

Library Lovers Build Community Relations: Student-driven outreach of library services

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Abstract

Community Involvement Projects in Turkey are volunteer work by students while a faculty member acts as an advisor. A group of Robert College students initiated a project that was to develop a library in another school. Working at RC library made them familiar with all the necessary fields of the profession. They arranged lists of activities for the primary school students like reading or creating stories from pictures. The exercises they tried in their own library, the planning and correspondence they used with other institutions made our students aware of the network around them, developing their social competencies. All learned to work in teams, collaborating with other schools. They became decision makers in selecting sources for a school library. They empathized with other students who had no libraries. Not everything went well, but when problems arose they were able to come to a resolution. It was learning, sharing and teaching with fun.

Keywords: School libraries, community services, students teaching students, social competencies.

Community Involvement Projects and Robert College

Education in Turkey is overseen by the Ministry of Education. The ministry issued a project in 2006 for primary and secondary schools. It is called Community Involvement Projects which are similar to educational branch activities such as social services/activities clubs. The idea is to improve the educational process and to support the quality of life of the students and the neighborhood. The goal is to develop self-confidence and a sense of responsibility, and to create new interests and skills in scientific, social, cultural, artistic, and sports related areas among the students. The participation has to be voluntary.

Robert College (RC), secondary school grades 9 through 12, took this very seriously. The student population of the school is 1,200. All Community Involvement Projects (CIP) are student initiated, student created and led projects with faculty or staff serving as advisors. All projects fulfill a need in the community, such as reading books for the visually impaired, volunteer work in a local hospital or a health center, or helping with services for the disabled citizens.

The students at RC must do a social service of at least 50 hours to get a diploma. CIP is not only volunteer work but part of their education, a formative experience they will never forget. In Turkey there are two school semesters, starting in the second week of September and ending the second week of June. Mid semester vacation is two weeks at the end of January and beginning of February. More than 30 CIP projects are done every school year at RC. Every project is recorded either by keeping a journal or by writing a paper.

Library Oriented Project-Defining Stage

A group of students were interested in doing library services. They were frequent visitors of the library media center and spent most of their free time in the library. Twelve students volunteered for this project. The Turkish literature teacher and the librarian (myself) collaborated as guides. The goal of the students was to help build a library while interacting with a different community, other than RC.

Training Stage

We started by getting more familiar with our own library: through our conversations they were introduced to the Dewey Decimal System. They learned how the books were classified and grouped. They began by shelving books, magazines and DVDs in different sections of the library. They helped the library staff in discarding the print magazines. We have 22 computers available for student use in the library. Members of the group helped in the maintenance of these computers, checking them from time to time, and assisted other faculty members and students in getting familiar with the OPAC. We use Follett and getting more student accounts with peers was a great success. In the previous year we had only 105; then the number rose to 575. They created and set passwords for the databases. I must say they were more creative than we librarians. In case there was a need they installed apps, such as Adobe and e-class updates. They were very good in guiding their peers with electronic books. We subscribe to Overdrive, which means the patron has to go through a few steps to download on to his/her device. If there was a need they assisted in solving printer, scanner, and photocopying problems. Some acted as the technology crew while others dealt with shelving books. That way we let them pursue their own interests. They felt they were part of the library and more connected. All the questions they asked were answered by the librarians. Some even wanted to learn how to catalog books. I offered brief explanations, they kept classifying in their minds. Questions like 'why are stage presentations and drama plays in different sections?' needed in depth explanation.

Processing Stage

After working in the library in the first semester they began to plan on their outside school project. Consulting friends, parents, neighbors, and publishers was a way to collect books. They were surprised by some publishers who donated books and disappointed with others who did not reply. Some children's publishers were generous in giving colorful story books. We, as librarians, also kept an eye on our donation lists so that we could spare story books or picture books for this collection.

Sharing Stage

The first step was to develop and enhance a primary school library in town. After deciding on the school library (Haskoy Primary School Library), they paid a visit to see what was needed. We packed about 500 books and print encyclopedias for that library. Haskoy school librarian and the students were glad to receive the package. The whole library was a small room; students checked every book, classified them with spine labels, and shelved everything correctly. RC students were happy to fulfill their first task.

Their second project was a more complicated one: they wanted to set up a school library in an Educational Park founded by TEGV (Educational Volunteers Foundation of Turkey). An Educational Park is allocated by the local government but is kept by the foundation, having all the necessary facilities for a well-rounded support for primary school students. TEGV indicates (2009):

The objective of Educational Volunteers is to create and implement educational programs and extracurricular activities for children aged 7-16, so that they can acquire skills, knowledge and attitudes supporting their development as rational, responsible, self-confident, peace-loving, inquisitive, cognizant, creative individuals, who are against any kind of discrimination, respect diversity and are committed to the basic principles of the Turkish Republic.

TEGV implements unique educational programs, with the support of its volunteers, in the Education Parks, Learning Units, Firefly Mobile Units, City Representative Offices and in primary schools through the "Support for Social Activities Protocol". They have 10 educational parks, 53 learning units, and 23 mobile learning units. Our students consulted the main office in town and decided to visit Afyon, in central Turkey, the land of *Phrygia* and King Midas.

We packed the donated books and headed for Afyon by bus. We were twelve students and two advisors. We had 1,000 books. The technology department lent us a computer in order to use for cataloging the books. We kept a log to record our actions. The students had decided to write a diary of the whole process. The trip lasted a full three days.

The education park we reached was a sort of stopping place for all the primary school students from the region in groups of 20 children. Throughout the day different groups would visit, participate in activities for about two hours and then a new group would arrive.

The students filled in the Excel form the librarian had prepared for them: Author (last name, first name), Title of the book, Publisher, Year, General subject, Call number. When completing the form, they kept referring to the way a professional librarian catalogs a book. All of them remarked that this was the first time in their lives that they realized the importance of recording books and making them accessible to users. They had no idea of the details of cataloging. We had discussions on how meaningful is to record and tag things in a way that is accessible to future generations.

Robert College students teamed very well with the local groups of children. The empty room that was allocated as the library was soon filled with books they had brought. They settled to shelve them.

RC students planned activities for the younger students who continued visiting the center. They met with children of different age groups and also of different social and economic backgrounds. This was the most impressive way of gaining experience with younger children of varying socioeconomic experiences. Some were middle class students, others came from very poor villages. The spectrum varied.

They read stories to those children, and asked them to read out loud. RC students knew that children need to practice reading in order to become better readers. Reading fluency activities followed by summarizing stories were successful.

They played childrens' games with them to get them into action. Students inspired the children to explore and enjoy plays.

Most of the RC students knew how to make origami and taught all the rest the art of folding colored paper and creating animals, and objects. That was great fun when children realized that the simple act of folding paper can turn into the magic of creating objects.

They asked the children to draw and paint on paper their dreams and tell stories about the drawings. Expressing themselves by their own drawings and building up stories while enhancing their vocabulary was encouraging, although with some children this was not easy to start. Some children had to be motivated more than the others because this was a totally new experience for them.

They played music: guitar and flute. Singing common songs and also teaching them new pieces was a way of celebrating together.

They used creative drama techniques using folk tales, legends, and short stories as starters. The children were very happy to act these stories. It was a first time for many of them.

RC students decided to paint the ceiling of the library which was composed of white foam boards. Each board has a different story. The origami pieces were hung from the ceilings. These art works which hung from the ceiling or the painted boards either by RC students or the local children created an ambiance in the room. The library looked warmer and more colorful. All of the students were proud of themselves. They even lit a fire for a friendly atmosphere. Reading and extra-curricular activities were definitely going to be enjoyed more than the past.

These tasks we encountered while at both schools, with all the children we met, were valuable experiences. Bringing the books and placing them on the shelves and using them with the local patrons were greatly appreciated. That was the most dynamic part of the whole process.

Evaluation

They kept filling their journals. We all learned from this whole experience. At first it was a project that fitted their interest in the library and reading books. We all were expecting action and fun. Their past knowledge was soon put forward, and plans for the new enterprises were drawn up. We brainstormed about what we could do, for possible gains. We analyzed the experience through talking and discussing, writing and reading the journals. It was clear that the impact was rewarding. Below are some questions from their journals:

- What did I do?
- What did I learn today?
- What did I feel today?
- Did anything meaningful happen?
- Something that surprised me was.....
- Something that upset me was.....
- Did anything interesting/wonderful/strange/ horrible/____ funny/ [your adjective] happen?
- Did anything out of the ordinary happen?
- Did anything happen that I didn't plan-? Was it positive or negative? What did I do about it?
- Something I noticed today was ...
- What is going well?
- What isn't going well?
- If something didn't go well, how did I handle it-? What sort of solutions for this are possible?
- Is there anything else I need to learn?
- Is there anything else I need to do?

Some of their remarks were:

We developed and started a primary school library collection.

We met with younger children who had no idea of what a library is, and we motivated them into reading books and creating stories of their own.

We empathized with children who had no library experiences.

The activities we planned and the whole process were very good opportunities for learning organizational skills.

We all developed more energy, more positive emotions for action by sharing our past experience and knowledge with local students.

We became aware of other groups around us, we were seriously concerned for interacting with them.

We understood that school librarians do heavy and multidisciplinary work.

The joy and fulfillment was unprecedented.

We added to our academic learning a life experience.

We became a whole person.

We celebrated the visit by a final party in the RC library. We made tea and cakes. I had ordered special cups with all the students' names on them. One side of the cup had a book cart logo and the other had the quotation of Jorge Luis Borges saying "I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library."

The outcome

The students developed interpersonal skills of many kinds with this community involvement project. They gained leadership, networking and teamwork skills.

Leadership: the students gathered all the donated books quite successfully. They achieved their common goal of developing/improving a library collection, setting/starting up a library collection, and motivating the patrons to become continuous users of the collection. They used their communication skills while mentoring younger students, delegating to them activities such as reading and telling stories.

Networking: writing to publishers and asking for donations made the group feel confident although not all the answers they received were positive. They did not give up, they kept seeking and identifying the needs for a school library. Consulting different schools and publishers gave them the self-reliance for setting up new relationships with people of different backgrounds.

Teamwork: Working with a group that had a common goal was easy for the students. They held meetings and through conversations one after the other adjusted to common objectives: which publisher to write to, which schools to visit, what kind of books to select, how to organize the collection etc. They became decision makers.

This library experience changed our students. Because it was the mastery of a deed beyond academics. Students faced real problems and tried to deal with them constructively. They developed problem solving, and business skills that they will need in their future lives. They can be leaders in their own fields, socially responsible active citizens.

References

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Biographical note

Ayşe Yuksel-Durukan received her BA from Robert College and MLIS from Dominican University, Illinois, USA. She studied fine arts at Mimar Sinan University (MA), Istanbul, Turkey. She has been working with school librarians since 2000, she initiated and arranged the 1st National School Librarians' Conference in 2003 at Robert College. She continues to work at Robert College Library Media Center and has been lecturing about libraries and educational events. She is a member of Turkish Librarians Assoc., IBBY, IASL, ALA, AASL, and has a Beta Phi Mu award. She is the director of the Middle East & North Africa of IASL.