Designing, implementing and evaluating training for school librarians in rural China: A case study

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This paper describes the development of a training program for primary and middle school librarians in rural China. There are three full-day training sessions. Phase 1 focuses on the role of school librarian and librarian survival skills, including: creating a welcoming library, rudimentary library organisation, simple book repair etc. Phase 2 focuses on reading promotion and activities and an introduction to collection development and book selection. Phase 3: focuses on incorporating reading into curriculum and addresses the link between reading and academic achievement and interaction with teachers. To date phases 1 and 2 have been completed in three provinces.

Librarian training; developing countries; PRC China

Introduction

Primary, middle and secondary school libraries in rural China lag behind their urban counterparts in many ways. These ways include: size and quality of collections, library facilities, technology, and the level of expertise of librarians. These librarians may be: new teachers, soon-to-retire teachers, or other personnel who are co-opted, often with great enthusiasm (but sometimes not) for the task. In many rural schools there is no full time

librarian or even a part-time librarian. Where they do exist, the part time librarians often have to juggle multiple roles, including a heavy teaching load or alternative duties such as school cleaner or school cook. This creates an impediment to the cultivation of reading habits even when there are good collections and the librarian's spirit is willing. With no training, school librarians start from a very low knowledge base.

To address this issue within the context of a reading and book program, sponsored by the Chen Yet-Sen Family Foundation (CY-SFF), for primary and middle schools, the authors designed and implemented a training program for library staff. The program design is based on the premise that the school library can be a major agent for encouraging young readers, especially in areas where there are no public/community libraries and where most families cannot afford personal collections.

The CY-SFF's reading projects are many and varied. They include school-based projects in the provinces of Anhui, Jiangsu and Yunnan. As they are rural projects, the schools are often widely dispersed. These projects have already been described in a number of papers (Henri & Warning, 2008; Henri, Warning, & Leung, 2008; Warning & Henri, 2008). The target for the model is to encourage reading for pleasure. This paper describes the training program for school librarians. It addresses: the needs of the target group, identified priorities for training, pragmatic elements such as costs, availability of the trainee librarians and availability of suitable trainers. Participant evaluation of the training is addressed.

The research team

The research team has long and extensive collective experience in curriculum development and delivery for teacher librarians, spanning four continents and some thirty years. All are currently involved in degree/diploma teacher librarian training programs. Additionally, Angel Leung and Jacqueline Shek are experienced teacher librarians who have delivered school librarian training on the Chinese mainland.

The Training Program

The training program is based on a combination of this experience, modified by addition and subtraction, to the local environment. It was vetted by mainland Chinese to ensure that it did not contain anything that could not be incorporated into Chinese schools. To date, Phases 1 and 2 have been carried out in four rural areas in the three provinces. Phase 3 has not yet been implemented.

Origins

Formal training was not a planned component of the original reading project, which was launched in 2006. The research team routinely provides advice on an ad hoc basis to school librarians during site visits. This advice is both solicited and unsolicited. Although librarians occasionally raise unique issues based on their local situation, most of the questions are repeated often, i.e. regardless of location the librarians have the same concerns and perceived information gaps. Similarly the unsolicited advice is often repetitive, e.g. how to display materials, introduce suitable opening hours, design engaging reading activities etc. A more formalised training session provides many advantages such as pre-empting mistakes and remedial activity, standardising practices to some extent, and bringing the librarians together, so creating the seed for communities of practice. A trial training session was arranged in Yunnan in 2007. This was a half-day session and was planned and delivered by

Angel Leung, a research associate who is an experienced Hong Kong teacher librarian, fluent in Putonghua, and has experience training mainland Chinese librarians. The CY-SFF's reading project in Yunnan is centred in Luxi, and takes in a very large area, extending south to the Burmese border. The logistics for the training were arranged by the local education authority (LEA). Due to the distances involved, some participants travelled during the previous day to Luxi. This was the first formal library training any had received. Also participation was not restricted to librarians. Officials from the LEA attended, as well as principals, deputy principals and language teachers, totalling over 50 participants. This is a phenomenon that has been repeated in subsequent training sessions. The session was conducted over a full day. Foci of the training were: defining the role of the school librarian, demonstrating the importance of reading for children, and how the librarian can encourage a whole-school approach. In hindsight this may have been an overly ambitious schedule: it was discovered that the librarians' most pressing concerns related to routine library operational skills.

A survey (see Appendix 1) was administered with the aim of canvassing participants' views about libraries, books and reading. The responses were instructive. For Q. 9, *What is the reading program trying to achieve?*, indicative responses included:

- "To build a reading interest and lifetime reading habit"
- "To broaden the knowledge base and teach students to appreciate books"
- "To enhance reading ability and build a good reading environment in the school"

For Q. 11, *How do you measure the success [of the reading program]?*, responses included:

- "Improvements in children's reading comprehension and self-learning ability"
- "Increased ability for self-directed reading and better comprehension of books"

The responses indicated some movement away from the unanimous view initially encountered on school visits that reading was solely a vehicle for improved academic performance that had been encountered in discussions with librarians in our earlier library visits. However the utilitarian view of reading still resonated strongly.

Development

The initial training in Yunnan surfaced the major concern of the school librarians: how to establish and maintain effective libraries. As a result, the research team designed a three-part training program that begins with basic library operation training and evolves to ways that the librarian can act as the catalyst for a whole-school approach to reading. A sample training plan relating to Phase 2 training is provided in Appendix 2. Each school librarian attends three full-day training sessions.

Demand for places has exceeded the original target of a maximum of 30 participants per session. Significantly, a sizable number of principals have also attended, and been visible by their enthusiasm. The local education authority is responsible for organising the logistics. The third phase will be completed in 2009. An additional advanced training session will be designed for librarians of designated model school libraries, who will act as exemplars for other schools. Each training session is evaluated anonymously by the participants. This is almost unanimously positive. Subsequent interaction between the project team and the participants in their schools demonstrates increased confidence, awareness of the role and

potential of the librarian. A logical extension of the existing program is credentialing by the local education authority and a library association.

Phase 1 Role of school librarian; Survival skills. The first training session focused on demystifying libraries and library work, and opening up access to the library. It specifically includes:
- Exploring the role of the school librarian
- Creating an image of a welcoming library
- Library cleanliness and housekeeping
- Rudimentary library organisation
- Planning and introducing rudimentary reading activities
- Circulation of items – strategies to encourage borrowing
- Developing suitable lending policies
- Designing engaging displays
- Rudimentary book repair
- Encouraging problem solving among librarians
- Discussion of model libraries

These topics are self-explanatory except for the last topic. The model library concept is a component of the CY-SFF reading model. A model library is a school library that has been identified by the research team as an exemplar for other libraries to emulate (Henri & Warning, 2009). As an exemplar it receives enhanced support from the CY-SFF and takes on concomitant obligations. All schools are encouraged to strive to attain model library status.

Phase 2: Reading promotion and activities. This training involves reinforcing the concept of moving beyond incentive based reading, such as book reports and comprehension exercises, to address enjoyable reading related activities that encourage free voluntary reading. It specifically includes:
- Strategies to attract students to the library
- Book reading – e.g. parents, teachers, students
- Storytelling techniques
- Organising literature circles
- Organising drama activities, including puppetry
- Activities to encourage student authors
- Organising special library and book events, e.g. International School Library Month
- Introduction to collection development and book selection/deselection (1)

This session draws on the trainer's experience and involves demonstrations by the trainer, using cheap props and props that the trainer or students have made. The participants are formed into groups who then present storytelling to the whole group. It is emphasised that activities such as celebrating International School Library Month do not have to be expensive or on a large scale. Librarians are encouraged to "start small".

The final component of collection development is a linkage between this session and Phase 3. Obviously reading activities are more likely to be successful when the book collection is a good one, in terms of appeal to the readers. The reality in most of these libraries is that there is nothing approaching a collection development policy. Almost all of the collection has been selected and supplied by the government. In any case, these schools have little or no budget for independent book purchases. While many of the titles may be

worthy in terms of character development, most are not attractive to young readers. They are mostly concentrated text with few or no illustrations.

Phase 3: Incorporating reading into curriculum. This session is based in the assumption that participants have acquired: basic library skills, resulting confidence in library management, and understanding of the concept of free voluntary reading. It is designed to encourage them further develop the whole-school approach. It specifically includes:

- Review of Phase 2
- Demonstrating the link between reading and academic achievement
- Initiating and nurturing interaction with teachers: educating teachers about the library
- Introducing fiction into the curriculum
- Introducing the concept of resource-based learning
- Collection development and book selection/deselection (2)
- Discussion of model libraries

The Future

In the short term, Phase 3 needs to be implemented. The research team will then consolidate the participant evaluation and their own professional judgment to assess: the efficacy of the training program, whether it should be continued, and if continued what form it should take. We are also exploring the possibility of providing in-residence training for identified model libraries. A trainer would reside in the town for one to two weeks duration, providing in-depth training and guidance to the model library plus some workshops for other local librarians. This would create a training continuum, represented in Figure 1.
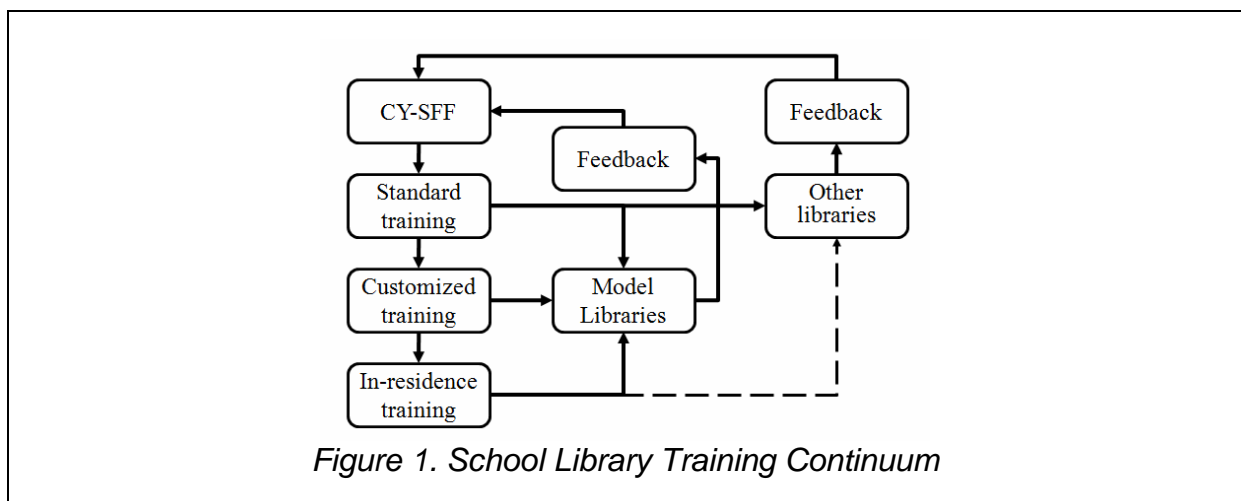

Figure 1. School Library Training Continuum

The librarian in the model library would then have some responsibility for training librarians in neighbouring schools. The expectation is that we are in a transitional stage, evolving to a situation where training is developed locally, rather than provided from outside. This would create a support and collaboration continuum for the local libraries, represented in Figure 2. It is difficult to predict how long this transitional stage will take.

Figure 2. Library Support and Collaboration Continuum
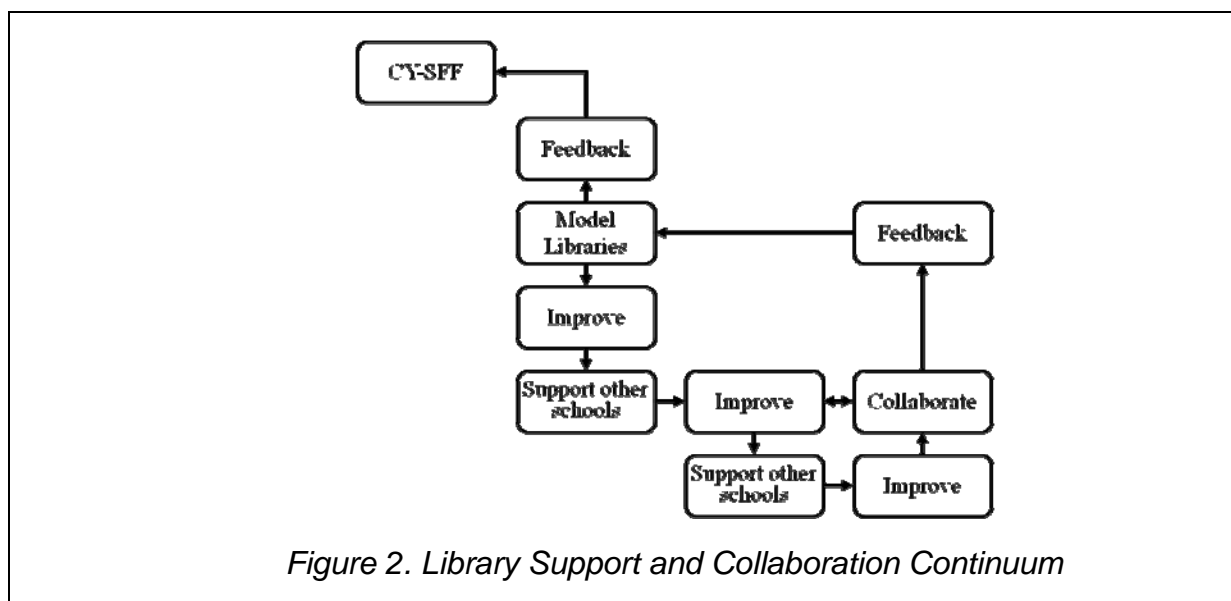
Occasional Training

In addition to the formalised training program, the CY-SFF provides training when the opportunity is available. At the Second International Conference for School Library Development in China: Getting the Basics Right, in Shanghai in April 2009, a number of practical workshops were offered. The CYSFF subsidised the costs of many of the delegates, and canvassed their preferences for practical workshops. The workshop topics covered were:

- Basic circulation methods
- Creating an attractive library
- Bringing stories alive
- Recruiting and training student librarians
- Training children authors
- Building a 'teacher as reader' culture
- Policies and strategies for promoting reading for pleasure among students – experience from Chengdu
- Book display techniques

These workshops were delivered by school library practitioners and experts from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. They were offered twice to allow delegates a range of choice that matched their needs. All sessions were fully subscribed and feedback was very positive.

Outcomes

Although the full cycle of training has not been completed, the research team has observed some tangible and intangible changes in the way the school libraries operate and the way the librarians behave. Apart from the impact of training on the librarians, we suggest that the attendance of many principals has smoothed the passage of change. They are now more aware of library and reading related issues and some have become zealous in their commitment to encourage reading. Of course these changes are not uniform. There is resistance to some of the areas covered in the training. Some key developments are described below.

Library tangibles

Many of the librarians have implemented changes to make the physical library a more inviting place. These include: beautification, such as student artwork or posters; moving the library to a better location; and introducing display shelves. Some schools have wall posters where students are encouraged to write their feelings about books they have read. Others have book inserts where readers comment and leave them in the book for the next reader to peruse and/or add to. This is a different approach to the traditional and widespread emphasis on reading comprehension that we observed in site visits. Many libraries place bowls of water at the door for children to wash hands before using the collection.

Collections

Librarians are displaying more awareness of the types of materials that attract young readers. Some schools have weeded unattractive materials, consigning them to storerooms. In most schools this would have been an unthinkable action prior to the training. Some schools are decentralising the collections to classrooms then rotating these classroom collections.

Policies

Many of the librarians have expanded library access beyond school hours. Library access is a problematic issue for school libraries in rural China due to a range of factors including: large student numbers and small collections and premises; and regulations limiting the time that primary students can spend on the school campus. Lending remains a commonly expressed concern. Librarians are fearful that books will be lost or damaged. In some libraries the most attractive reading materials are not lent due to these concerns. In most, there is now acceptance of the principle that books worn out by proper use is a good thing.

Reading activities

Librarians, in collaboration with teachers, are initiating reading activities that appeal to children. These include thematic activities relating to different types of books, poster creation and reading circles. Schools are increasingly scheduling classes in the library where there are read-aloud activities and students engage in silent reading. Some schools are organising reading activities for students over the long summer break.

Conclusion

Many of the changes noted above may seem trivial, especially in terms of library operations in developed countries. To the research team they represent a level of recognition of the paradigm of reading for pleasure rather than the traditional paradigm of "guardian of the books" that we routinely observed in our earlier site visits. We perceive this to be a major development in rural libraries involved in the CY-SFF reading projects. They begin from a very low base in terms of material resources and an equally low base in terms of the skills and knowledge of school librarianship. It remains to be seen whether the changes in behaviour continue or dissipate. Ideally if the communities of practice concept becomes established it will be the catalyst for self-generating change.

Appendix 1: Survey Form (English translation)

1. Do you work in a school? If yes,
   - ☐ Kindergarten
   - ☐ Primary
   - ☐ Middle
   - ☐ High

If no then, please go to Q25

2. What is your job title?_____

3. If a teacher, how many years experience?__
4. If you work in the school library, how much library experience do you have?___
5. Have you had any formal library training?____
6. Have you visited any other school libraries to observe them?__
7. Does your school have a reading program?___

If no then go to Q25

8. If yes, what are the key parts of it?_____
9. What is the reading program trying to achieve?_____
10. Is it successful in achieving these goals?_____
11. How do you measure the success?_____
12. How could it be improved?
13. What are the major problems you encounter with the reading program? Eg :
   - ☐ Not enough books
   - ☐ Wrong types of books
   - ☐ Lack of interest from students
   - ☐ Poor facilities
   - ☐ No time for students to read
   - ☐ Other_____

14. Is your library a welcoming place for students to visit?____
15. Do teachers send students to the library?_____
16. If yes, for what purposes?_____
17. What are the opening & closing times of the library?_____
18. Does your school have collections of books in classrooms?____

   For Principals

19. Why did you attend this workshop?_____
20. Why do you have a school library?_____
21. How important is reading?
   ☐ not important   ☐ somewhat   ☐ very
                          important   important

22. How do you encourage your teachers to read?_____

23. Have you visited any other school libraries to observe them?_____
24. What sources of funding are available for school libraries?_____

25. What did you learn from today's workshop that is useful?_____
26. What can you apply to your school library or classroom or other?_____
27. Is there anything that you would you like to apply but cannot? If yes, what are the barriers that prevent you from applying them?_____
28. What further library or reading program workshops would you like to attend?_____
29. Please add any comments that you would like to make_____

<center>Thank you for completing this survey</center>

Appendix 2: Phase 2 Training Plan

Logistics

- Whole day (ie 9.30 to 4.30 with breaks)
- Small group: maximum of 30
- Venue: classroom with tables seating about 6
- Equipment: screen & projector, computer, whiteboard or equivalent for displaying results of discussion
- Stationary: Large paper (A3 or larger), thick marker pens (different colours), blue tac, postit notes
- Children's books
- Props: sample puppets, posters etc
- Refreshments: tea, water, lunch

Lesson Plan

Time (mins)	Content	Remarks/prompts
5-8	Warm up exercise; getting to know each other	Games, icebreakers
8-10	Sharing & exchanging : questioning, discussing and solving problems	TLs asked to briefly describe what have been done in the past few months. Some prompts eg: how they are providing access to books, decorating library, library activities, book selection, etc
75-120	Presentation and discussion A. Library activities for promoting reading:	• Slide show • Role play • Discussing
30–45	I. In school activities Storytelling methods eg: organic, puppetry, drama etc Reading day, Stop everything & read Briefly Discuss positive outcomes from storytelling, eg thinking skills, concept of continuity, comprehension, values, prediction etc	• Simulated storytelling • TLs will try different techniques • Self analysis • Peer feedback
15	MORNING TEA	
30–45	II. Inter-school activities (Note problems with distance) Competitions for posters, bookmarks, poem, short story, exhibitions, thematic	• Emphasise that participation is more important than winning • Emphasise enjoyment for students is major outcome • TLs to suggest possible themes that are topical/relevant to their students

30–45	III.National/International activities World book day, International School Library Month	Activities could be same as above activities but focused for the specific event
60	LUNCH	
60-90	B. Planning for activities Slogan: Think big, start small Student focus, budget, human resources, cooperation with others (eg principal, teachers, parents, other staff, volunteers), time management, physical resources, Document, review and share experience	• Provide planning template and samples • Group work & sharing • Raise problems & suggest solutions
15	AFTERNOON TEA	
45-60	C. Basic library skills • Book structure • Basic searching skills in printed matter	Discussion & sharing
45-60	D. Role of TL in promoting reading I. Exposure/extensive reading II. Reading interest/initiative III.High order thinking skills IV.Analytic thinking V. Organizing skill VI.Creativity	• Present some data on impact of libraries & reading on student outcomes • Discussion & sharing
15-20	Evaluation survey	• Survey forms

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Statement of Originality

This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the authors and that the paper was conceived and written by the author(s) alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from others are referenced.