

Finding the Path of Cognitive Education for Remote High School Library in China

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Abstract

In this digital age and the Internet era, can a high school library in the remote West China, burdened with the examination-oriented education, escape the fate of being marginalized, and be able to achieve something in assisting the cognitive education of the students?

The answer is “Yes”. As a past high school teacher, a past school administrator and a current high school library director, the author looked back on her experience working with the Evergreen Education Foundation in developing the services and capacity of two high school libraries in Southeast Guizhou province, and analyzed possible paths and key factors to achieve this breakthrough. The analysis in this paper provides a useful reference to school libraries in remote West China that set about to explore a path leading to excellence riding the wave of the New Curriculum Reform.

Keywords: high school library, cognitive education, New Curriculum Reform, West China education

1. Background

The libraries in remote western China is more like the “book warehouse”, as the books are quite old and the opening hours cannot be guaranteed. There are no professional workers for the libraries. The librarian, working part-time, are mostly teachers who are about to retire. Teachers and students don’t care about the libraries, having their hands full with teaching and study tasks. Needless to say, school administrations do not pay much attention to the library, either. Libraries are basically marginalized. In the digital age and the Internet era, can these libraries change their fate and make a difference upon students’ cognitive education? I will address this question by reflecting on my experience working with two libraries in Southeast Guizhou Prefecture, Guizhou Province, namely Wende High School Library in Zhenyuan County, and Kaili No. 1 High School Library in Kaili City.

2. Case Study No. 1- Wende High School Library

The Wende High School is a young public high school founded by the government in 2003. There are about 1700 students in the school. Most of the teachers are university graduates, passionate but without working experience. Students are not of good quality, either. In Guizhou Province, when students go from middle schools in counties to high schools, they

can choose from four grades: Of the top grade are several provincial high schools, followed by prefecture-level high schools. Of the 3rd grade are the best high school in the county, e.g. Zhenyuan High School in Zhenyuan County. Other high schools in the county belong to the 4th grade. Therefore, students who go to Wende High Schools are those with bottom test scores. Over 80% of these students are from rural villages. Each year only 5% of the students who attend college entrance exam go to colleges and universities, and 40% go to polytechnic schools. Facing enormous pressure, Wende High School is constantly looking for special model of education to improve the college entrance rate, and build the capacity of young teachers, in order to meet the expectations of the parents and the community.

Since the school library partnered with the Evergreen Education Foundation (EEF) in 2006, I came to realize that this collaboration would be a great opportunity for teachers and students, hence the development of the school, if it was fully leveraged. Looking back on the development of the school library since 2006, I found that teachers and students had indeed gained a lot through this collaboration.

- 1) Advanced ideas and intellectual inputs from the external entity, and the cultivation of seed teachers (pioneers) at schools by this entity;

During every developmental phase of Wende High School Library, a round of idea inputs from EEF is followed by a round of practices by teachers and librarians, which is in turn followed by a new round of idea inputs, so on and so forth.

Phase1. Library circulation automation: At the end of 2005, the librarian was trained on the usage of the Integrated Library System. In August 2006, automated circulation was on in the library; The librarian and I learned from the 2006 EEF conference¹ that libraries should serve students and teachers through rich and easily accessible book and information resources.

Phase2. Library service improvement: Various activities are needed to attract students and teachers to the library. In 2009, EEF started to select, fund and guide one-year small projects which are proposed, designed and executed by local teachers and librarians to help partner libraries improve their services and build capacity for their team. Through workshops on project management in 2009 and 2011, and practices in the small projects, the teachers and librarians have formed understanding of the following two key methods: 1) outcome-based project design and evaluation, and project outcomes should break out of the set pattern of “emphasizing knowledge and neglecting abilities”, and strive for higher level cognitive educational objectives including analysis, evaluation and creation; (Krathwohl,2002) 2) experiential study, which focuses on reflection, extraction and application.

As for me, then a vice-principal in charge of teaching, because the ideas brought by EEF showed me a path from library to information center, then to capacity building of teachers and students, which addressed my concern about how to improve teaching, I became a seed in Wende planted by EEF and a path finder for teachers and students. After attending each EEF workshop and conference, I shared what I learned with the school administrations, the fellow

¹ Since 2003, every other year in the even years, EEF hosts an international conference called Information Technology in Education (ITIE). The conference invites library professionals and researchers including staff of rural libraries, educators, NGO staff from various countries and regions. Every other year in the odd years EEF organizes a workshop on rural library development for in-depth training and exchange.

teachers and students. In 2009 when the EEF small projects started, I not only organized the history teaching group to apply, but also encouraged core teachers of other subjects to apply and participate in experiments. For example, Yongdeng Wu, a Chinese teacher, and the Director of the Teaching Research Office, developed a project on reading and writing of ancient poem and prose, and another one surveying the living conditions of the disabled in the community. The active participation of vice-principal in charge of teaching and the Director of the Teaching Research Office encouraged more teachers to participate in 2010.

2) Experiments of library cognitive education service via inquiry-based learning projects, as well as nurturing the collaboration of teachers and librarians for long-term development;

From 2009 to 2011, through EEF small projects, the school library promoted the inquiry-based learning in humanity and science subjects, such as the two projects described below.

“Zhenyuan Local History” project: In collaboration with the librarian, six teachers from history teaching group led students to collect and sort information and materials on local history, and then compiled a local history textbook. In the process of information collection, teachers and students realized the lack of resources in school library and local public library, and learned how to find books, and how to search information on the internet by search engines. This project incurred a number of first-time trials. For the first time, students participated in the making of a textbook, with their analysis and communication abilities improved. For more than half of these students, it was their first visit to local historical and cultural sites including the museum. For the first time, students studied and visited one of the most important enterprises in the historical Westernization Movement— Green Creek Iron Works. It was also my first time to use my family photos, portraits of three siblings on the local hanging bridge over the years to tell a story of changes of my family and my town. For the first time, students realized that history is around us, and the thousands of connections in our lives are the history happening and evolving.

The Study of peach flower Jellyfish in Wuyang river: Wuyang river is Guizhou’s scenic spot, where peach flower jellyfish, a type of freshwater jellyfish reputed as “living fossil” live. Students were very interested in finding out what kind of environment can produce peach flower jellyfish. They searched information in the library and on the Internet, also did field study. Although the students lacked professional equipments to accurately measure the conditions of the waters where the peach flower jellyfish live, they collected jellyfish samples and water samples, studied the morphological characteristics of the jellyfish, measured the basic water environmental indicators, and provided the analysis report.

However, there were two elements missing in the development of Wende High School Library, leaving a hidden danger for the sustainable development of the library:

1) EEF and the pioneer in the school (I, the vice principal) failed to gain the support from the top management (the principal) regarding the basic idea of library development from early on. The principal only gave tacit permission to the developmental work of the pioneer and the teachers/librarians, without determination to make a difference in the library development.

2) The library team failed to advance the team building and environment building (and to gain enough support for this advancement);

Corresponding to the principal’s attitude of "do nothing, invest nothing", the library team building did not make any progress. The team was all along one librarian plus a few student volunteers. Though many students asked for open-shelf access to facilitate book browsing

and selection, the library team was afraid of the possible book loss and the occurring management difficulty and never advanced in that direction. Accordingly, no fundamental changes were made to the library environment taking the opportunity of the library automation and service experiments based on small projects.

After I left the school in 2011, the momentum of and the support for the EEF small projects were no longer there. In 2012, there was no small project application from Wende High School. The library went back into stagnation.

3. Case Study No. 2- Kaili No. 1 High School Library

Kaili No. 1 High School is a Class I model public high school in Guizhou Province, belonging to the aforementioned second grade. In 2011, its new campus was completed, with over 5400 students in the school, and undergraduate enrollment rate above 85%. In Guizhou it can be viewed as a high school with quality teachers, excellent students, and first-class campus. As a model high school, it often has visitors from other schools, so the school management imposes a high standard on works of all aspects. Due to this environment, combined with an open-minded principal, library development has gained strong support from the school management. In Fall semester, 2011, I transferred to this school. The initial plan was that I would become a history teacher. But incidentally, the preparation for the new campus library began, and I was providing consultation on library service. I realized connecting with the EEF platform may bring big opportunity to this library, since it already had good hardware in place, but troubled with the lack of management and service. So I decided to apply for the position of librarian director, hoping to turn this opportunity into a reality.

- 1) A pioneer connects the library with external entities to gain new ideas and knowledge, meanwhile seeking recognition and support from the top school management.

From my experience in Wende School, I learned that paradigm shift starts with change of the mind, and the foremost mind to change is that of the top management, in high schools in China the principal. The best way to gain support for an idea is to let people see the vision of this idea in real.

In September 2011 when we began the preparation for the new library, the school did not realize the importance of the library, and just casually assigned two idlers to do the preparatory work. As a result, many basic services did not start well. May 2012, EEF organized a Taiwan library tour for a group of selected teachers and librarians from partner schools. I was selected due to my past small project performance. EEF and I also coincided with each other on inviting my principal to join at the school's own expense. This tour turned out to be an eye-opener for us by showing us the library concept and the rich, open, and humanized services of the secondary school libraries, university libraries, and community libraries. My principal realized the importance of the school library for the overall development of the school, and decided to partner with EEF. This is a critical turning point.

- 2) Team building, environment building and service development shall proceed concurrently in order to strengthen the support from the school management by the library's performance.

Team Building

More often than not, the library staff consists of people who joined the library in order to get ready for retirement. How to motivate them and build their capacity is an imminent problem. My approach is: 1) taking the opportunity of the New Curriculum Reform to input ideas. For

example, since the new curriculum emphasizes independent learning, inquiry-based learning, and collaborative learning, we proposed the library as an important venue for the new learning method. In turn to serve this new need, we proposed the concepts of "Reader first, service first" and "Proactive service instead of passively waiting for the readers". 2) striving for support from the school polices, such as quantifying work load and raising wages, in order to inspire a sense of accomplishment in librarians ; 3) providing a variety of learning opportunities for librarians, such as a) organizing study group which collects and studies domestic or international information on school library management; b) creating a blog and a QQ (an online messaging tool) group to connect the librarians, teachers and volunteers, to facilitate the exchange of advanced library management, educational philosophy and methods; c) seizing opportunities to send the librarians and teachers out for training broaden their horizons and improve their skills. For example, in April 2012, recommended by EEF, my school sent several teachers to participate in a reading training in Dafang County, Guizhou Province held by Smiling Library, an NGO based in Shanghai. These teachers submitted a proposal of classroom book corner which was implemented in 2013. 4) Assigning work wisely. Use people's strength in order to give them confidence and turn the past inertia into a passion to show their talents. For example , Teacher Liu Chunxuan specializes in compute operation so he is responsible for the operation of library management software; Teacher Mei Long (another Mei Long in our library) is good at communicating with students so she is in charge of managing the book corners; Teacher Xiufen Yang is meticulous and patient, so she is responsible for book classification, display and other routine work .

Volunteer building is also an important part of team building. After we provided open-shelf access, we were short of hands. So we recruited many student volunteers for helping out. At the beginning of each semester we recruit volunteers from K10 students, train and examine them, select qualified ones to formally appoint. We also exchange with the volunteers and share our knowledge and experience through the blog and QQ group. For the student volunteers, they gain from this working experience more than the librarianship skills. One volunteer described what he gained in his final report, "... Some people say volunteering is a waste of time, but I do not think so ... here I know which books are most popular.... I also developed my communication and teamwork ability. From being clueless initially to getting into my stride now, I have harvested the ability of doing real work in the society as well as more reading... I love reading, and love this job... ". Each semester we have more than 120 student volunteers taking shifts from Monday to Sunday, to meet the peak demand of around 1500 circulation requests during the one and half hours of extracurricular activity time.

Environment Building

During the visit of the library of Sun Yat-sen High School for Girls, the Jianguo High School library, the Private Xingrong Library & Xiulan Cultural Center in Taiwan, what impressed us most was that proactive service mentality of these libraries, the humanized environment in every detail, and the open and equal access of library resources. Thus I think, we may not have the money to build a website, but we can create a blog; we cannot offer online reservation, but we can provide notification by e-mail and text messaging; we do not have luxurious tables and chairs, but we can make simple environment clean and cozy; we do not have a big number of books, but we can help each book find its readers ... All these are entirely feasible. After we merged the book-storing room and the reading room to provide open-shelf access, some students said, "Now I can read by the shelves and feel like swimming in a sea of books. It is so much different than before". After the blog and the e-mail and text messaging service were rolled out, the teachers and students commented, "Now it is much more convenient to borrow books. It saved us a lot of time, and we can now borrow books at home". After we extended our circulation service to parents and community residents,

they told us, "The school library is now open to us. It never happened before. The collection and service of the school library is better than the public library, and it is more convenient." Parents also said, "We come to the school library to borrow books, and visit our kids by the way. We in effect also teach our kids by example this way. It is a good thing. "We realize that as long as we put readers first and try our best to satisfy their needs, the future of the library is full of hope.

Service Development

Collection Development – We purchase books based on suggestions and feedbacks from our teachers and students. Since 2013, the school has allocated 100,000 Yuan annually to purchase books, and the book list has been jointly decided by the teachers and students. In the first week of the Spring semester, 2014, with new books coming into the library, in order to borrow a new book right after it arrived, some teachers and students often paid a visit to the library or called to check, which never happened before. So good books that meet the needs of the teachers and students are the basis to attract more readers to the library. Meanwhile, books purchased by EEF small projects in our school also continue enriching thematic collections.

Recommended reading and reading promotion - 1) We regularly recommend reading lists on selected subjects. We take into consideration the needs of subject education, the needs of student clubs, suggestions from the parents, book rating list by the students, themes of school reading festivals, themes of the World Reading Day, etc. 2) We carry out academic reading program. To understand the utilization of the library, we conducted a survey of teachers and students. Our survey found that over 60% of the students do not know much about the school library. Nearly 30% of the students paid less than two visits to the library each semester. 15% of the students have not been to the library at all. As for the teachers, 50% of the teachers visited the library one to two times each semester. Over 40% of the teachers have not been to the library. The reasons given by the teachers and students were: 1) Searching information on the Internet is more efficient; 2) They are overwhelmed by teaching and study and lack the spare time to go to the library; 3) There is a stereotype about our library. Some teachers and students have not been to the new library, but they assume that the books were out of date and prefer visiting the bookstore. To address these issues, in 2013, we launched the academic reading program, having the subject teachers to request or recommend reading lists based on their teaching needs so that the students can understand the role the library plays in their learning. For example, a history teacher asked his students to read the "Global History ", "The Rise of Great Nations", "The Collapse of the Heavenly Kindom" and other books often referred to by the document-based questions in the college entrance exam, then conduct reading exchanges.

Inquiry-based learning – In the past three years, librarians and teachers in our school did a number of EEF small projects, on local cultural study such as "Tianzhu County Ancestral Temple Cultural Studies", "Southeast Guizhou Folk House Cultural Studies", "Oral History on Tin Embroidery", "Collecting Dong Ethnicity Folk Tale in Southeast Guizhou", on natural sciences such as "Plant Identification and Description Plaque Making". Through these projects our teachers, librarians and students saw the role of the inquiry-based learning in enhancing students' research ability, teamwork, communication skills, and IT skills. These practices also allowed teachers and librarians to accumulate experience in cognitive education, and nurtured the ever- extending collaboration between teachers and librarians.

Our library team proved the role of the library in teaching and learning via ever-increasing circulation rate, number of library visits, and outcomes of small projects, achieved by our

actions. The vice principal who oversees the library also changed from passively listening to the briefs, to actively asking what he can further do to help - - This shift enabled further development of the library. Therefore, once the development of the library is on track, the team building, environment building and the service development need to steadily advance together, to strengthen the support of the school management via the library's performance.

4. Leveraging Policies and External Entities

Though Wende High School and Kaili No. 1 High School had different fates depending on whether they had won the recognition from the school management timely, both had rapid development within a few years. Although this development is inseparable from teachers' and librarians' own needs and efforts, the stimulus from external NGO and policies is an important catalyst. The inputs from NGO in ideas and funding, combined with the competitive demands of the school under local and national education policy, promote the development of the library.

Several big opportunities seized by Wende High School Library are: 1) In 2006 with funding from the Evergreen Education Foundation, it realized automated library management; 2) In 2009 along with the New Curriculum Reform in Guizhou province, it guided teachers to develop school-based curriculum leveraging EEF small projects, thus enabling further development of the library; 3) In 2010 the results of the small projects were used for National Youth Science Competition and School-based Curriculum Contest. The honors and awards won by the students and teachers, together with the policies such as the winning students of National Youth Science Competition can get bonus points in college entrance exam, and the winning teachers of this competition can get bonus points in professional title appraisal, further mobilize students and teachers.

Owing to several opportunities seized, Kaili No. 1 High School Library has become a local model library in recent years. 1) To compete for the title of provincial model high school, the school secured the funding and support to build a new campus including a new library building. Together with the idea of "Scholarly Campus" as characteristic education, the library not only had its overall facility and hardware greatly improved, but also became the core of characteristic education, with support from all departments of the school; 2) The New Curriculum Reform at the national level, and the resulting library developmental policies at the local level, both improved the status of the library in secondary education; 3) The library leveraged external NGOs such as EEF, including the EEF small project platform for service experiments and EEF conferences and workshops for capacity building. Till this day, the number of full-time librarians in the library has grown from the initial one to three people in 2013 to five in 2014, and the school was committed to building a dedicated training room and network information classroom in 2014. This series of changes gradually pave the way for the library to becoming an information and cultural center for teachers and students.

5. Trial and Error – The Key is to Start Action

High school libraries in remote areas are still in the early stages of development. They are facing great challenges in changing attitudes, gaining policy support, getting funding and full-time staff quota. Only with an open school environment, visionary school leaders, and real efforts of librarians to accumulate experience, can the libraries gradually develop. Encouraged by the idea of EEF small projects "failure is ok, as long as lessons can be learned", we keep advancing by trial and error. These trials and errors can be at a micro scale, such as various management and service design details, and at a macro scale, such as strategic lessons learned and put into use later. For instance, in developing Kaili No. 1 High

School Library, we were able to avoid the strategic pitfalls in which Wende High School Library was caught, by winning over the principal in the first place, and concurrent building of library staff and library environment.

6. Conclusions

In the digital age and the Internet era, how can a high school library in the remote West China burdened with the examination-oriented education grasp the opportunity of the new round of educational reform and build the school library as a strong facilitator of cognitive education and an information center for teachers and students, to meet the emerging educational demand? Such a question is worth thinking over and revisiting during the development of school library. Looking back upon my experience with Wende High School and Kaili No. 1 High School in Guizhou province, I derived the following key success factors: 1) Advanced ideas and intellectual inputs from the external entity/NGO, the cultivation of seed teachers (pioneers) at schools, and winning over top management of the school from early on; 2) Concurrent building of library staff, library environment, and library service, 3) Experiments of library cognitive education service via inquiry-based learning projects, as well as nurturing the collaboration of teachers and librarians for long-term development; 4) Leveraging policies and external entities (e.g. NGO) 5) Continuous trial and error with the key being to start action.

We can see that a school library in an underdeveloped area can only survive and grow by seizing opportunities provided by policies, at the same time introducing advanced management and service concepts, and carrying out activities to meet the actual needs of teachers and students, in a word, take the initiative, start action, and constantly accumulate experience via practice. I hope the analysis in this paper can serve as a reference for high school libraries in remote areas of western China to find a path towards excellence leveraging the tide of New Curriculum Reform.

7. References

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Biographical note

Mei Long has been the Director of the Kaili No. 1 High School Library since 2012. After graduating from the History Department, Guizhou Institute of Ethnic Minorities, she became a history teacher in 1992. From 2008 to 2011 she served as Vice Principal in Wende High School, Zhenyuan County, Guizhou.

She has been participating in the Evergreen library program since 2006 when she led the library automation of Wende High School. She was also the main investigator of several Evergreen small projects in Wende High School and Kaili No.1 High School.