

Combined school/public libraries in Israel at the elementary school level: some results of an exploratory field study

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A B S T R A C T

The issue of combined school-public libraries has long concerned researchers and practitioners in the field and is well documented in literature. A literature survey reveals dozens of opinion articles as well as research papers reporting empirical field studies, especially in the US, Canada, UK, Australia and Germany, which attempt to determine the advantages and disadvantages of this model, and possible factors associated with its success in practice. Despite the importance of the topic and its potential of budget savings and greater efficiency in use of resources, except for very limited treatment in a few seminar papers, no large-scale empirical study of the extent and performance of combined school-public libraries in Israel has been conducted.

The study aimed to empirically investigate the combined school-public libraries existing at the **elementary** school level in Israel, compared to regular school libraries. The main research tools were three different written closed questionnaires sent to the school librarian, school principal and one of the school teachers. In 1996 questionnaires were mailed to all 130 elementary schools which, according to official government records, had some type of combination libraries. Questionnaires were also mailed to 33 randomly-chosen schools, having a 'regular' (i.e. not combined) library, to serve as a control group. Response rate was about 55% and the final sample included 86 libraries.

Main findings: The number of combined libraries has risen constantly over the decades, an interesting trend, especially in view of the recent decline reported in the US and Canada. However, it is likely that the trend has already peaked and the accelerated growth of the 1980's will not recur. Regarding space, seats and collection size, the situation in the main regional combined libraries (typical to rural areas), excluding branches, was much better than in the urban ones, whether combined or not. It is uncertain, however, whether the full potential of these larger dimensions was actually utilized and to what extent elementary school students truly benefited from them. The advantage of the combined libraries is

manifested also in the professional searching tools offered to users, but the mean number of users of the reading-room was about the same in most types of libraries for the morning period, but differed considerably in the afternoons.

Regarding an overall evaluation: more than half the librarians of the combined libraries rated them as 'very successful' and recommended the model to other schools, while the rest (47%) rated it as only 'partially successful' or expressed dissatisfaction due to serious problems, and would recommend it 'with reservation' (36%) or not at all (11%).

Findings indicated that the combined model is more likely to succeed in a regional library than in an urban one, and that in most indicators it rates high above the regular libraries included in the control group. However, the relatively high proportion of librarians and principals who avoided rating their combined model as 'very successful' calls for further and more detailed investigation of the reasons to this finding.

Introduction

The issue of combined school-public libraries has long concerned researchers and practitioners in the field and is well documented in literature. A literature survey reveals dozens of opinion articles as well as research papers reporting empirical field studies, especially in the US, Canada, UK, Australia and Germany, which attempt to determine the advantages and disadvantages of this model, and possible factors associated with its success in practice.

Literature review

Summarizing the literature from the 1940's, and enumerating the many reasons against the combined model, White (1963) concluded that most writers opposed the combined model, which did not solve the problem of duplicated collections. A follow-up study by Unger (1975) revealed that 25 of the combined libraries eventually separated, while others reported worse service to adults. Haycock (1973) pointed out some major considerations in the planning of a combined library, but preferred cooperation between both types of libraries than combining them into one unit, since the differences in their goals have important implications on location, organization, management and daily operation. In a recent article Haycock (1990) claims that the combined model has tremendous potential, which can be achieved only by a combination of careful planning, prudent selection of location and staff, a clear program and constant process of evaluation. The combined library should be an active center in the heart of the school, easily accessible to the public; otherwise it is a waste of resources. Practical experience indicates that successful combined libraries do provide better service, but rarely save on operation costs. Aaron and Smith (1977) recommended that communities with limited resources not adopt the combined model, unless it enables getting larger resources and hiring professional staff.

Woolard (1980) concluded that the combined model better suits small communities with populations of 5000 to 10000, while Aaron and Smith (1977) failed to find clear evidence of saved resources in the seven combined North American libraries they studied. The Canadian and Australian field experience was discussed in a collection of papers edited by Amey (1987) who presented in 1994 the strategy of Cooperative Program Planning and Teaching (CPPT) which considers the teacher and the librarian as partners in the

cooperative project of planning, teaching and evaluating lessons taught in the class or in the library, aiming at developing information skills so needed in the current 'Information Era'. Such a library, becoming a 'learning zone' in the educational program of the school, is entirely different from the old conventional library that was remote from the school activity. Documenting the development of combined libraries in Australia, Amey focused on processes of planning and evaluation, and concluded that this model succeeded in South-Australia, providing a suitable response to the unique features and problems of that area. Later, the whole issue was again discussed at length by Aaron (1993) who reviewed about 50 articles on the topic.

Proponents of the combined model usually mention its following advantages (Kinsey and Honig-Bear 1994: 37): considerable savings in buildings, equipment, manpower, collections and services, longer opening hours, professional staff, wider accessibility to information, and providing library services to small communities lacking the financial resources needed for establishing their own public library.

Opponents raise the difficulties of responding to adults and students at the same place and time: reluctance of staff members, reluctance of adults to use a school-located library, differences concerning location preferences, and censorship on materials considered unsuitable for school children.

Despite the importance of the topic and its potential of budget savings and greater efficiency in use of resources, except for very limited treatment in a few seminar papers, no large-scale empirical study of the extent and performance of combined school-public libraries in Israel has been conducted.

Purpose of the study

The study aimed to empirically investigate the combined school-public libraries existing at the **elementary school level** in Israel, or more specifically:

To establish the scope of this phenomenon.

To discover the specific problems faced by these libraries.

To determine the unique features distinguishing them from other elementary school libraries.

To determine the level of service they provide users, compared to regular elementary school libraries.

Methodology

The main research tools were three different written closed questionnaires sent to the school librarian, school principal and one of the school teachers. The librarian's questionnaire was the most detailed one, asking about various aspects of the library's daily operation, while the other two questionnaires were much shorter, focusing mainly on the school's contribution to the library, its use and its success, as viewed by principal and teacher. In 1996 questionnaires were mailed to all 130 elementary schools which, according to official government records, had some type of combination libraries. Questionnaires were also mailed to 33 randomly-chosen schools, having a 'regular' (i.e. not combined) library, to serve as a control group. Response rate was about 55% and the

final sample included 86 libraries: 42—combined, 30—public library branches (serving school only) and 14—'regular' ones. Some of the libraries were visited personally and in-depth interviews were conducted with librarians and principals, focusing mainly on advantages and disadvantages of the combined type and its typical problems.

Findings

From Table 1 it can be seen that over half of the combined libraries were located in schools belonging to regional councils, and another 21%—in local ones, thus totaling over 76% which are located in non-urban areas, i.e. rural sector. Most branches of the former ones did not adopt the combined model.

Table 1: Distribution of Libraries According to Type of Local Government (in %)

Geographical Location of School	Combined Libraries	Uncombined Branches	Control Group	Total
Regional Council	54.8	76.7	0	53.5
Local Council	21.4	3.3	14.3	14.0
Town or City	23.8	20.0	85.7	32.6
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
N	42	30	14	86

Generally speaking, this finding corroborates the trend in the literature which recommends the combined model mainly to rural areas or to remote suburbs. Close to one-quarter of the combined libraries were, however, located in urban areas.

Year of Establishment:

Only 71 libraries (83%) of the 86 included in the sample answered this question. Table 2 shows that the number of combined libraries has risen constantly over the decades: while only seven existed in 1969 (=19% of the 37 respondents), seven more (19%) were established in the 1970's, 17 more (46%)—during the 1980's, and six (16.2%) from 1990 on.

Table 2: Distribution of Libraries According to year of Establishment (in %)

Year of Establishment	Combined Libraries	Uncombined Branches	Control Group	Total
Before 1970	18.9	26.1	9.1	19.7
1970-1979	18.9	26.1	9.1	19.7
1980-1989	45.9	21.7	36.4	36.6
1990 on	16.2	26.1	45.4	23.9
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
N	37	23	11	71

This seems to be an interesting trend, especially in view of the recent decline reported in the US and Canada. However, even assuming that the current rate is maintained, and six more are established by the end of the decade, it is likely that the trend has already peaked and the accelerated growth of the 1980's will not recur. It is also noteworthy that 26 of the 37 libraries (70%) began as combined libraries, meaning that they were intended to function as combined libraries. Most others became combined one to six years after their establishment. Nine of 23 uncombined branches reported that they had begun as combined libraries, but later became a school-housed branch of a main regional or public library, serving only the school.

Interestingly, when asked why their library was a combined one, most librarians and principals did not respond, probably due to a simple lack of knowledge of this point. This finding revealed a weak link in the combined libraries studied, in view of the great emphasis put in the professional literature on the importance of the philosophical and conceptual commitment of all those involved, especially school principals, to the idea of 'combination'.

Location:

Table 3 presents the distribution of the sampled libraries according to their physical location in the school area or its vicinity. Professional literature puts a strong emphasis on the importance of choosing the right location for the combined library, a factor contributing significantly to its success. There is a consensus that the library should be located in a central place, easily accessible to school students and to the public.

Table 3: Physical Location of Libraries in the School Ground (in %)

Location of library	Combined Libraries	Uncombined Branches	Control Group	Total
School's Ground Floor	33.3	33.3	42.9	34.9
Other Floor	16.7	13.3	28.6	17.4
Air-Raid shelter	7.1	6.7	14.3	8.1
Separate Building on School Ground	26.2	40.0	0.0	26.7
Separate Building outside School Ground	9.5	0.0	0.0	4.6
Another	7.1	6.7	14.3	8.1
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
N	42	30	14	86

Table 3 figures show that only 26% of the combined libraries were located in separate buildings in the school ground, which is considered a preferable location for the combined model. One-third of them were located on the school's first floor, a second-best location, less convenient for the general public, and about 10% were located outside the school area, which is less convenient for the school students. Most libraries in the control group were located on the first (43%) or other floor (29%), or in air-raid shelters (14%), always within the school building, while a considerable proportion of the uncombined branches (40%) were located in separate buildings in the school area, probably since they started as a combined library.

Space: It is widely agreed that a combined library requires much more space for its daily operation. Aaron (1978: 51) found that libraries conducting successful programs occupied much more space than those with less successful programs, and a similar statement was repeated by Haycock (1990: 34). The official 1988 new Israeli standards, which allocated only 20 m² for a 12 grade (and more) elementary school worsened the situation, since the minimum recommended in 1989 by the Department of Libraries was 150 m².

Table 4 shows that regarding space, the regional combined main libraries (typical to rural areas), excluding branches, were much better off than the urban ones, combined or not: while the mean area of the former was above 300 m² (twice the recommended standard) the mean for the latter group was between 100 and 130 m² (below the minimal recommended standard of 150² for a 12 grade school), with the control group mean being the lowest, 98 m².

Table 4: Actual Space of Libraries Compared to Recommended Standard

Library Type	N	Average Library Space (in m ²)	Recom- mended Space (in m ²)	% of Deviation from Recomm.	No. and % of Libraries Exceeding Recomm. Standard	
					no.	%
Combined Regional	14	309.3	150	106.2	12	85.7
Combined Regional Branch	9	127.1	150	-15.3	4	44.4
Combined Public	8	129.3	150	-13.8	2	25.0
Combined Public Branch	11	117.5	150	-21.7	4	36.4
Uncombined Branches	30	104.2	150	-30.5	4	13.3
Control Group	14	97.9	150	-34.7	3	21.4

From the entire group of combined libraries, more than half (22 of 42) exceeded the recommended standard of 150 m². Leaving aside the combined regional libraries, the proportion drops to only 36% (10 of 28), which is still much higher than that revealed among the uncombined branches (13%) and the control group (21%). Thus, although most combined libraries (except the regional ones) are below the recommended standard, it seems that in the absence of an official mandatory standard, the space of the combined libraries is nevertheless a great achievement for the elementary schools in which they are located, especially when compared to other types studied.

Similarly, the regional libraries had on the average more **seats** than the urban ones or the control group: 50 to 67 percent of the combined regional libraries had a number of seats equal to, or over, the recommended minimal standard (10% of school population) vs. 30% or less in the other groups: the control group, the uncombined regional branches and the combined public library branches.

Concerning **opening hours**, most types of combined libraries were open longer than the control group libraries (30 to 40 vs. 21 hours per week). In the mean number of opening days per week, however, no significant difference was found between the various groups, meaning that those libraries which were open less weekly hours were probably open less hours daily. Half the control group and similar proportion of most combined ones were open six days a week, and the vast majority were open three days or more. The combined libraries had a significant advantage over the control group as far as school vacations were concerned: 93% of the former were open during vacations vs. 14% of the latter group.

Collection:

Table 5 shows that, except for the control group, in other types of libraries book collection size exceeded the recommended standard of 10 books per student. The regional combined libraries topped the list, with 3.6 to 4.7 ratio of actual average to recommended, followed by combined public ones (2.55 to 1.56). In the uncombined branches the ratio dropped to only 1.32, but still above the standard, while in the control group it was the lowest, only 7.9 books per student, instead of the recommended 10.

Table 5: Average Number of Books per Student in Various Types of Libraries

Library Type	N	Average No. of Students per School	Average No. of Books per Library	Actual No. of Books per Student	Recomm. No. of Books per Student	Ratio of Actual No. to Recomm.
Combined Regional	14	611	28959	47.4	10	4.74
Combined Regional Branch	9	294	10667	36.3	10	3.63
Combined Public	8	444	11315	25.5	10	2.55
Combined Public Branch	11	459	7148	15.6	10	1.56
Uncombined Branches	30	417	5505	13.2	10	1.32
Control Group	14	511	4033	7.9	10	0.79

In other words, the combined libraries had much higher means of books per library, books per student and periodicals per library than the non-combined branches and the control group. The book per student ratio, for example, was 25 to 47 in most types of the former, but 8 to 13 only in the latter, while the minimal standard was 10. Obviously, the combined libraries have a big advantage over other types studied, concerning collection size, and offer students a much larger collection than the regular school library.

It is uncertain, however, whether the full potential of these larger collections was actually utilized and to what extent elementary school students truly benefited from them, or were they perhaps 'frightened' and overwhelmed by the huge collection?! Moreover, since more than 60% of the combined libraries limited circulation only to 'members' (who paid annual fees), it is doubtful whether their large collections were being used by their school students up to their full potential. Figures concerning actual circulation fluctuated between 3 to 5 books during two months and did not reveal any clear advantage of the combined libraries.

Concerning pedagogical material, 29% only of the combined libraries reported they held in the library, vs. 73% of the uncombined branches and 50% of the control group. Similarly, regarding audiovisual material, 36% only of the combined ones reported holding it in the library, vs. 70% of the uncombined branches and 43% of the control group. Holding both (pedagogical and audiovisual material) were 14% only of the combined ones, vs. 57% of the uncombined branches and 29% of the control group. Part of the explanation is that many of the school principals having a combined library prefer holding these types of materials in some other place in the school, rather than in the library, due to lack of space, lack of skilled professional staff and accessibility considerations. It is also noteworthy that between 17 to 19 percent of the combined libraries reported having no such materials at all, as compared to 3%-7% only among the other two groups. The overall picture is, however, that 14% only of the combined libraries can be considered real media centers.

An advantage of the combined libraries is manifested in the **professional searching tools** offered to users: all but one had a catalog (mostly Dewey classified) vs. 63% of the non-combined and 43% of the control group. Likewise, in about 70% of the combined the catalog was computerized, and in 43% the circulation too, while for the non-combined the corresponding figures were 43% and 30%, and among the control group only 14% (!) had computerized catalog and circulation.

Interestingly, regarding librarians' education it was found that those in the control group had better education compared to other groups. All of them had academic education, and 31% had it in librarianship, while more than half had no library education. In other groups the percentage of librarians with academic education was lower, as well as the percentage of those having library education, not to mention an academic one.

Library use and activity:

The mean number of users of the reading-room was about the same (between 65 and 88) in most types of libraries for the morning period, but differed considerably in the afternoons: 20 to 30 students daily in most combined libraries, vs. 40-46 in the non-combined branches and only eight in the control group.

Overall evaluation:

More than half the librarians of the combined libraries rated them as 'very successful' and recommended the model to other schools, while the rest (47%) rated it as only 'partially successful' or expressed dissatisfaction due to serious problems, and would recommend it 'with reservation' (36%) or not at all (11%). However, adding the eight librarians who declined to answer this question to those who expressed dissatisfaction, raises the proportion to 57% vs. only 43% who considered the model 'very successful'.

A similar pattern was revealed among the school principals questioned, but it should be noted that about one-third of the principals declined to answer this question, a possible indication of dissatisfaction or simply of lack of close knowledge on their part. Most other principals in the combined model group would not prefer a separate school library, and about 40% expressed a high degree of satisfaction, and 60%—'fair degree of satisfaction, while among the control group the corresponding figures were 9% and 91%.

Conclusions

1. Most combined libraries in Israel use resources which are intended for the local public library, and there is no amalgamation of resources. Since, however, elementary schools in Israel usually lack funds for a library and do not have official openings for librarians, the combined library solution may be considered the 'less of two evils'.
2. Findings indicate that the combined model is more likely to succeed in a regional library than in an urban one, and that in most parameters it rates high above the regular libraries included in the control group: professional management, large collections, space, and opening time, especially on school vacations.
3. The drawbacks of the combined model in Israel seem to be: charging money for borrowing (in some libraries), limitations on free use of the library, procedures not adjusted to school needs, lack of coordination between librarians and school staff, and little practical application of the library-media center philosophy.
4. The relatively high proportion of librarians and principals who avoided rating their combined model as 'very successful' calls for further and more detailed investigation of the reasons to this finding.

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