

School Librarian's Role Redefined: An Amazing Experience of Life Skills Teaching

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Abstract

School librarian plays the role of a resource advisor, literature search expert, life coach, etc. Apart from maintaining an efficient collection and providing effective information services, the librarian contributes significantly to students' holistic development. This paper shares the experiences of a librarian who had the opportunity to teach life skills in her school. Simple strategies were employed using literature as a tool which helped in building a bridge between students and resources. Success stories of a few students using library programs have been listed. The approach to deal with students emotional issues using the concept of bibliotherapy which has been justified on the lines of Ranganathan's laws of library science, has been discussed. Librarian's efforts to instil in them the essential life skills needed to traverse the journey called life are outlined.

Keywords: Life skills, school librarian, library programs, bibliotherapy, student achievement

Introduction

Present day school librarian dons many a hats - that of a resource advisor, literature expert, life coach, etc. The job profile is being redefined due to onslaught of information, communication and technology. The management, the teachers, students, parents - every stakeholder in the school environment has a lot of expectations from the library and librarian. Apart from maintaining an efficient collection and providing effective information services, the librarian plays an active role in school committees, takes responsibilities in organizing events for the school and contributes significantly to students' holistic development.

This paper is the result of the experiences of a librarian who had the unique opportunity to teach life skills in her school. Simple strategies were employed to impart life skills, using literature as a tool. It also helped in achieving the mission of the library - that of building a bridge between students and resources. It was a wonderful opportunity to understand and communicate with adolescent students, thereby shaping their assumptions about the world using varied resources available in the library. As a profession, librarianship is directly related to active listening which is a major tool to understand how adolescent students feel, express and seek guidance. The librarian's approach to deal with their emotional issues using the concept of bibliotherapy has tremendous influence on shaping up their personality and instilling in them the essential life skills needed to traverse the journey called life.

Overview of 'Life Skills' in Indian Schools

Life skills have been defined as "the abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life" [CBSE]. Life skills are taught in Indian schools under various names like Moral Science, Value Education,

etc. Most of these sessions are guided by textbooks which introduce various values necessary for leading a good life. They are elaborated with supporting stories or poems. Of late the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) in India has introduced life skills in schools with the goal to capture the true essence of adolescence. The circular issued by CBSE states, "Adolescence is a time of immense creative energy, self-discovery and a desire to explore the world. Children can be fraught with feelings of isolation, loneliness and confusion. Lessons in life skills help in the holistic development of children and its significance cannot be ignored." [Express India, 2008]

Introduction of 'Integrity Club' for imparting life skills

Along with teaching life skills as a compulsory co-scholastic subject, the CBSE had also asked all its schools to set up an 'Integrity Club' to sensitise students on the importance of upholding high values and life skills. It had issued a circular asking the schools to introduce 'Integrity Clubs' based on the model developed by Airports Authority of India (AAI) and adopted by Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan (KVS) in its schools. The circular stated that the clubs would be designed as community groups for cultivating "human values among students by means of organising games, activities and workshops in schools". [CBSE] So the author's school has honoured the suggestion and initiated the Integrity club called, **Adani Vidya Mandir Integrity Club (A.I.C.)** to support the teaching of life skills. The Vision is "**Adani Vidya Mandir Conscience Keepers (A.C.K.)** will guide the entire human race to lead an ethical life". The mission is "A.C.K., an embodiment of life values will motivate their fellow schoolmates, their family members and the whole community to imbibe the essential values and build a value based society to become a progressive country with a strong ethical base". The Strategy adopted for fulfilling the vision and mission is "Adani Vidya Mandir Community learns life values in a play way method and become embodiments of values by integrating these values in their lives every day". The club has its own logo, a mascot and song to encourage the students to be members. It conducts a series of activities like nature walks, heritage walks, visits to monuments, old age homes, poster designing competitions, etc. apart from role playing, enacting, etc. According to the model, IC is set up in the school as a 'community group' consisting of students from classes VI to IX in the age group of 11-16 years. ICs should work on inculcating 12 basic values, which include integrity, love, patriotism, compassion, tolerance, secularism, unity, simplicity and honesty. [Times of India, 2011]

Strategies

With CBSE placing so much importance for life skills as a co-scholastic subject in schools, it was with great apprehensions that the author accepted and wondered whether as a librarian, she could handle this portfolio.

But classes' third to eighth had specific textbooks to teach life skill topics it was relatively easy. In these classes, each topic or value elaborated in their textbooks was linked to life skills adopted by the Integrity Club. Initially students were given case studies pertaining to the topic wherein they had to form groups and research using the 5W1H method. Then they had to present the problem and solution of the given case study as discussed and interpreted by their group. This exercise in itself inculcated in them the interpersonal skills as well as problem solving skills. Then the lesson and the value contained in it was explained to them connecting to the case studies they shared. Some values would be approached through the method of creative thinking wherein the students would prepare posters to convey the importance of imbibing that particular value. At times fairy tales, folk tales, biographies would be given as resources for understanding a particular life skill and then students would come up as groups and enact the stories or scenes of the stories or a person's life.

But the challenge was in teaching classes ninth and tenth, where there were no specified textbooks. For the past two years, the school had encouraged the UNICEF, UNESCO and

WHO listed ten core life skill strategies and techniques namely problem solving, critical thinking, effective communication skills, decision-making, creative thinking, interpersonal relationship skills, self awareness building skills, empathy, and coping with stress and emotions as the ones the school as a whole should focus on. [UN Office... Module 7 Life skills] Again repeating them would have been uninteresting to the students. Thus an exclusive syllabus was designed integrating the above said life skills and the Integrity Club adopted values for teaching life skills. Each topic of the syllabus would take around two to three sessions each of forty minutes duration, to complete. For the students of these classes, different teaching techniques were tried. After an initial introduction of the topic through a story, or an article, the topic would be open to the students to discuss and prepare a common mind map. This was very helpful as students were pleased to share their views. Then their inputs would be summarized and elaborated with lot of supporting anecdotes. The next session consisted of role playing, debating or brain storming, creating messages in the form of posters, mind maps, wordles, etc. and putting them on display. The last session would comprise of a written assignment to get an insight of their understanding.

Assessment

The assessment for classes' third to eighth was based on the pen and paper test conducted twice in the academic year. The assessment for classes ninth and tenth included allotment of marks on the basis of their general attitude in school, seminars based on the life skills imparted and folder of assignments. General Attitude of the student included their classroom behaviour, interaction with their peers and teachers, caring for school property, following rules and zeal for learning. The folder of Assignments was marked on the basis of timely submission, completion of assignments, content, presentation, reflection of the understanding and exhibiting their creativity. For seminars, teams of five to six members were formed and the work was distributed. All teams worked on the topic chosen by them and presented it to their peers. They also designed a poster which contained quotes, stories along with drawings, which was supplemented with a paragraph about their understanding on the topic given and a message they wanted to convey. Here the students were evaluated on the content, relevance and overall presentation of their seminar topic.

Life skills: Foundation for students' success through Library programs

Indians consider knowledge as an important component of their value system. In the school, library is considered as the 'Temple of knowledge', an abode of Saraswati, Goddess of Knowledge and the Arts. She is supposed to convey the message that "Knowledge helps man find possibilities where once he saw problems." The students from day one are oriented that they will respect the place, take care of the resources and make right use of the knowledge gained. Whenever they come for literature search, they are taught to give right credit to the resources and authors they refer. Ethical use of information is an essential life skill, stressed right from lower classes to the teachers too.

The students' scholastic and co-scholastic achievements can be increased to a great extent if there is distinguished participation of all the stakeholders of the education system. The parents, as well as the educators should be exemplary in their conduct and role. Thus, school librarians have a role to play apart from managing the library operations efficiently. They should be embodiments of values and should extend their expertise to all those activities which increase students' achievements. Below are some of the experiences shared by the author regarding the library's direct involvement in creating a few success stories of students and successful coordination of some events.

Organizing Skills: 'Bhaskar Champs' Scrap Book Activity

Our school's primary focus is excellence in academics and thus efforts are made to integrate as many academic skills as possible. Students are encouraged to participate in many in-house and external events to pick up skills. The librarian's organizing skills were put to test

when assigned to coordinate 'Bhaskar Champs' a scrap book activity conducted by Divya Bhaskar, a leading national daily. This activity emphasised research and organization skills in students. Fifteen students participated in this activity wherein they had to collect information about given topics from newspapers, magazines, books, Internet, etc and make a scrap book. All the students' works were exhibited in a city hall. Scrap books of three students, were selected for exhibition at the national level in the capital city, New Delhi.

Literacy Skills: Budding Author

Librarian as a part of the information literacy activity, encourages students to write articles, stories, etc for their school newsletter, children's newspapers, etc. by giving them the required guidelines, research material, etc. One such effort resulted in one of the student's story 'Monopoly can wait' getting published in the internationally acclaimed Chicken Soup series, namely 'Chicken Soup for Indian Teenage Soul – teens talk relationship'.

Non bias approach: NASA experience

The school announced that one student from our school would join a group of students who were chosen for a free sponsorship for a prestigious Educational Programme to the US space agency, NASA. The process of choosing the deserving student was left to the librarian with the thought that she reaches out to maximum number of students and there would be no bias in the selection. To justify the selection a test designed by the librarian was conducted based on NASA and space technology for students of classes eighth to tenth. The student with the highest score was chosen. During one of the interaction, he expressed his inability to overcome shyness in groups of students. The librarian put aside some time and coached him as to how to be confident, learning focused, and a brand ambassador of our state apart from providing relevant resources to understand space technology, NASA, United States of America, the weather, culture, food, etiquettes, etc. When he returned and talked to his peers about his experience at NASA, he also shared that books are his best friends and they shaped him into a better person!

Inculcating Concern for Environment as an essential life skill

Caring for our environment is one of the most important life skills for the 21st century students. The school took part in the rally on the occasion of 'World Forestry Day', organized by Adani Foundation in collaboration with municipality schools. The library had the opportunity to coordinate the event. Students researched the topic of forests, their conservation, etc, made information pamphlets and distributed to all those who participated in the rally. They also made green crowns, badges, cloth posters, etc to show solidarity for the cause of conservation of forests and gave a power point presentation to create awareness to students in the school. Around one thousand students from various schools of the city participated in the rally. The mayor of the city along with the school trustees took part in the tree plantation ceremony and flagged off the rally. The students under the guidance of the librarian put up a moving tableau on a camel cart wherein they enacted plays to show how in Indian culture, trees have a special status.

Empowering students to be 'Change Makers'

Design For Change (DFC) is a global movement designed to give young people an opportunity to express their ideas for a better world and put them into action, initiated by a local school in the city in 2009. . A team of five students with the librarian as their mentor took part in this contest with the initiative titled '**Taking Bullying Head On In Schools**'. 'Think, plan and act' was the strategy for the whole project. Evidence was collected in the form of real stories, case studies, etc which was presented in morning assemblies. Few students came up with comic strips of bullying and cartoons of bullies. Efforts were made to reach the roots of such bullying problems through mind mapping. Some students reframed famous quotes to stimulate their peers. A brainstorming session was conducted to address the queries. They designed student friendly 'Frequently Asked Questions'. Finally they framed a set of code of conduct for different areas in the school and an anti bullying policy to

combat bullying. This initiative was carried for duration of two weeks and every activity, change and success was documented and presented as dossier. It is a matter of pride that our school's entry won in the 'TOP 66' category at the international level. [DFC, 2011]

Promoting Arts

The school organizes events in such a way that it has to have some learning outcome for the students. Manipuri Dance Performance of a well known Padmashri Awardee in arrangement with SPIC MACAY (Society for Promoting Indian Classical Music and Culture Among Youth) was no different. It began with the library taking an initiative to conduct an awareness session about SPIC MACAY. The students collected literature about the state of Manipur, its dance forms, its musical instruments, its way of life, etc. They collected information about the civilian awards and more in detail about Padmashri awards. Students realised that the Indian Classical Music and Culture is a big movement in which they can be a member and contribute their tiny bit. They researched that folk dances deal with the people, local culture, nature, etc. They valued the importance of team work and coordination while watching the performance. The performance has evoked great curiosity for this art form and students approach mythology and folk literature in the library with great enthusiasm.

Understanding diversity and blending cultures

To give an international exposure to students, our school regularly hosts scholars from various countries and one such guest was a Taiwanese National, on a mission to learn more about Indian Culture while simultaneously sharing the same about Taiwan. The librarian had the opportunity of coordinating the visit. To understand their visitor and her country, the students were encouraged to refer to atlas, Lands & Peoples reference series, travel books and brochures. Story sessions especially on folk tales of China were held. The students accessed the Internet and studied Chinese artefacts and did paintings, paper craft, etc. They looked up for the word "Welcome" in Chinese script and put up the synonyms of the same at different places. They prepared Taiwanese song and dance to welcome the scholar. It was a learning experience for all, in the form of interactive sessions for teachers and students, cultural presentations by students, question and answer sessions for students on various topics, collaborative discussions with teachers regarding lesson plans, awareness about Chinese & Taiwanese culture and focus group discussions.

The above compilations show that it is possible for a school librarian to be proactive, as school libraries have an exclusive collection to cater to the intellectual, social and emotional needs of the students. This leads to the fact that books and knowledge have the power to create positivity and achievement which was the basis for bibliotherapy to be practised in the school. It helps to deal with the negativity and inferiority in some students and channelize their energies. Also, author's personal experience as school librarian confirms that one turns a counsellor, as students have great trust that whatever they share with the librarian will be restricted to the four walls of the library and will not be a discussion point in the staff room with teachers.

An attempt is made here to apply the laws of library science as formulated by Dr S R Ranganathan, the Father of Indian Library Science to support the practice of the concept of bibliotherapy.

Use of Ranganathan's Laws of Library Science as basis for Bibliotherapy

Wikipedia defines "bibliotherapy as an expressive therapy that uses an individual's relationship to the content of books and poetry and other written words as therapy". It is said that, bibliotherapy can assist children in building confidence and self-esteem. It attempts to normalize a child's world by offering coping skills and reducing their feelings of isolation, reinforcing creativity, and problem solving. Despite the limited research on bibliotherapy and its effects, many teachers have shown improved achievement and self-concept.

Bibliotherapy is an old concept in library science. The basic concept behind bibliotherapy is that reading is a healing experience. [Wikipedia]

Children are blessed with the gift of curiosity and imagination- the basic life skills. As adults when we talk to them about various concepts, connections, complexities, etc., they are keen to explore and understand more first hand. The best place we can introduce to them is the library and the resources. Dr Ranganathan's first law "**Books are for use**" implies that every book in the school library can be made use of. Our effort would be to teach students as how make use of books to satisfy their curiosity and fuel their imagination. For instance, the basic principle of our school library is "**Each Resource is an Inspiration in itself**". So the students are counselled that every resource has a purpose and it can be made use of to suit our requirements. As librarians we excel in identifying the right resources, collecting them, organizing them and giving access. But somewhere we miss the point that we need to motivate our students to use them. Being motivated to gain knowledge is an important life skill.

Young students are happy with life's simple things, but simple things may also upset them easily. As educators we need to look at ways and means to reach out to them and ensure that their issues are taken care of. One such effort would be to encourage them to find solutions to their problems on their own by reading the right books. Thus the second law '**Every reader his or her book**' holds true in the sense that the anxiety of the student to find solution can be provided by helping them choose the right resource. Precise understanding of their need is essential. Bibliotherapy in a school library in simple terms is about the right student reading the right book for the right reason. The reason may be to overcome one's weakness, one's problem, one's anxiety etc.

Resources are reflections of human life, the environment we live in and the various emotions we go through. So the third law of library science '**Every Book its Reader**' affirms that most human emotions and thoughts are addressed in one resource or the other. The only effort is to bring the resource to the student in search of it. Basic awareness of the resources we add is a must. Not all students have the skills and the patience to locate the required information by themselves. It would be a service, if we walk up to the shelf with the student, building a conversation to identify the nature of requirement and offer the best possible resources to choose from. An important advantage of bibliotherapy is, students develop appreciable social skills when they interact with the librarian to share their problems and seek their suggestions for appropriate reading resources. They learn to express their problems and when they confidently share their reading experience with their peers.

The fourth law says '**Save the Time of the Reader**'. By suggesting and locating the right resource for the student, we can help the student to acquire the appropriate information at the appropriate time. Being organized in everything we do is an important life skill. When the resources are arranged in a systematic manner, the time taken by a student to search for a particular resource is reduced and the same time can be used for other purposes. Bibliotherapy helps students sort out, organize and prioritize their thoughts to discover themselves using the information from the reading resources. This helps them to identify their strengths, weaknesses and in the process acquire another important life skill, that of self acceptance.

The fifth law of library science says '**The Library is a Growing Organism**'. In the context of bibliotherapy the ultimate goal is to address the emotional turbulences that students undergo, using books as tools and help them to develop their potential. It is a researched fact that school Library can be an excellent focal point for a student's achievement.

Nurturing the school library to facilitate the holistic development of the students should be main role of the librarian. The intellectual, emotional and spiritual requirement of the students

can be fulfilled by the resources and result in the creation of new knowledge which again gets added to the existing knowledge bank. Thus the baton of analysis and synthesis of knowledge keeps getting passed to the next group of students. Connecting the animate and lively students to the otherwise inanimate books will make the library come alive and make it a happening, growing place.

Bibliotherapy Initiatives @ AVM Library

A brief overview of the school and the library where the author works is shared so that it gives an insight into what necessitates such initiatives and their outcome.

Adani Vidya Mandir: (Temple of Knowledge)

Adani Vidya Mandir was started in the year 2008 for the benefit of the students coming from economically challenged backgrounds by Adani Foundation, the Corporate Social Responsibility Arm of the Adani Group of Industries. The school is affiliated to the Central Board for Secondary Education in India and has now seven hundred students studying in classes' third to twelfth. It takes one hundred fifty to two hundred students every year and provides free transport facilities, food, uniform, stationery apart from totally free education. The school is situated on a sprawling 26,000 square meters and has a wonderful infrastructure ranging from state of the art classrooms, laboratories, libraries, to sports ground, arts centre, etc. Facilities like counselling, medical checkups; specialized sports coaching, etc are provided to the students in order to give them holistic education.

There are two libraries namely Junior Library and Senior Library for the use of students and staff. The junior library caters to the needs of the students of classes third to eighth and has a collection of three thousand five hundred books. The students of classes ninth to twelfth and teachers use the senior library and the collection is around three thousand books, thirty two periodicals, six newspapers, one seventy five CDs, a few maps, charts, globes, etc.

Every class gets two library periods in a week. In one period the students are issued books and in the second period they are taught library and information skills. In order to optimise the usage of the resources, best practices like Structured Library Period (SLP), Adopt a Book Project (ABP) and many others are tried. The process of automation has begun and now the holdings of the library are available online. As the students are from various backgrounds, the library is a getaway for some who come from disturbing social backgrounds and the concept of 'Bibliotherapy' is practised for their emotional healing. Right now there is no rigid structure but is being practised at the author's school on experimental basis. At the orientation programme at the start of the academic year, the concept of 'Bibliotherapy' is shared with them in a subtle way. The most successful strategies are discussed in this section.

Common Reading Sessions

It is a fact that the students come from a background where many of their parents are illiterate, many do not have access to reading material, and many do not have time or inclination owing to their socio economic conditions. This prompted the author to try bibliotherapy in the library.

One strategy adopted is conducting regular reading sessions for students of class third to fifth. Stories are so selected which appeal to their conscience, some which invokes empathy and motivate them to take up the challenges in routine life. Some of the stories from Indian Epics like Eklavya – a tribal prince's story, instil in them the devotion for teachers and the skills imparted by them. Vishnu Sharma's Panchatantra – a collection of fables teach basic life skills like true friendship, helping nature, etc. A few biographies like 'The Diary of Anne Frank' helped students to empathize, be more compassionate, and few have taken to diary writing to keep their emotions in check! Reading all time favourite stories like 'Tale of Peter

Rabbit' made the students realize that being naughty is okay. Reading 'Sylester and the Magic Pebble' was a great experience as many empathised with the main character and shared instances of being lost, or parents searching for them, etc. and the interesting hobbies they developed after listening to this story.

Review Sessions

Almost every reading session was followed by a review session consisting of oral interaction and writing activities. The interaction would involve simple questions like what was the moral of the story, who was the favourite character, etc to complex questions like how would you have liked the story to end? What would happen if the story continued? etc. The writing activities would be in the form of book reports, mind maps, sequential charts, wordles, etc. When their written assignments were reviewed by the librarian, and something needed to be verified and counselled for an individual student, it would be done in a subtle way that the student would be at ease and would be benefitted.

Friends of the Library

The school is relatively new and many students join from schools that have no libraries and it worked as an advantage to inculcate the virtue of reading. Giving access to the library during lunch break and examining the regular students, identifying their choice, encouraging them to talk and share their concerns helped in creating a group called 'Friends of the Library'. The members of this group loved to interact amongst one another and discussed and suggested resources to one another. They identified peers who had issues and encouraged them to read. Apart from volunteering to do odd jobs in the library, they promote the benefits of reading books and do small surveys in entire school, like the number of students who are myopic, the students who are left hander, etc and prepare posters highlighting their research findings. This group has learnt to heal themselves and others through books, thus gaining a new outlook towards life.

Outcome

A study was undertaken to understand the impact of the library on the students' holistic development. A series of questions were asked to the students of classes' fifth to eighth and one specific question was to write about any book that helped them to deal with a social, emotional or academic problem. The response was overwhelming. To note a few examples, a student of class eight had vividly described how she got over her habit of telling lies after reading 'My experiments with the truth', an autobiography of Mahatma Gandhi. Another student had talked about reading the classic 'Robinson Crusoe' and being motivated to develop determination and courage to face challenges in life. Another student of class sixth discussed how reading 'Ugly Duckling' over and over again helped her to realize the reality of life that inspite of being dark skinned she would one day aim to do extraordinary work. Another student who could not handle the failure of not winning a medal in the sports day turned to a book on 'Origami' and cultivated the passion to make extraordinary paper items. To summarise most of the life skills, be it creative thinking or critical thinking, interpersonal or intrapersonal skills, decision making or problem solving, empathy or effective communication library is definitely the first place where the students learn by themselves for a long lasting effect. [Kumbar, R. T. 2012]

Conclusion

Most school libraries around the world carry out similar efforts. All school librarians give their best to their students and teachers. But the only difference that may exist is the diverse backgrounds that we all come from. The sharing in the context of our culture and tradition, our access to technology makes it interesting and rewarding that each of our efforts is unique. It can be rightly concluded that the school library is an 'Amalgam of Information, technology, culture and values' and the school librarian is the missionary professional who uphold the ethics of being human and in charge of knowledge, which is God's greatest gift to humans.

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