Establishing School Library Network through Collaboration and Partnership in the Middle East: Success story of GEMS School Library Network

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to show the possibilities of collaborative and partnership approaches of school libraries to achieve librarians' professional development and interchange ideas in order to inculcate 21st century learning skills. This paper displays opportunities for school librarians to become proactive in providing support across their services through a highly professional network platform. It outlines and discusses the last two years of successful professional experience of GEMS Library Network. This network could play a pivotal role in support of various library practices and professional development of its member librarians.

Introduction
GEMS Library Network is one of the subject network of GEMS Education, working under the direct supervision of TELLAL Institute. GEMS Education, based as **Global Education Management Systems** (**GEMS**), is a global education company. It is an international consultative and educational management firm, and is the largest operator of kindergarten-to-grade-12 schools in the world, with a network of over 70 schools in over a dozen countries. It aims to impact 100 underclass children for every child enrolled in a GEMS institution. Founded and headquartered in Dubai, GEMS has schools in the United Kingdom, the United States, Singapore, India, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, Kenya, Switzerland, and the United Arab Emirates. All GEMS academics and leaders have access to the multitude of coaching opportunities provided by **TELLAL Institute**. TELLAL is the abbreviation of 'Teacher Learning and Leadership Training and Development'. It is the Middle East's foremost teacher training institute, and professional learning and development provider. TELLAL is a professional training institute, with services issued by the KHDA (Knowledge and Human Development Authority, Dubai). TELLAL offers a broad range of continuous professional development options to cater for all levels of teaching staff. Through its partnership with GEMS Education, TELLAL Institute operates on a global scale, with a network of quite 11,000 academics and leaders appointed to over 70 institutions in fourteen different countries.

GEMS Education has 55 schools in the Middle East region (49 in United Arab Emirates, 2 in Qatar and 4 in Egypt). Each subject or specialist area should have its own network, organized by an appointed Network Leader, who brings together educators teaching the same subject, age group or specialism within the GEMS network. Subject Networks open GEMS teachers up to the fantastic resources of other GEMS teachers. All the GEMS Subject Networks arrange networking events and training workshops for the members. Network leaders organize a minimum of three events each year. Every academic year, the events will be taking place during the Network Workshop Weeks. The Network Weeks will involve networking events giving the opportunity to meet and collaborate with other teachers in the same field, training utilizing internal subject experts or workshops featuring external learning specialists. The Middle East GEMS Library Network leads around hundred library professionals from 55 schools and arrange many professional development programme for them.

Importance of breaking the traditional concepts of library service:
The 21st century is the era of knowledge explosion, and so as a concomitant, the library should be the place to provide the right and latest information to its users. Librarians have to carry out their role more effectively and efficiently to provide the resource and service to the users. This is not a discussion on the technical methods in the field of library science, but the school libraries should be better equipped to ensure and to provide the best possible service to the students. The 21st century librarian has to carry out his/her role more effectively and efficiently to provide his resource and service and act as collaborator, teacher, moderator, facilitator and research guide. The 'Inquiry Learning' approach is highly important; it requires students to develop a range of critical multi-literate skills to work in authentic, problem-solving situations, decision-making skills, cross-curricular approach and consideration of Multiple Intelligence. This will be focused on various library standards -finding information, using information, the help of Information & Communication Technology (ICT), knowledge construction, reading, collaborative and independent learning.

Communication revolution, which has made easy the availability of information and reading material, is replacing the need for libraries and books for the present generation of students. Adapt, become relevant or else shut down and perish is the clear option left to crops of libraries and librarians. It was found that the first step towards this adaptation is for the library and librarians to provide a platform for inquiry based learning, and space to students to build up knowledge with high level of confidence in seeking and processing information. In this process, the role of the Librarian becomes not just a keeper of books but a point of quick reference and guidance. A Librarian should be a factotum of knowledge to the students in the modern library!

Most of the institutions and librarians are always supportive of wealthy stock and the implementation of various reading activities in the library, as traditionally, the key role of school librarians have been the development of reading. They ensure the collection has leisure reading material and initiate a number of reading promotional activities to raise awareness of books and authors, such as author visits and various reading programmes. A modern librarian will face many questions, and he/she has to take initiatives to break the monotonous techniques and try to overcome the traditional clichés. Continues professional development activities will help to overcome from all the traditional approaches and will raise the professional level of librarians.

Importance of breaking the traditional concepts and creating a live library network:
Earlier, the libraries formed networks mainly to make their functioning simpler, better and more cost effective. The traditional or common objective of the library network is to acquire and develop library

collection and avoid the duplication of materials to resolve the budgetary problems. The latest technologies and trends lead the global information demand as well as information management. In order to stay ahead of time, the role of the 21st century library network has to be raised from that of resource sharing to a professional development platform.

Traditionally, the key role of school librarians focused only towards the development of library resources and in improving the reading habits among students. The modern library has to provide information and resources to the users with the support of latest technologies. The first step towards this adaptation is that the librarian should have sufficient knowledge about the latest technologies. The library network will be a platform for inquiry-based learning for the librarians and to build up their professional skills with high level of confidence in seeking and processing information. In short, the modern library network should be a professional development platform for its members.

Importance Collaborative and partnership approaches among library network members:
The main and primary objective of a school library is to support the students in developing reading habits and attain the curriculum knowledge. The 21st Century is the era of the explosion of knowledge, so the library should be the place to provide the right and latest information to its users. The librarian has to carry out his/her role more effectively and efficiently to provide his resource and service. This is not a discussion on technical methods in the library service, but the library should be better equipped to ensure the best possible service to its users. A school library should provide a model of enquiry based learning to build up knowledge with high-level confidence in seeking and processing information.

A 21st-century school librarian should be a collaborator, teacher, moderator, facilitator and research guide. A library should be a place to conduct various curriculum-based research activities along with reading activities. A school library should be a student-centered learning place resembling a 21st-century classroom. The collaboration and partnership between the library staff and the teachers have a keen role in the present academic structure. Here, the librarian will act as a facilitator and should cooperate with teachers in proper collaboration during the school hours. The role of school librarians cannot be underestimated in the current situation. Collaboration and partnership between library network members, library staff and academics has a keen role in to play in this process of learning. A 21st century library network has an important role in the collaborative and partnership approaches of its members.

Transformation of Library Network:
Here, at the GEMS Library Network- Middle East region we have a success story to share, of its interconnected platform of a number of school libraries under the proper guidelines of TELLAL institute and GEMS Education. We realized that the library network could play a pivotal role in support of various library practices and professional development of librarians. GEMS Library Network covers a total of 55 schools and around 100 librarians in the Middle East region. We had faced many challenges during the traditional network period. From the last two years, we have fixed various SMART GOALS and added many new techniques to overcome the challenges.

Goals are part of every aspect of life and it provide a sense of direction, motivation, a clear focus, and clarify importance. The word "**SMART**" is an acronym that stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely. SMART goals set up for success by making it specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely. SMART goal setting is one of the most effective and important process for achieving network goals.

Library Network Smart Goals 2018-2019:

The GEMS Library Network fix minimum two smart goals every year and try to achieve the same with maximum participation of its members. It helped us to achieve various professional opportunities and encouraged the whole network activities efficiently. The 2018-2019 SMART goals are;

1. To extend network members' participation in International Conference
2. To conduct Library Workshop on LMS

1. To extend network members' participation in International Conference:

International conferences are primarily organized by professional organizations or academic disciplines. Within the library and information profession, international conferences offer an arena for experts and learners to share knowledge and experiences on a variety of areas and specialisms. Attending an international conference is a professionally rewarding experience. International conference attendance enables the participant librarians to share research findings, discuss emerging trends in the discipline, interact with experts in the fields, and develop publishing and presentation opportunities.

The librarians must strive at all costs to attend the international conferences. Every conferences provides a platform for its delegates to share experiences, learn from each other and also learn best practices in the profession. Attending international conferences will make us a known figure in academic circle, and also will create an impression on our network members that we are an active member in the academic community. We achieved immense participation in the SIBF-ALA2018 Conference through group registration. This provided great opportunities to network members to interact with international library experts and learn many new techniques of collaborative approaches and modern library practices. The greatest edges of attending an international professional conference are the opportunities to make our network and increase our awareness of latest trends happening in our area of interest. We had the pleasure of attending some nice shows throughout the SIBF-ALA conference 2018.

Main Reasons to attend International Conference:

International conferences are great opportunities for professional development of all the professionals especially for school librarians. The GEMS library network has taken keen initiative to participate as a group in SIBF-ALA conference for the past two years. Here are some reasons for our library network to lead our members to participate in the international conferences;

·   International conferences provide an opportunity to learn new ideas, professional techniques, new trends in the field, etc. from the conference presentations.

·   It provides an interactive opportunity with many professional experts from different countries of whom we may have only heard or read about.

·   It also allows us to participate in open discussions as well as to learn new information and tactics.

·   International conferences create an opportunity to attach with many attendees and professional experts who come from different countries and with people having different professional views. In short, it creates an opportunity to learn from them, build new relations, and also strengthen the existing ones.

·   International conferences pave the manner for scientific cooperation by meeting and connecting with researchers from completely different countries.

Representation analysis of GEMS Library Network members in SIBF-ALA Conference for the last two years given below:

Year of conference	Member Librarians	Interested to attend	Attendance	Level of participation
2017	98	25	11	11.22%
2018	100	70	28	28%

2. To conduct Library Workshop on LMS:

The workshop attendance enables the librarians acquire new ideas, get new skills and build networks with other librarians. It is an opportunity to interact directly with experts in the profession as part of their professional development. Continuing professional education is the important benefit of each workshop. Network members acquire new ideas and creating personal network with other librarians.

GEMS Library Network conducted workshops for its members for the last two years. The main challenges we had faced during the time of the last year library workshop was the inconvenience of the network members to attend as it was conducted on a working day. To overcome this problem, this time we arranged the library workshop on a holiday. It helped the network members to attend the workshop and thus we achieved a sound participation. This year (2018-2019), our PD workshop focused on library management systems and arranged international trainers to lead the sessions. The number of participants in the workshop increased compared to previous year and the workshop sessions were successful with effective and meaningful Q&A sessions.

Workshop attendance by librarians is a necessity, especially in this era of information technology application and use in libraries and information centers. The benefit of library workshops are enormous; librarians acquire new skills to remain relevant. We will continue to arrange workshops for library network members. The provision of professional development activities within any library network should be strategically informed and should enable the library to achieve its strategic goals. As a part of achieving the smart goal, the GEMS library network conducted the PD workshop for its members with a sound participation and well-organized sessions.

Participation analysis of network members in GEMS Library Workshop for the last two years given below:

Year	Member Librarians	Interested to attend	Attendance	Level of Participation
2017-2018	98	36	25	25.5%
2018-2019	100	70	53	53%

Other Functions of GEMS Library Network:

Apart from the smart goals, the GEMS Library Network could also extend our functions toward the following:

i.	Cascading platform and open forum for discussions and inquiries.
ii.	Regular meetings at fixed intervals and providing interactive opportunities.
iii.	Cultural Awareness and Value of National Curriculum.
iv.	Proper guidance on Library Management System.
v.	Evaluation of electronic information resources.
vi.	Guidance and assistance on acquisition to acquire better value for money for digital Collections.
vii.	Budgeting assistance.
viii.	Members participation in local library conferences/seminars/workshops/meetings
ix.	Network consortium to purchase electronic information resources.
x.	Discussion and review opportunities on latest publications.
xi.	Demo presentations of local and international products.
xii.	Social media platform to share day-by-day library practices and ideas.
xiii.	Lending service/sharing books/donation opportunities.
xiv.	General assistance and timely support.

i. Cascading platform and open forum for discussions and inquiries:

We have designed and created the Network Forum to bring the members together to discuss real and relevant issues that they deal with in their libraries. The Library network online platform is created for the network members to share and exchange their professional experience and information. The members can share their valuable experiences and information through the open cascade sessions with healthy discussions.

ii. Regular meetings at fixed intervals and providing interactive opportunities:

The main or primary goal of a library network meeting is to promote resource sharing and co-operation activities among librarians by open discussions. It provides an efficient and authentic information-sharing platform for the members. The regular library network meetings help to share various information among each other through face-to-face discussions.

The regular library network meetings;
- encourage inter library loans for the maximum use of resources,
- arrange vendors' presentations,
- provide cascade sessions,
- introduce various databases,
- share leadership responsibilities to coordinate the members from different emirates,
- share ideas to develop library collection by proper guidance and mutual cooperation,
- share the awareness of banned or unauthorized books, etc.

iii. Cultural Awareness and Value of National Curriculum:

The GEMS Library Network understands the importance of cultural awareness and the value of National curriculum. This is one of the important responsibilities of school librarians. The acquisition of global awareness and an understanding of the value of diversity is an integral part of the education. The importance of cultural awareness and National Curriculum is spread among network members through the day-by-day forum discussions and meetings.

iv. Proper guidance on Library Management System:
Librarians work to ensure their daily library practices and procedures for managing LMS. The proper awareness on various LMS and the limitations are discussed within the network. The library network platform creates opportunities to share the limitations and concerns on the Library Management System.

v. Evaluation of electronic information resources:
The information literacy and its influence on electronic resources are very important. The librarians face various challenges on electronic information resources in their daily practices. The awareness of latest e-resources is a significant quality of a librarian. The GEMS library network always incites the evaluation of e-resources before recommending it to the members. The promotion of high quality e-resources would help in achieving higher global ranks.

vi. Guidance and assistance on acquisition to acquire better value for money for digital
collections: The rapid growth of information and communication technology (ICT) has brought a revolutionary change in the library information service. Acquisition is now a crucial process in the management of collection development. The 21st century school library network has to follow its own active and effective collection development policies. GEMS library network maintains its own collection policy and strategy to acquire digital resources.

vii. Budgeting assistance:
The network members have to get the proper guidance and timely support from the library network for the comfortable working with budgets in the most cost effective way. The GEMS library network does not involve the budgeting directly to any of its member libraries, but tries to provide information about the availability and cost of new resources. The library network arranges demo presentation sessions in regular intervals to introduce new education products. This helps the member librarians to understand the cost of the products and helps to prepare their budget for an academic year.

viii. Members' participation in local library conferences/seminars/workshops/meetings:
All the professional gatherings are formal meetings where professionals to share ideas and make policies that will be beneficial to their field of study. All the gatherings of library professionals provide an opportunity for open discussions, fact-finding, problem solving and consultation. GEMS Library Network Members participated in various seminars, workshops, meetings, etc. conducted by organizations like Emirates Airlines Literature Festival, U.A.E School Library Network, Information Literacy Network (ILN)-Gulf Region, etc. This participation helps in professional development and to interact with other library professionals. The local library conferences and workshops help the librarian to learn about current trend, and latest technology.

ix. Network consortium to purchase electronic information resources:
The GEMS Library Network realizes the importance of promoting high quality research and creation of new knowledge by network members. To promote quality research, academic integrity and publication ethics, the availability of latest and high quality publications are very important. We have a strategy and policy (GEMS Education policies for purchasing) to support member libraries. E-resources are an important and invaluable part of school libraries. At the same time, e-resources can be expensive; there are many types of databases and e-resources available in the market. The library network seeks a consortium during the subscription of e-resources. The formation of network consortium helps us to reduce the purchasing cost with maximum availability of resources. The role of the library network is very important in the formation of network consortium. The network consortium provides many benefits

for the network members, by reducing purchasing cost as well as empowering participation of member libraries.

x. Discussion and review opportunities on latest publications:

Electronic resources are the dissemination of information in electronic formats. The realization of the potential and unique feature of electronic media are very important before the subscription. The exponential growth in publishing of e-resources has resulted in difficulties in the retrieval of information due to the widely scattered sources. The e-resources have rapid development and have wide use in the present world, so timely review is very important before the subscription. The GEMS Library network always conducts an up-to-date study on the latest publications through open and proper discussions.

xi. Demo presentations of local and international products:

Demo presentations always provide the visual support to enhance the quality of the products. The effective demonstrations help the network members to get a proper idea about each product. The demo presentations help the librarians to understand the use and value of the products.

xii. Social media platform to share day-to-day library practices and ideas:

There are a multitude of social networking opportunities available for use today. Social networking sites can be used to connect with people and to connect with other library professionals. The social media platform helps to promote the professional achievements and day-to-day library activities of the network members. All uploads of the library activities can be easily viewed by all network members and various library professionals in the world. Social networking technologies include many sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.

Here, GEMS library network commonly uses its 'twitter' account (@GEMSLibNetwork) to share our events and connect the libraries. The social media account helps us to stay updated on various library events we wish to attend. It also helps us to interact with member librarians through discussions, image tagging and sharing. The use of social media allows the member librarians to reach out to different librarians. Ultimately, the use of social media empower librarians to promote their library events and services in different venues.

xiii. Lending services/sharing books/donation opportunities:

Lending and sharing services are one of the most popular and traditional services of a library network. It is the most common use of cooperation between GEMS library network members too. The requests for the supply of books on interlibrary loan or requests for journal articles are received from the member libraries through email and phone. The sharing of resources often enable libraries to deliver higher quality services than they would be able to deliver on their own.

xiv. General assistance and timely support:

In the modern world, we realize that the role of library network is highly important. The GEMS library network assists the member librarians in their daily library practices by sharing ideas, open discussions, library visits, meetings, etc. The GEMS library network promotes resource sharing and cooperation activities among the member libraries by providing proper communication links and interpersonal communication. The GEMS Library Network encourages its members to achieve awards and appreciations (Eg: GEMS Library Network members have been achieving the Emirates Literature Festival Best School Librarian Awards for the last three consecutive years) along with professional development.

Conclusion

The electronic era of the 21st century has brought tremendous changes in the library environments, and the role of library networks. The development of information technology and Web-based electronic services creates new opportunities for the modern library networks that substantially differ from traditional library model. We have realized and proved that the library network could play a pivotal role in support of various library practices, and professional development of librarians. This framework provides opportunities for school librarians to become proactive in providing support across their services through a highly professional network platform. We keep encouraging the network team to grow together, work with confidence and transform their level of professional workforce.

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Mr.Raghunathan. M.O, MLISC Librarian and GEMS Library Network Leader, GEMS Modern Academy, Dubai, United Arab Emirates has been working in multicultural environment since May 2007. He is of Indian origin, working in the Middle East region for the past 12 years. He has more than fifteen years' experience in the field of education and is a well-experienced librarian in CBSE, IGCSE, ICSE and IB curriculum. He has transformed the GEMS Library Network from the traditional system to 21st Century Library Network through collaborative and partnership approaches. Raghunathan has achieved many appreciations and awards in his professional life. Nominated for the IASL 2016 School Librarian Award, Finalist in the ELF 2017 Award, Nominated for the ELF School Librarian Award 2018. Presented papers in IASL2015 Maastritch-The Netherlands, SIBF-ALA2015 Sharjah Conference, ILN-GCC Symposium 2018, Library Seminar 2017 at Ahmedabad, India and Young Scholars Congress 2019 Thiruvananthapuram, India.