two main documents produced for this programme were:

1. *Standards for Secondary School Library Media Centres*
2. *Library and Information Literacy Curriculum*

The *Standards for Secondary School Library Media Centres* was used by the SEMP to guide the development of the school libraries and were adhered to in all the key areas. NALIS also used the document to justify its request for staffing at secondary schools.

The Library and Information Literacy Curriculum was developed based on the Big6™ process, (*Eisenberg and Berkowitz, 1987*) to enable students to become more effective users of information, to encourage students to make fuller use of the library, and to help students develop the skills for lifelong learning, retraining and career enhancement.

The School Library Services Unit, headed by the Director, Educational Library Services Division, NALIS assisted in the planning and implementation process by providing :

- advice on all matters related to secondary school library services
- reviews of over 60 architectural designs
- specifications for all furniture and equipment to be procured under SEMP
- lists of information resources including print and non-print materials as start-up collections for 20 new schools and for the upgrading of all 124 schools
- proposals for the integrated library management software
- leadership and support as chair/team members for tendering committees for all items procured.

SEMPCU was responsible for securing the required approvals from the Ministry of Education, the Inter American Development Bank and the Central Tenders Board. SEMPCU was also in charge of the procurement and delivery of items and services.

Achievements

The SEMP Co-ordinating Unit (SEMPCU) constructed twenty (20) new secondary school with libraries based on the concept of the Multimedia Learning Centre and designed them according to standards outlined in the *Standards for Secondary School Library Media Centres (2001)*. Books, furniture and equipment, including computers with internet access were also provided for these school libraries.

SEMPCU first purchased books, furniture and equipment for forty (40) schools. These were distributed mainly to the Junior Secondary and Composite Schools, later renamed according to the cardinal point locations.

To ensure the transformation process, the following items were provided by SEMPCU to all 124 Secondary School Libraries in Trinidad:

Integrated Library Management Software – Alexandria

Copy cataloguing software SMART MARC

2 Computer workstations for library administration

6 Computer workstations with headphones for student research

2 Digital cameras for students projects

2 Digital mini video cameras for students projects

2 Printers

1 Photocopier with Venda Cards for students' use

1 Scanner (Bookcheck)

2 Barcode readers - handheld and wireless

Approximately 2000 titles comprising Caribbean, reference, fiction and non-fiction books

50 multi-media software titles

A one year subscription to 9 journals
Approximately 28 Library Shelves
2 Periodical stands
1 Newspaper rack
2 Library book trolleys
2 Audio visual trolley carts
1 Library electronic detection and security gate
1 Overhead projector.

Approximately 120 school libraries were provided with internet connectivity. These injections radically transformed the school libraries which were then renamed School Library Media Centres.

In addition to the twenty (20) schools constructed by SEMPCU, the Ministry of Education also constructed approximately ten (10) schools to ensure full placement for secondary school students. One of the major challenges faced by SEMPCU was the implementation of the Technical Upgrade aspect of the SEMP Programme which involved the re-designing and refurbishing of specific areas of the laboratories and libraries.

Consequently, this project was placed under the direct responsibility of the Ministry of Education. However, instead of the Technical Upgrade of the schools, the Ministry opted to entirely rebuild the schools. Five (5) schools are currently under this programme. One school has already been completed and is in use. Four schools are scheduled to be completed before the next academic year, 2011 - 2012.

Evaluation of the School Library Media Centres: Baseline Survey (2007-8)

In November 2007, the School Library Services Unit began a Baseline Survey exercise to assess the status of the libraries and to provide guidelines for future development. To this end, a Baseline Assessment Form was designed and distributed to all school libraries in Trinidad for submission to the School Library Services Unit upon completion.

A document was prepared by the School Library Services Unit entitled "*Guidelines, Standards and Strategies for Secondary School Libraries / School Library Media Centres in Trinidad and Tobago*". This was distributed to the staff in all school libraries in Trinidad. The completed Baseline Assessment Form was evaluated against the standards in this document and meetings were conducted for school librarians and library assistants in charge of school libraries to discuss the assessment and to provide guidelines and strategies for the future development of each school library.

Based on the discussions a report was prepared for each school. School visits were conducted to discuss the report with the Principals and to monitor the development of the school libraries. Reports were maintained for the individual libraries. This aspect of the project was completed in June, 2008.

Supervisory staff of the School Library Services Unit have been visiting the school library media centres to monitor their progress. The Reports have now been developed into school library profiles which are used to track the development of each library.

Current Status of School Libraries

Current Status /Evaluation

Secondary school profiles were completed for all 123 School Library Media Centres in the post SEMP injection period. The profiles include detailed information on:

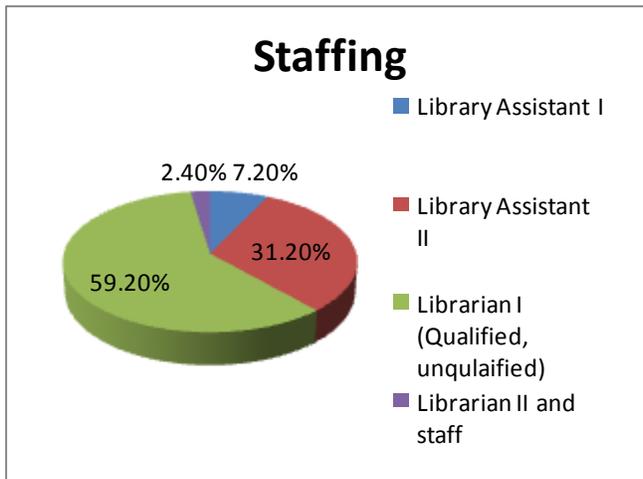
- staffing

- student population
- accommodation size in square metres
- facilities
- furniture and equipment
- collection - stock of items per student/circulating fiction/nonfiction/number of non-print items.

An analysis of the profiles to determine whether national standards have been met in critical areas reveals the following:

Staffing

48.8 percent of schools are adequately staffed (60 of 123 have adequate staffing).



Schools operating with:

1 Librarian Assistant I	-	9
1 Librarian Assistant II	-	39
Librarian I	-	74
(7 qualified 67 unqualified)		
Librarian II and staff	-	3
(qualified)		

Diagram 1 shows the existing staff assignments

There are ten (10) qualified Librarians in the system in addition to unqualified but experienced personnel who are acting in the position of Librarian. NALIS, over the past three years, has been awarding scholarships for qualified applicants to pursue online undergraduate qualifications at the University of Aberstwyth and post graduate degrees at accredited universities of choice.

Accommodation

In the late 1970's there were fifty-seven (57) schools with purpose built libraries. At that time library spaces were mainly large rooms (bigger than classrooms with similar designs) to be furnished with appropriate resources.

Forty (40) have been purpose built within the 21st century.

Twenty-six (26) have been placed in areas not specifically designed to be a library but remodeled to suit the requirements. This was the situation mainly in the earlier established denominational and government schools.

One hundred and twenty-one (121) of the one hundred and twenty-three (123) school library media centres meet the minimum standard for seating accommodation. Thirty-six (36) percent meet the optimum of adequate seating for 7 % of the school population, while the remaining sixty-three (63) percent meet the minimum standard of seating for 4% of the school population.

Computers and Internet Connection

All SLMC's have been provided with internet connection and are each equipped with at least eight computers for research and document preparation. SLMC's with less than eight functional computers would be in the situation as a result of loss through burglaries or malfunctioning systems. As of February 21, 2011 there were 20 SLMC's without internet access due mainly to school wide server or electrical problems and in one instance a defective fibre optic switch.

[Educational Library Services Division, Systems Support, 2011]

Collection Development

Collection development continues with resources being supplied from the School Library Services allocation and the individual school's annual budget. There is now a focus on the supply of electronically available resources. Every secondary school student has 24/7/365 access to EBSCO databases. Britannica online is also available at the SLMC.

Conclusion

The Ministry of Education has always viewed the school library as an important component of secondary schools. Moreover, the library was highlighted as one of the key areas for development under SEMP. By ensuring that all secondary school libraries were automated, equipped with furniture and information resources in a variety of formats, including internet access, SEMP achieved its aim of modernizing the school libraries.

Michael Ramkissoon, former Project Manager, Finance, Administration and Support Services, (SEMPCU) summarises the intervention through e-mail by declaring that cumulatively, these initiatives ensured that schools and therefore students, teachers and school officials have access to teaching and learning resources which were non-existent prior to the SEMP intervention. These interventions, when compounded with those elsewhere in the system provided the enabling environment to allow students and teachers to optimize opportunities for teaching and learning in the 21st century.

Recommendations

From 1999, NALIS staff of the School Library Services Unit had been concentrating on successfully completing the SEMP implementation plan. Having attained this objective, with the closure of the SEMP in March 2011, focus can now be placed on the future further developments of school libraries in Trinidad. The following are recommended:

Revising the standards for the space allocation based upon the fact that increasingly, resources can be remotely accessed and the existing accommodation is generally adequate for the standard percentage of students.

Highlighting to the Ministry of Education for necessary action, the instances where SLMC's services are being curtailed due to infrastructural problems such as faulty electrical and space constraints.

Revision of the existing Library and Information Literacy Curriculum which was produced in 2002.

Increasing remote access to digital information through subscription databases and free digital library resources to align with students' needs. The Ministry of Education has procured laptops as an instruction tool for all students entering Forms 1, and will continue this project as an on-going activity. NALIS has already responded to this information need by providing access to EBSCO Host for all the secondary students in Trinidad.

Provision of digital literacy programmes to develop the research skills of the techno-savvy 21st century learners.

Collaboration with the Heritage Library Division of NALIS on the digitization of Caribbeana material to include the relevant aspects of the curriculum.

Incorporating in a structured manner the web 2.0 technologies and ensuring that policy guidelines are provided for their use.

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Biographical Note

Grace Achoy is a librarian for twenty-five years, mainly working in school libraries. She has been in the position of Head of the School Library Services Unit for the past ten years where she has led many of the projects for the transformation of the school libraries in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mrs. Rachael Greene is presently a School Library Supervisor at the Secondary Schools Library Services Unit at the Rudranath Capildeo Learning Centre , Mc Bean Trinidad and Tobago. She earned her post graduate qualifications in Librarianship at the University of the West Indies, Jamaica.