

Information literacy: Hong Kong primary teachers' perceptions of the role of the teacher librarian

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating Hong Kong primary teachers' perceptions of the teacher librarian role in relation to information literacy. Primary teachers' responsibility for equipping students with information literacy skills in cooperation with the teacher librarian is focused. A mixed-method of quantitative and qualitative approach was taken. The data were collected through questionnaires sent to every tenth primary schools listed in the Primary School Profiles 2011 published by the Committee on Home-School Co-operation, EDB, HKSAR and face to face interview with six questionnaire respondents. Questionnaires were sent to 146 schools. 75 teacher respondents answered and sent back. The results have identified teachers' understanding of information literacy, the need to develop student such skills, professional development needs and teaching in terms of information literacy skills, government policies and school administration related to the teacher librarian role. Some suggestions were made regarding to teachers' professional development needs in terms of information literacy.

Keywords: Information Literacy, information technology and information skills; Differences in the teacher librarian role; Hong Kong primary teachers' perceptions of the teacher librarian role; teachers' professional development need in terms of information literacy; CPT and flexible library timetable.

The research problem and its context

Information needs and library programs in the information age

Advances in computers and information technology mean that the world is now experiencing the 'Age of Information' (Heilprin, 1989). According to Todd 1996, the amount of information available is growing rapidly at an exponential rate. Production, processing and use of information have become one of the most important human activities. The world economy is changing from one based on manufacturing to one based on information (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1995) and the major unit of exchange has shifted from goods to information or knowledge. "Knowledge is information from every available source, analysed

and targeted to needs. The skills for doing this are what we mean by information literacy” (Latham, 1998, p.1). Extracts from Doyle’s (1993) and McKenzie’s (1998) work defined information literacy as the six skills of formulating need based questions; identifying and locating all possible sources of information effectively; evaluating and organizing information for application; combining new information with the existing knowledge to create new knowledge; making informed decisions; and using information in problem solving. Information literacy is also at the core of lifelong learning (American Association of School Librarians, 1998). To ensure the employability of workers, the government must provide citizens with the necessary education and training to ensure that they know about and are able to use information literacy skills (Latham, 1998). In the information age, the mission of the programs run by the teacher librarians in school libraries is to ensure that students and staff are effective users of ideas and information. These programs should be centered on information literacy that are designed around active and relevant learning where the skills learnt can be used in daily life (American Association of School Librarians, 1998). Since 1998, Hong Kong government has provided each primary school with a school library and a teacher librarian to manage the library. This is a rather unique development which requires scrutiny and investigation of the role of the teacher librarian.

The provision of the teacher librarians and their roles

In Hong Kong schools, before 1997, the Chinese and English Extensive Reading Schemes had been implemented by phases by the Education Department, HKSAR. Since 1997, the government has extended these schemes “gradually to cover Primary 1 to Secondary 5” (Education Department, 1997, cited in Education Bureau, HKSAR, 2012, n.p.). School libraries and teacher librarians have been provided by the government for primary schools since 1998. Such provision was to “enhance the library services and to coordinate the implementation of the Chinese and English Extensive Reading Schemes in primary schools” (Education Department, HKSAR, 1998, n.p.). It did not mention meeting the information needs of students in this new and ever-changing information age by equipping them with information literacy skills. It was not until 2001, the duty of the teacher librarian to “enhance students’ self-learning ability and attitude in project learning” (Education Department, HKSAR, 2001, p.2) was legislated. In 2002, the need to develop student independent learning skills was stressed in the education reform document when the Education Department, HKSAR, (Curriculum Development Council, 2001) set out seven learning goals that Hong Kong students should be able to achieve in ten years’ time. Independent learning skills were the fifth goal. In 2010, independent learning was reiterated together with lifelong learning by the Education Bureau (formerly known as Education Department), HKSAR, in the Consultation Document on the Information Technology for Quality Education (Education Bureau, HKSAR, 2010). What the newly established teacher librarian in Hong Kong primary schools should and can do is unprecedented. The role of the teacher librarian has never been made explicit to the teachers. In May 2000, A Pilot Scheme on Collaboration and Learning: Role of the Teacher Librarian, was jointly organized by the Education Department and District Teacher Network, Hong Kong Primary Education Research Association (Education Department, HKSAR, 2000; District Teacher Network, 2000). A team of the principal or the vice-principal, one to two subject teachers and the teacher librarian from each school were invited to participate in order to gain an understanding of the value of collaborative planning and teaching (CPT) between subject teachers and the teacher librarian. A video recording of this pilot project and the practices that were developed was

produced, but follow-up sessions and new resources have not happened and have not been produced.

Interpretation of the legislated teacher librarian role

Although the role of the teacher librarian is legislated, the interpretation of this varies in different schools. Their duty ranges from the circulation of library materials to the set of information services that integrate school library resources into effective classroom learning activities (McDougald and Bowie, 1997). One of the key ways of determining what the role of the teacher librarian looks like is to consider the teaching workload issues that face teacher librarians. From the school year of 2003/04 to 2007/08, the Library Section, Education Bureau, HKSAR (2009) had collected data of the overall teaching workload, including the teaching of library lessons, of teacher librarians. Questionnaires were completed by the teacher librarian of all schools at the beginning of each school year and sent back to the Library Section of the Education Department, HKSAR. Most (19 – 26%) of the teacher librarians had to teach 11-20 lessons per week in addition to managing the school library in primary schools. The number of teaching lessons per week ranged from zero to 31 showing a great variety of deployment models.

In-service training and professional development of teacher librarians

Year after year, the government continues to fund the in-service teacher librarianship training for newly appointed teacher librarians who then work as ordinary subject teachers when they go back to school after such training. The huge gap between the latest global professional development trends in teacher librarianship introduced in the training courses of teacher librarians and the actual practices in participants' schools have been a source of frustration for me ever since I have been involved in all the above including being an ordinary subject teacher, a newly appointed teacher librarian in 1998 and in another school in 2008, a participant in the pilot scheme in 2000 and a part-time tutor of the Diploma in Teacher Librarianship in the University of Hong Kong, School of Professional and Continuing Education, which is totally funded by the government. Most course participants complain that they are part-time teacher librarians. They cannot find their specific role in their schools. They are assigned to subject teaching jobs which are their major duties in addition to managing the library. Very limited time resource is allocated for the library related work. Most participants of the course are not working as full-time teacher librarians. What they learn in the training course can hardly be put into practice when they go back to their schools. Principals and subject teachers have no ideas about their instructional roles solely as teacher librarians. So subject teaching duties are assigned to them. There is hardly any personal pursuance of professional development.

The two year in-service professional training for a mostly part-time job is questionable. The government, school administrators and teachers are not consistent in their expectations of the fully funded professional training course for teacher librarians. There is a huge gap between the budget spent funding such a professional training course and the daily job conditions of the professionally trained teacher librarians. Participants of the training course often complain that their teacher colleagues and the principals do not understand their specific role. To some extent, the principals' perceptions represent teachers' perceptions. In the long term, experienced teachers will become principals. So studying teachers today involves the principals of tomorrow. Principals' perceptions of the role of the teacher librarian have a direct impact on utilizing such a post which in turn shapes the teachers' perceptions

of the role of the teacher librarian. Being the part-time tutor of the training course for newly appointed teacher librarians, I have to face the course participants who have difficulties performing their specific role to collaborate with their teacher partners to equip students with information literacy skills. I need to know what teachers think or how they perceive this role which drives me to carry out this research.

Literature review

Information Literacy, information technology and information skills

The definition of information literacy for the necessary skills has been discussed in the previous section. For attitudes and mindset, I combine Stauffer Library, Queen's University's (2012), Colorado Educational Media Association's (1994) and Association of College and Research Libraries of American Library Association's (1998) information literacy characteristics to include the following:

- actively deal with ideas;
- be confident to solve problems;
- function smoothly whether there are more than one answers or none;
- complete work to high standards and create quality products;
- be flexible and adaptable;
- function independently and in groups; aware of opportunities;
- being able to express personal ideas; develop arguments;
- refute others' opinions when necessary;
- learn new things and identify the truth.

One of the eight Key Learning Areas in Hong Kong primary schools is Information Technology (Education Bureau, HKSAR, 2015). Information technology and information literacy have always been taken as similar in education settings. There is a need to distinguish information literacy from information technology so that the research area of this study will not be misunderstood. Bruce (1995) argued that information literacy is the ability to use information technology for information retrieval and communication. Stauffer Library, Queen's University (2012) clarified the relation between them by saying that information literacy includes computer literacy. Computer skill enables people to use electronic information tools to gain access to information which is only part of the variety of information tools. It should not take greater value than other tools. Computers do not think by themselves so that effective searches rely totally upon the searchers themselves.

One of the four 2002 legislated teacher librarian roles by Hong Kong government states that teacher librarians are information and media specialists who develop students' information skills. The relation between information literacy and information skills needs to be clarified. According to The Library, University of Bath (2015), information skills include: Finding quality information, avoiding plagiarism and the ability to find, evaluate and synthesize various sources of information. Carey (1998) pointed out that information skills are an indispensable component of information literacy.

Differences in the roles of teacher librarians

School Library Association of South Australia (SLASA) (2008) highlighted the dual role of teacher librarians as both teachers and information specialists. They issued the Teacher Librarian Role Statement which can be adapted to suit the level of responsibility of the teacher librarian. When all the roles listed are fulfilled, the teacher librarian is at a leadership level. I would like to compare some of the teacher librarian role stated by SLASA and the Education Bureau (EDB), HKSAR (2002) below.

In the teaching and learning role of the teacher librarian, SLASA listed training students to seek, critically evaluate, synthesize and present information. These are the four out of the six skills in the definition of information literacy discussed in the previous section. EDB, HKSAR did not list the information literacy skills to be learnt by students. Rather, a comparatively general role of the teacher librarian to facilitate the development of information literacy within the school was legislated. Developing resource-based programs to enhance the independent learning skills of students was also stressed. SLASA listed integrating the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions of the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability *Framework* into teaching and learning programs. EDB, HKSAR did not list integration of skills into teaching. SLASA listed collaboratively planning and teaching units of study with subject and classroom teachers to develop information literacy skills. EDB, HKSAR also listed working collaboratively with teachers in planning and teaching. But the aim was to promote the use of a wide range of information sources in learning and teaching.

In curriculum involvement, SLASA listed being a partner in planning, implementing and assessing school policies relating to the curriculum and advocating student information literacy across the curriculum. These were missing in EDB, HKSAR's teacher librarian role statement. According to SLASA, the aim of working with teachers was to establish a school-wide information skills continuum and to cooperate with school administrators to incorporate Information and Communication Technology into the curriculum. In the EDB, HKSAR's role statement, such aim does not relate to skill learning but to identify required curriculum content, appropriate information resources to develop school-based curriculum strategies such as project learning and "life-wide" learning activities.

In services, the aim of coordinating resources by SLASA was to support the information needs of the whole school. Such aim by EDB, HKSAR was to support learning through reading and curriculum development. SLASA listed arranging efficient policies for delivery of services, including flexible time-tabling for use of the library which was not mentioned in EDB, HKSAR's statement. The role of the teacher librarian is central to this research. There will be research questions arising out of the role of the teacher librarian.

Cooperative planning and teaching (CPT)

Henri (1990) claimed that cooperative planning and teaching (CPT) is an instructional model in which the teacher librarian and the class teacher are equal partners in the instructional process. They share the responsibility for the planning, implementing and evaluating of learning programs that incorporate information literacy. Resource based enquiry approaches will be employed wherever suitable to maximize the contribution from the teacher librarian through the use of a wide range of learning resources, and the application of information skills. The role that each of the partners plays varies from a little more than an exchange of ideas to the very detailed and time consuming input from both partners resulting in a fully integrated unit of work in the optimum use of the partners which is most likely to enhance

student learning. The information skills that are trained in a unit must be appropriate to the learners' need as it arises, in curriculum context, not scheduled at the beginning of the year, not just an extra item.

“When a decision is made to involve the teacher librarian in the assessment of student work, it makes sense to involve the teacher librarian in the assessment of the students and their use of information skills. It makes little sense simply to divide the students' work into two piles” (Henri, 1990, p.12).

Class teachers benefit from getting a few trusted items and relevant information to the topic without going through unnecessary ones. They have no time to read more than enough materials (Henri, 1990).

Flexible library timetable

Mills (1991) argued that to carry out CPT, administrative changes must be made in the use of the school library. The library accommodates the students' learning needs as they arise. Its use is not determined by a schedule. Fisher (2000) claimed that the flexible library timetable enables teachers to decide the frequency and length of library time in need. Students will go to the library with the needs to solve problems making the library visit more motivated to learn and practice their locating skills. Individual students are able to seek immediate answers to the problems they encounter in the classroom. Small groups from different levels can share the same library space and time slot so long as the resources needed are different. The reference collection and audio visual resources will play their role as research tools which they should be. Literature and non-fiction books can play an active role in creative subjects such as Art and Writing.

“Lessons, activities, assignments on units of study will be planned co-operatively by the teacher and library staff by first checking to see the extent of relevant resources in the library. Teachers can share unit activities and resources more effectively and thus save doubling up on preparation and time”(Fisher, 2000, n.p.).

The research title and questions

The title of this research is: Information literacy: Hong Kong primary teachers' perceptions of the role of the teacher librarian. The following questions are derived from the research title:

- What is the role of the teacher librarian in Hong Kong primary schools?
- What are teachers' perceptions of the role of the teacher librarian?
- How have these perceptions developed?
- What are teachers' perceptions of information literacy skills?
- Who do teachers think are responsible for developing student information literacy skills?
- What strategies teachers have been adopting to develop information literacy skills
- amongst their pupils?

Findings and discussions

This section discusses some of the findings from the data collected from the questionnaire survey and the open ended questions in the questionnaire survey and the face to face interview. The qualitative data collected are represented by fifteen themes and their subthemes. Some themes have only one subtheme while others have more than one. They are bolded for easy identification. “Respondents” refers to questionnaire respondents. To

enhance the clarity of presentation, direct quotations of the interviewees' responses are italicized and enclosed with double quotation marks. (Q16:2) means interview question 16 responded by Interviewee Two. The literature reviewed is referred to during the discussions.

Teachers' understood information literacy skills as observing copyright

66.3% respondents said that they understood information literacy skills. An examination of their specification in their own words about what they understood by "information literacy skills" found that 42% understood them as copyright. McKenzie (1998) mentioned three components of information literacy. One of them is creating new insights and fresh knowledge which is completely different from rehashing others' ideas and plagiarizing. It means information literate people observe copyright. The ability of observing copyright is only one of the information literacy skills.

Teachers take information literacy skills as part of information technology skills

11% respondents take information literacy skills as part of information technology skills. Stauffer Library, Queen's University (2012) clarified the relation between the two by saying that information literacy included computer literacy. Computer skill enables people to use electronic information tools to gain access to information which is only part of the variety of information tools. It should not take greater value than other tools. Computers do not think by themselves so that effective searches rely totally upon the searchers themselves. Most (61.3%) respondents selected "another person" who mainly teaches students how to use information in an ethical and responsible way. 79.2% of this another person are Information Technology (Computer) teachers. This shows that teachers take information literacy skills as part of information technology skills which might be taught by information technology teachers. It is just the opposite according to Stauffer Library. It is further evidenced by one respondent who said that, "*Information Technology panel head,*" was the person who was mainly responsible for developing teachers' and students' information searching skills and information literacy skills in the use of the school library collection. "*But s/he does not necessarily use the school library collection.*" S/he took information literacy skills as information technology skills which could be disconnected with library books. Similarly, in Interview Data Theme Thirteen: Teachers' information literacy skills – understand information literacy skills as Information Technology ability to use a computer, tablet PC and software. The 66.3% respondents said that they understood information literacy was not completely reliable when compared with the literature. Two third, the majority of the respondents did not give reasons to support their agreement to the fact that "information literacy skills are necessary in the information age". That mirrors 32.4% of the respondents who said that they were at the poor level of understanding information literacy skills.

Most (33%) respondents agreed that the initial teacher training course prepared teachers to teach information literacy skills. Given the fact that teachers take information literacy skills as part of information technology skills, are they assuming that the training of information technology skills provided by the government and in teacher training includes information literacy skills? Such assumption is supported by the following statement, "*It is the responsibility for all teachers to teach information literacy skills, however training is not necessary*" (Q12:2, 3). The assumption that information technology skills include information literacy skills misleads teachers to the following statements:

- "*The 2002 legislated teacher librarian role as an information and media specialist can be fulfilled by non-teaching clerical staff*" (Q16:2).

- “The 2002 legislated teacher librarian role as an information and media specialist is not the case in my school” (Q13:1, 2, 4), (Q14: 2, 4), (Q15:2).
- It is recommended to clarify the relationship between information literacy skills and information technology skills in teacher training course.

Teachers’ perceptions of the need to develop student information literacy skills

The third largest group (47.3%) chose "Students learn how to solve a problem on their own by searching for relevant information from the school library" to be a difference to the teaching and learning since the presence of the teacher librarian in their school since 1998. Less than half schools have such student performance. Only two related examples were provided by the interviewees in the interview. Solving problems independently is one of the six information literacy skills. Function independently is one of the information literacy characteristics. Teachers’ perceptions of the need to develop student such skills were reflected in the interview data as Interviewee One said,

“In my school, senior grades do more project-based learning. Each time when we do project learning, the teacher must ask students to find information from the following sources: newspapers, books, Internet resources. So we will certainly ask students to go to the library to try to find information. They need to search for information not just from our school library, also from libraries outside our school. Of course, given the ability of the students, whether they are able to find suitable resource is another matter, but we must ask students to really get to the library to find appropriate resources / information. May be even not just project-based learning, sometimes for homework, we also ask them to do so. So the teacher librarian does his/her duty to help students find resources” (Q45:1).

“Project learning” (Curriculum Development Council, HKSAR, 2001, p.83) is one of the four key tasks in the education reform in Hong Kong since 2001. The above school is really implementing it. All teachers are involved including the teacher librarian. Students increasingly need the skills to search for suitable information which they are simply asked to during project learning and in doing homework. Definitely, they need the two skills of “identifying and locating all possible sources of information effectively; and, evaluating and organizing information for application” out of a series of six information literacy skills. They also need the other four skills of formulating need based questions when deciding on their project titles; combining new information with the existing knowledge to create new knowledge to achieve their project learning outcome; making informed decision when answering the project learning question and using information in problem solving when they present their project learning results. The teaching in this school reflects the questionnaire survey result of 93.2% teachers strongly or agreed that “information literacy skills are necessary in the information age”. Twenty four out of seventy five, nearly one third of the respondents gave the following reasons to support their agreement:

- *“The wealth of information is part of life.”*
- *“Work more efficiently.”*
- *“Do not want to cause ‘crime’ due to ‘convenience’”.*
- *“Opportunities for the need of using information technology in daily life and classroom learning are increasing. Unable to grasp the information literacy skills will inevitably create obstacles for learning, will most likely be eliminated by the information age.”*
- *“Now it is too easy to receive all kinds of information, people must know how to distinguish and choose the true and beneficial.”*
- *“The online world is the same as the real world. It reflects personal behavior and quality.”*

Each person should be responsible for their own actions.”

- *“Lacking this skill will become blindly and will be utilized to create a force. It may eventually contribute to cyberbullying.”*
- *“Avoid breaking the law, to educate the importance of respecting intellectual property rights.”*

These are only a small part of the information literacy attitude and mindset of being confident to solve problems; function smoothly whether there is more than one answer or none; learn new things and identify the truth. In project learning group work and doing homework, students need more information literacy skills, attitudes and mindset such as completing work to high standards and creating quality products; be flexible and adaptable; function independently and in groups; aware of opportunities; being able to express personal ideas; develop arguments; refute others' opinions when necessary as mentioned in the literature review.

The reasons of agreeing that “information literacy skills are necessary in the information age” provided by the respondents show that being a community member in the globalized information society; teachers have already sensed the importance of information literacy. However, being the front line educators and teachers who are students' significant adults, they lack the information literacy cognition. They need the comprehensive and professional understanding of information literacy skills and most importantly, the way to equip students with them because they have such responsibility as in Interview Data Theme Six: Agree with the 2002 legislated teacher librarian role as an information and media specialist – we need to develop students' information skills.

The second largest group (30%) of respondents disagreed that the initial teacher training course prepared teachers to teach information literacy skills. That means not all the teachers are ready to teach information literacy skills. It was argued that “Only when teachers understand that information literacy must begin with them, is an information literate school community possible” (Henri, Hay and Oberg, 2002, p.2). 58.9% respondents chose “Awareness of information literacy skills” to be the way to help them utilize the skills of the teacher librarian and 41.1% chose “Developing your personal information literacy skills.” It is recommended that the initial teacher training course develop teacher information literacy skills and prepare teachers to teach information literacy skills.

Teachers' perception of further professional development needs in terms of information literacy skills.

Most (57%) respondents agreed that they have further professional development needs in terms of information literacy skills. This is consistent with Interview Data Theme Fourteen: [Teachers' responses regarding information literacy skills](#) – it is the responsibility for all teachers to teach information literacy skills. The following kinds of training requirement are needed for them to be able to do that:

1. *“Coupled with the ability of teachers to use information technology, what is information literacy? How to teach students knowledge in this area?”(Q12:1)*
2. *“In today's heavy teaching, teachers cannot afford to attend courses frequently. In my school experience, different subject teachers go out to attend lectures. The message will be disseminated in our school's own sharing sessions and staff meetings. The teacher librarian, who gets his /her training, can share with us when s/he comes back” (Q12:6).*
3. *“Some workshops by the Education Bureau for colleagues to attend. Let colleagues know what to pay attention to..... Or simply circulate a memo. Then we will all know about*

what we have to comply with the Code” (Q12:4).

4. *“First teachers have to correct the concept that making use of information and library materials are the duties of the teacher librarian or the Information Technology teacher. Now learning is not a teacher only responsible for a subject. When teachers are on the Internet, endless and unlimited information appear. How should we apply the information and do screening? When encountering copyright issues, some skills are needed. Some points need to be noted. We should not casually use someone’s information. How to tell whether one is able to use the information correctly? If teachers are aware of these, they are willing to share the work to help students learn” (Q12:5).*

Other findings and discussions include:

- The relationship between the role of the specialized teacher who teaches information literacy skills and the responsibility of all teachers to teach such skills.
- There is no conventional way of teaching information literacy skills.
- The legislated teacher librarian role is not known explicitly to all.
- The library does not have a curriculum guideline. The progress of each school is not the same.
- Disagree with some items in the 1998 legislated teacher librarian role items (a) to (j).
- Teachers’ perceptions of the teacher librarian role as a teaching partner.
- Teachers’ perceptions of the four roles of the teacher librarian legislated in 2002.
- Trained teacher librarians fulfil the role of ordinary subject teachers.
- Reading materials versus curriculum-related resources.
- Administration jobs versus management jobs in a library.

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