A Research Agenda for Enhancing Teacher Librarians’ Roles and Practice in Hong Kong’s 21st Century Learning Environments

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In many countries, especially countries in Asia, there has always been a lack of understanding on the role of the teacher librarians. Through the results of interviews with two professionally recognized teacher librarians in Hong Kong, we define some enhancing roles and best practices of teacher librarians in the Asia that merit further exploration. Because previous empirical studies have been small and quantitative, this qualitative study highlights key topics in a proposed research agenda that focuses on current and emerging issues of teacher librarianship in the digital age.

Introduction

Professional practices among teacher librarians in Asia, Hong Kong in particular, have been little studied. Unfortunately, in many countries, especially in Asia, there has always been a lack of understanding on the parts of classroom teachers and school administration about the role of the teacher librarians in the public education system (Nakamura, 2000; Cheng, 2012). According to Lo, et al. (2014a, p. 51), “Teacher librarians are not only managers of the school libraries, they are also educators, administrators, teaching consultants, information specialists, and information literacy teachers.” To make the matter worse, many novice teacher librarians do not have a clear understanding of the potential contributions of the school library programmes to students’ overall development process and their academic achievements, as well as their contributions to students’ overall enquiry-based learning as a whole (Lo et al., 2014b). Here, we present a qualitative study that reports, in depth, professional practices and changing roles amongst teacher librarians in Hong Kong. Based on the findings of this study, we further discuss our agenda of research on the emerging research and development issues on the enhancing roles of teacher librarians under the current digital age.

*Aims of Study & Research Questions*

According to Chan (2008), “good library programmes are linked to high academic achievement in students” (p. 15). Unfortunately, ignorance of the teacher librarian profession appears to be universal, and major problems identified included a lack of resources, a lack of time, a lack of certified programmes and training opportunities, lack of recognitions towards teacher librarians’ qualifications, and lack of understanding and support amongst principals and other classroom teachers (Lo, et al., 2014b). As such, this study was set out to answer the following research questions:
1. What are the emerging new roles of the teacher librarians under the new digital era?
2. What are the nature and scope of new changes in the practices among the teacher librarians through the cases in Hong Kong?
3. What are some key professional knowledge, skills, as well as characters traits needed for the teacher librarians to perform their new roles effectively?

**Literature Review**

During the past decades, public education has been the site of major shifts in which a traditional rote learning, teacher-centred paradigm has been replaced by enquiry-based learning. In order to achieve more interactive and enquiry-based learning, students first need to become proficient in information literacy (IL), so that they are able to actively search for information and construct knowledge (Harada & Yoshina, 2004; Kuhlthau, Maniotes, & Caspari, 2007; Hepworth & Walton, 2009). Asselin (2005) stated that due to the growing number of printed and digital resources available, and the expectations that student learning outcomes needed to reflect the use of information to acquire knowledge, teacher librarians should take a proactive role in helping teachers in the selection and strategic use of a wide range of teaching and learning resources. Asselin's study (2005) revealed that teacher librarians could make unique contributions in preparing students to take part in the global networked environment via information literacy (IL) programmes carried out in schools. Asselin saw teacher-librarians as leaders in new learning environments, in which information and communication technology (ICT) skills are necessary for independent learning and problem solving in the quickly evolving digital environment.

Although Kuhlthau (1995) predicted that there would be an increased integration of information skills in the curriculum. Lupton (1995) reported that ICT would be a big challenge to teacher librarians, because ICT has expanded and evolved so much that many of teacher librarians would lack the technology skills to fully tackle its implementation. Several years later, Miller (2005), in a published literature synthesis, concluded that the role of teacher librarians was constantly changing, partly due to the influence of ICT developments. Miller advised teacher librarians to remain aware of their new roles as ICT teachers, and that this role should be performed in collaboration with other classroom teachers, in order to effectively incorporate IL skills instruction into the curriculum.

Cheng (2012) examined how teachers, students and school administrators perceived the roles and functions of the teacher librarians in local schools of Hong Kong. Cheng's study showed that participants still primarily connected teacher librarians, and school library services with printed books and reading, and very rarely perceived them in contemporary roles. Cheng suggests such as those of information specialists, IL teachers, and curriculum facilitators, etc. These outmoded views can often prevent teacher librarians' roles and services from being easily seen as contributing to students’ overall learning experiences. Leung (2007) conducted an action research on implementing IL in collaboration with a school vice-principal, a primary one General Studies teacher, and the teacher librarian at a primary school in Hong Kong; Leung’s study concluded that positive student feedback encouraged the teaching team to try collaborating on more topics with the same class. Chu’s (2009) action research examined the benefits of enquiry-based learning in teaching and learning in primary schools, in which IL teaching was one of the major teaching components. Chu found that the two key factors led to the effective embedding of IL in enquiry-based learning are the support of the school principal, and collaboration between subject area teachers and the teacher librarians. All these studies carried out in Hong Kong, concluded that teacher librarians are in a position to provide a valuable input to teaching and learning, but that supports from both the school administration and subject teachers are definitely needed to the effectively realize of student learning potentials.
Nakamura (2000) conducted a survey to compare teachers’ perceptions towards school libraries in Ohta-ku, Tokyo, and Honolulu, Hawaii. The survey results suggested that the major factors limiting the developments of school libraries in Japan were the lack of official legislations and policies regulating the position, and roles of school libraries in teaching and learning; a lack of supports from the subject teachers; and traditional perceptions of teacher librarians’ roles relative to teaching and learning. Kasai (2006) explored the professional practices of teacher librarians in Japan, and found that they only provided basic services such as the preparation of books for classes or interlibrary loans for teachers. Kasai also found that team teaching involving teacher librarians, and subject area teachers was not a common practice in schools in Japan.

In Taiwan, Yang and Chen (2007) investigated teacher librarians’ support services were in the form of coordination or cooperation with teachers. However, according to Montiel-Overall’s (2008) collaboration taxonomy, very few senior high school libraries could provide collaboration-oriented services. Yang and Chen (2007) reported that a shortage of professional staff, budget, and facilities, along with misperceptions of teacher librarians’ responsibilities caused difficulties in teachers and students, etc. In spite of the perceived difficulties, there are evidence that teacher librarians in Taiwan work well together with teachers, and manage to support teaching and learning of the whole school community to a certain level (Yang & Chen, 2007; Lo et al., 2014a; Lo et al., 2014b). Han’s (2006) policy analysis described Korean government initiatives for enhancing the development of the public school library system, including a 5-year (2003-2007) master plan to modernize school libraries by hiring professional teacher librarians; promoting the use of libraries in the regular classrooms; and integrating school libraries into the overall school curriculum. Han concluded that this policy reflected the study findings that have shown that subject teachers and principals can act as key influencers on teacher librarians’ effective performance.

In summary, studies conducted throughout the East Asia provide a mixed view of teacher librarians’ abilities to attain enhanced and changing roles in the digital age. This study is an effort to gain a more in-depth view of teacher librarians’ practice, and their movement towards closer collaboration around digital learning.

**Method**

This study was intended to be exploratory and to reveal a different, richer type of data, in particular new requirements and issues, than which a questionnaire survey could not provide. Therefore, a qualitative, ethnographic approach to data collection and analysis was important. Through the use of qualitative research interviews this paper presents an insight into a very small, but significant group of practicing secondary teacher librarians in Hong Kong. It was felt that a qualitative, ethnographic approach to data collection and analysis was important. A major strength of face-to-face interviews lies in the fact that they allow ‘unexpected’ responses, as well as discourses to emerge. In addition to allowing the participants to articulate the answers based on their own understandings of the researchers’ questions, such natural and free conversational interviews also enabled maximum flexibility for more open, spontaneous, and instant exchanges of ideas without any preconceived expectations on our side. More importantly, we could use a series of follow-up questions to clarify their answers, as well as to verify immediately the participants’ responses and our understandings. The goal was not always the technical explanations behind specific tasks or operations, but the immediate and direct experiences of the individuals - illustrating the underlying reasons for their actions and decisions. As Rossman and Rallis pointed out, the interview approach not only provides opportunities for open discussions where both the participants and researcher could “construct meaning” together, but it is also “essential for the understanding of how participants view their world.” (1997, p. 124). In order to observe the ethical issues associated with research interviews, after the interviews had been transcribed, all the
transcripts and the “Afterthoughts” were sent to the interviewees for their review, corrections and approval.

Research Setting and Participants

This study focused on two practicing teacher librarians in Hong Kong, who are well-known in the local professional community for a variety of educational, as well as recreational programmes created out by them – this was essential to the study, as much of the data collected would reflect their professional experiences, and also their perceptions towards the learning environment which has undergone major changes in the past decade. Both participating teacher librarians had over ten years of experience as school and public librarians. One librarian was from School A, a government-subsidized school with Chinese as the main language of instruction. The other participant was from School B, a high-ranking secondary school operating under the Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) of the Hong Kong Government together with rich funding, gifted staff, and bountiful resources. The Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) is instituted by the Education Bureau of Hong Kong, with the aim of providing subsidies to enhance the overall quality of private school education in Hong Kong at both elementary and secondary levels. Under this Scheme, schools are free to decide on their curriculum, fees and entrance requirements.

Despite much difference in the background of these two schools, both librarians are well-known for their expertise and efforts in the local school library community for creating unique library programmes, that could serve as models for enhancing students’ academic achievements, as well as meeting the needs of the rapidly changing school environment in the digital era.

Data Collection

As the Appendix reflects, we used approximately 10 interview questions. These questions dealt with the participants’ own professional competencies, specialized areas/skills, workload, areas of responsibilities, as well as other successful library- and non-library-related learning / creational initiatives created by the two interviewees. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews, each of approximately 45 to 60 minutes in length, were the data-gathering techniques employed in this study. Emails were written to the respective teacher librarians for seeking permission for conducting the interviews at their schools, explaining the purpose of the study, outlining the approximate duration of the interviews, etc. Permissions were also sought for using a digital voice recorder to record the interview sessions, in order to facilitate transcribing the responses at a later stage.

Data Analysis

We analysed our findings according to the five roles of teacher librarians (Church, 2008), under the framework of teacher librarians’ roles offered by the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), namely teacher, instruction partner, information specialist, leader, and programme administrator:

1. As teachers, teacher librarians analyze learning and information needs of students, in order to locate and use resources to meet those needs. Typical activities include library classes and reading promotion.
2. As instructional partners, teacher librarians work closely with other teachers to identify and coordinate among the inter-relating student information needs, curriculum requirements, and various information resources, in order to improve the overall learning outcomes.
3. As information literacy (IL) specialists, teacher librarians provide expertise in acquiring and evaluating various information resources and bringing in awareness of information issues into collaborative relationship with teachers, administrator, and students. They also provide instructions and consultations for locating, accessing, and evaluating information.

4. As education/curriculum team leaders, teacher librarians facilitate the best practices of education and librarianship through their understanding of current trends and issues in education. They are often “change agents” that lead in library and school improvement activities. They share information, apply research results, and engage in action research.

5. As programme administrator, teacher librarians work collaboratively with all stakeholders to define policies to guide and direct all the activities related to the above-mentioned roles and duties, i.e., including all roles and duties carried out as a librarian, instructional partner, IL specialist, and education/curriculum team leader.

As phenomenological research, the researchers’ central task is to identify the common issues or themes in the experiences related by the participants (Neuman, 2009). The interview recordings were transcribed, and the relevant information was arranged in common themes according to the experiences and present situations of the participants, i.e., according to the five roles described by AASL (2009). Based on these interviews, our own related research, and previous research conducted about teacher librarians’ roles, we further discuss some key currently emerging research issues in school libraries in the Discussion section. Conclusions were then drawn accordingly.

**Results**

In this section, we report the analysis of the interviews that suggests areas for further investigation, categorized by the five roles of AASL. These areas are affirmed by our observations in the Hong Kong region.

**Teacher**

A traditional role of a teacher librarian is that of a teacher, especially in promoting reading and advocating reading skills. To enhance this teaching role, the teacher librarian must have initiatives to devise programme that are in step with the current environment to compete against other non-educational activities that would distract young students from reading. The Ethics Resource Center (2009) defined that initiative is the power or competence to start or to follow through enthusiastically with a plan, scheme or project. Initiative is an important point for investigating the roles of teacher librarian, because a lack or presence of professional initiative can affect the outcomes and impacts of the library programmes on students and other teaching staff. Both teacher-librarian participants conducted many library activities for their students. Teacher Librarian A took the students to a local bookstore with classroom teachers from other subjects, so that they could buy books for an activity called “Reading Passport”.

**Teacher Librarian A:** “I arranged for all Form 1 to Form 5 students to visit a mega bookstore in Hong Kong to select books for the school library. Many other subject teachers also took part in planning and organizing this event. Before this visit actually took place, I had to organize in-house training for the other teachers, teaching them how to avoid purchasing duplicate titles. The whole event was proven to be very successful and was fun, enjoyable and well-received amongst our teachers and students….For example, some of my colleagues enjoy building models. I then asked them recommend books on model building, in order to attract them to join the reading club. In addition, I have a friend who works for a comic bookstore. So I asked him to donate some comic books to our school library, for the purpose of attracting more students to come. If the students are willing
to spend more time on reading, I really don’t mind doing extra work for them or for the school library.”

**Instructional Partner**

The teacher librarian works with students and other members of the school to analyse learning and information needs; to locate and use resources that will meet those needs; and to help others understand the collected information and communicate with each other. As the *Information Power* guidelines stated, “effective collaboration with teachers helps to create a vibrant and engaged community of learners, strengthens the whole school programme as well as the library media programme, and develops support for the school library media programme throughout the whole school” (AASL & AECT, 1998, p. 51). Lankes (2012) also stated that the role of the teacher librarian as an instructional partner, and information specialist is essential to the school ecosystem and student learning as “understanding knowledge, how it works, how it is dynamic and relational, not static or hierarchical, changes how librarians facilitate learning and knowledge creation” (2012, p. 10). Kuhlthau, Maniotes and Caspari (2007) also pointed out that teacher librarians as instructional partners and leaders can facilitate this process through guided inquiry. “When teacher-librarians, as instructional partners, collaborate, co-teach, and plan robust inquiry units, this changes the culture of the school into a collaborative inquiry community” (Kuhlthau et al., 2012, p. xiii). Like other teachers, Teacher Librarian B attended meetings, but without the constraints of subject area preparation, was satisfied with the large amount of time she could spend on preparing the library classes. On the other hand, Teacher Librarian A also taught a Chinese Language class, which gave her the burden of balancing her work between classroom preparation and instruction and running the library. She pointed out that the time spent on teaching other classes could sometimes affect the quality of her library work.

**Teacher Librarian B:** “I liaise with the teachers of three main subject areas, Mathematics, English and Chinese. They will try to arrange for library lesson time. There are two classes catered for Form 4 students, and I teach them specific independent learning, and also [online information] searching skills; and I share these teaching duties with other English teachers, and the course is entitled, ILT (Independent Learning & Teaching).”

**Teacher Librarian B:** “[For the subject of] Liberal Studies, students are required to do extensive readings on their own [for essays]. In this context, the [school] library and the [teacher] librarian are playing an increasingly important role in the whole school community. In my case, I make an effort to let the school community know that I am always ready to help the other teachers with their subject/classroom teaching. This year, I have worked with different subject panels, and created subject-reading lists tailor-made for their teaching. The different subjects covered by the reading lists include: Chinese, English, Liberal Studies, Mathematics, Sports, Visual Arts, Humanities, History, Geography, etc. Other science subjects, such as Information Technology and Natural Sciences were also included in these reading lists. These reading lists were tailor-made mainly for the Form 1 to 3 students. In addition, I am also teaching reading strategies to the junior students, with the aim of inspiring them to become avid readers, i.e., teaching the students how to assess the plot and enjoy the story line…”

**Information Specialist**

As an information specialist, a key duty of teacher librarian is to bring awareness of information issues to teachers, administrators, students, and others. Information issues could be described as
the knowledge and skills on how to locating, accessing, understanding, evaluating, apply and share information within and beyond the school library. Information literacy (IL) refers to skills, processes and, as an approach to learning is increasingly important when it comes to students’ research work due to inquiry-based learning (Herring & Tarter, 2007). However, it is often up to the teacher librarians whether they are going to implement a strong IL component in the school’s programme.

Teacher admitted that reading promotion, not IL promotion, was the focus of School B’s library programme. She explained that IL was somehow a “technical” thing to her, which she believed the information technology (IT) teacher should be responsible for.

**Teacher Librarian B:** “This [teaching of IL skills] is definitely very important and is within my job descriptions. If I have to teach IL, I would usually put more emphasis on teaching the Form 1 students [ages 12 to 14]. But I do not hold classes [on IL skills] on a weekly basis. I only teach IL according to the requests issued by individual classroom teachers, or to support students to carry out their major school projects or assignments, etc.”

Teacher Librarian B focused more on the importance of IL. She believed that information retrieval skills are so important at the school level, because such skills could help students learn independently. Teacher Librarian B conducted regular library lessons for the higher forms students, so that they can find more appropriate information for their essays. As an IL specialist, she taught students strategies to help them locate, access, and evaluate information within and beyond the school library. Supported by other subject teachers, Teacher Librarian B provided either solo or co-taught library lessons on a regular basis.

**Teacher Librarian B:** “I have a very strong IT background. Before becoming a teacher librarian, I have spent over ten years working as a software engineer in different profit and non-profit organizations in both UK and Hong Kong. Because we understand that information searching and retrieval skills could help students become more self-reliant, in terms of both learning, as well as problem solving. Nowadays, the Internet is such a powerful, useful and convenient tool; at the same time, students feel so overwhelmed with information overload! Hence, they must learn to locate, evaluate, and use the needed information found on the Internet – and this is what IL is all about. A large part of my job is to encourage students to use IT tools for different project-based work, producing reports, multimedia presentations, etc. In fact, an important part of my duty as a teacher librarian is to provide training to all new teachers at the beginning of each academic year, and teach them how to use the online databases…”

**Leadership**

The leadership roles of teacher librarians are investigated from the perspectives of school environments, working conditions, and educational systems. Based on the nature of work performed and the initiatives taken by the teacher librarian participants, they were considered “change agents”, who were “being self-conscious about the nature of change and the change process” (Fullan, 1993, p.12) in their own schools. To support the learning and information needs of the school community as a whole, both Teacher Librarians A and B were well aware of guidelines and expectations from school management from the Hong Kong Education Bureau (EDB) and international educational foundations. Teacher Librarian A treated reading promotion as the first step to achieve the library missions and school visions. This is motivated from understanding principal’s expectation of creating an enjoyable reading environment and official guidelines about “reading to learn” from the EDB. Teacher Librarian A viewed herself as a
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School background and financial support may also influence teacher librarians’ role in nurturing the 21st century learners (AASL, 2007). According to the Standards for the 21st-Century Learner (2007), an programme guide for school libraries released by the AASL, learners in the 21st century should be taught to use skills, resources and tools to: (1) inquiry, think critically and gain knowledge; (2) draw conclusions, make informed decisions, apply knowledge to new situations, and create new knowledge; (3) share knowledge and participate ethically and productively as members of our democratic society; and (4) pursue personal and aesthetic growth. For example, as a teaching staff in an aided school with limited government funding, Teacher Librarian A was aware that having adequate financial resources was the key for providing quality library services for the school community as a whole. Therefore, she initiated several fund-raising events for a library extension project. Teacher Librarian A also thought that funding and the mode of instruction may have affected her School’s decision making on the development of the school library. This is because School A is a government-subsidized school, Teacher Librarian A therefore thought that she needed to be more proactive, and work extra hard in coordination with many different internal and external parties to fight for additional funding and resources for her school library.

**Teacher Librarian A:** “Recently, our library has undergone a major extension and renovation. In addition to negotiating with the architect and the contractor, I also took the initiatives of approaching many well-known corporations in Hong Kong to ask for donations. Luckily, I was able to raise $40 million [HKD] for this library extension project. There was so much extra [administrative] work involved. But being able to see our students enjoy spending their time in the library, all the extra hard work turned out to be most worthwhile.”

Teacher Librarian A noticed the recent trend of class reduction in selective schools in Hong Kong. Since class numbers had shrunk, Teacher Librarian A seized the opportunity to approach the principal about using an empty adjacent classroom to extend the size of the physical library. She further believed that good interior design and a comfortable environment would affect students’ perception as well as usage towards the school library. On the other hand, Teacher Librarian B devoted much of her staff time on training the student librarians and managing the school library’s daily operations.

In summary, the participants reported that teacher librarians’ leadership role was essential for bringing out these new and positive changes, especially those radical and innovative ones that are conducive for converting the students to become avid readers as well as keen independent learners.

**Programme Administrator**

As a programme administrator, the teacher librarian guides and directs all the activities related to the whole school library media programme. As mentioned before, teacher librarians are assumed to be proficient in the management of, staff, budgets, equipment, and facilities. Teacher Librarians A and B performed their roles as a programme administrator in drastically different ways. Teacher Librarian B mentioned that the school provided her a lot of freedom for planning over the activities and development of the school library. She had a library committee with which to discuss various development-related policy issues. Yet, the library committee met no more than three times a year. Therefore, for most of the time throughout the year, other decisions were actually made solely by Teacher Librarian B herself.
Teacher Librarian B: “I don’t have statistics to support my speculations. So I can only guess – I think it really depends on the school type. Our school is half-subsidized by the local Government, and half-subsidized by our church. And then of course it depends on the school culture as well, i.e., see how serious the principal regards the teacher librarian as an important position within the whole school, and how serious she views voluntary reading and self-independent learning as part of students’ education. Based on the resources and supports I received, and the amount of responsibilities I have to undertake, I am sure our principal takes me [the librarian position] very seriously, and I do welcome this decision, because that gives me a lot of time, resources as well as freedom to fully exercise my professional knowledge and skills to the best advantage for the overall success and welfare of the whole school.

Teacher Librarian B also stated that the school principal provided full support for the library, because the principal recognized the value of the library as the hub of the whole school. On the other hand, Teacher Librarian A was permitted to expand the library, and was in charge of the fundraising programme throughout the expansion project. The school library and the library extension project required a significant portion of the school’s budget, for which the principal is ultimately responsible. Teacher Librarian A stated that the principal understood that the library expansion could ultimately benefit the whole school at all levels; in Hartzell’s (2003, p. 1) words, “principals should support school libraries, because it is in both their students’ and their own interests to do so”.

Teacher Librarian A: “Our principal is very supportive and open-minded. When we first started re-designing and re-modelling our school library, I asked him how he wished the new library to be. His answer was very simple. He just wished the library to be more Starbucks-like, i.e., [a] popular social place amongst the students, where they could just spend time there to enjoy the space, regardless they are going there to read or just to hangout with friends….Whether the principal values the library depends entirely on how well you do your job. I always make an effort to let him know what activities and classes are being held at the library. I constantly remind the principal and the other teachers that the school library is the heart and soul of the whole school, as well as converting our library into a ‘showcase’ for our visitors.”

Teacher Librarian A: “When the library was about to expand, there was much administrative work to do. I had to ask for the price quotations, and to draft the tender forms as well. I went to interview 10 other teacher librarians, who had experiences in library renovation projects. They told me bluntly that it would be tough work. But I just couldn’t bear to see my library being lack of space and lack of resources. I hope the library would project a very different image to our students after the expansion. I wanted to give it a try, instead of doing nothing. Also, in the recent years, I have been attending courses on building self-confidence. As a librarian, with all the freedom given, I think we should try different things.”

The two teacher librarians both mentioned that the schools are very supportive for the library programmes. With the support by the principal and other staff of the school, the teacher librarians as programme administrators can therefore effectively plan, execute, and evaluate the programmes to ensure the library’s quality services and its relevance to the whole school community.

Discussion
Based on these interviews and the previous research conducted about teacher librarians’ roles, we would like to discuss some key emerging research issues in school libraries nowadays, according to AASL’s five roles.

**Investigations on Enhancing the Teacher Role**

The interviewees’ responses revealed that the initiatives of individual librarians affected their job performance. When teacher librarians showed initiatives towards the library programmes or their work, they would try to improve what they had already done, and came up with many innovative ideas for their students. Todd (2007) studied the relationship between teacher librarian initiatives and student learning outcomes, and results showed that it was beneficial for students when the teacher librarians have initiatives. Or, as Hamilton (2011, p. 40) stated, “I must be a lifelong learner myself, one who reflects regularly on the next steps for my students, for the content area teacher, and for myself.” When teacher librarians act as facilitators, they keep learning, improving themselves, and holding different library activities to benefit their students as well as colleagues. Those findings are helpful and significant to serve as direction to further investigate the roles of teacher librarians as a facilitator. It is because the answers bring the importance of taking initiatives among the school librarians. Action research can therefore be carried out accordingly.

However, even if the interviewees are experienced teacher librarians, they have been innovating and experimenting with their initiatives. This is because past successful experiences in other regions may or may not be directly applicable here and now, as the environment is ever-changing, and there are differences in school cultures and user expectations. Thus, the effectiveness and success factors of old and new initiatives need more systematic re-investigation under different cultural and environmental contexts.

**Investigation on Effective Instruction Partnership**

Over the past decade, teacher librarians’ roles have changed drastically, from helping students find resources for reading and projects, as well as teaching other library skills to enabling them to approach learning from a questioning or enquiry-based perspective. Today’s teacher librarians provide as much wider range of expertise and technical skills in accessing a network of resources, evaluating/selecting resources. The interview results indicated that both teacher librarians placed a great deal of emphasis on forming partnership on a regular basis with other classroom teachers, with the aims of enabling:

1. both the classroom teachers and students to become information literate, as well as technology fluent - and teaching them how library resources (both printed and electronic) could be applied and used;
2. students to become self-directed learners, independent problem-solvers, and critical users of information;
3. collaboration with other classroom teachers, by providing learning packages and instructions that are tailor-made for supporting the learning needs and experiences of the school community as a whole.

As highlighted by Branch-Mueller, de Groot, and Salerno (2013, p. vi), “this collaborative role of the teacher-librarian is integral for the success of the school library programme, and requires teachers to see the teacher librarian as an important member of the school teaching team.” In order to achieve the above, teacher librarians are expected to serve as instructional partners, i.e., not only to collaborate with the classroom teachers, but also with other members of the school community. There is no doubt this close collaborative role of the teacher librarians is an important factor that is influential to the overall success of school library programme, and would definitely
require both the senior management, as well as other classroom teachers to see the teacher librarian as an important member of teaching team. Further research is needed for examining the ways in which teacher librarians present themselves as instructional partners in their respective schools. Within the “instruction partner” role, teacher librarians can identify new and innovative ways to collaborate with other teachers, parents, as well as other members within the school community to enrich every learning activity that is within or outside the curriculum. Teacher librarians also must be leaders within their school, community, and profession. Research agendas may also include how teacher librarians build on the pedagogical potentials of school libraries to enable students to become self-motivated learners and independent problem-solvers.

**Information Specialist and ICT Use**

During the past decades, we have witnessed major shifts in school education, i.e., the traditional rote-learning paradigm and the “teacher-centred” approach have been gradually replaced by enquiry-based learning. IL skills are considered the foundation of enquiry-based learning. Meanwhile, as reported by Lo et al. (2014a, p. 314), the new knowledge-based learning environment has become increasingly focused on student-centred learning and other self-taught skills. Such new learning processes are gradually replacing the traditional education system, which emphasizes on passive learning, rote memorization and spoon-feeding of knowledge with teachers as the sole providers. Research results indicated that the two participants utilized different strategies in promoting reading or the IL programme. As mentioned before, different types of schools (DSS or regular aided school) may have their own strategies and focus when it comes to the topic of IL. Their relative effectiveness in relationship with curriculum, resources, culture, and other factors definitely worth investigation, as these factors varies much even within Hong Kong. The interview results indicated that in these new information-rich learning environments, IL skills have become increasingly important, as well as being closely associated with the key concepts of library instruction. Under the digital information age, not only the students are expected to be effective users of both information and technologies, subject teachers of varying disciplines also need to learn how to make good use of the library’s resources for supporting their classroom teaching. For this reason, Teacher Librarian B put a great deal of emphasis on provide training to all new teachers at the beginning of each academic year – with the aim of ensuring that teachers at all levels would become self-reliant and effective users of the school library.

On the other hand, further research questions should focus on how Information and Communication Technology (ICT) could benefit teacher librarians. “ICT facilitates the process of identification, collection, storing, processing and disseminating of information” (Rahman, Uddin & Akhter, 2004, p. 608). Through adoption of ICT, teacher librarians can enjoy advantages with different information processes being facilitated. The research questions related to ICT would be divided into two parts: advantages to current work, and professional development of teacher librarians.

As both teacher librarians mentioned that they have a lot of duties to do, they hope to spend more time on handling the library issues. There are a lot of virtual platforms and professional associations that are particularly relevant to the practicing school librarians, such as the Hong Kong Teacher-Librarians’ Association (HKTLA). It might be helpful to further investigate whether teacher librarians can use ICT to reduce their workload, and how ICT could benefit their current work by attaining higher efficiency.

On the other hand, some teacher librarians may provide their students with different creative platforms to share ideas and information, e.g., wikis, blogs, Facebook, forum and video platforms+
conferencing, etc. They need to learn how to build these platforms with relevant IT skills, and then pass these skills onto their students. Therefore, it is crucial to study whether teacher librarians are equipped with adequate ICT skills for their current and future work.

“Digital divide is commonly defined as the gap between those who have and do not have access to computers and the Internet” (van Dijk, 2006, p. 221). Digital divide has been a central concern on the development of both students and educators in a climate of educational reform under the new media age. It would be also meaningful if we can investigate how school libraries can contribute in minimizing the gap of digital divide. Digital divide not only concerns about providing resources and access to technology, but also relates to how school and community incorporate digital skills in school, and out-of-school context to provide equal access for students (Thorne-Wallington, 2013). Since these two interviewees come from schools with different funding sources and educational systems, comparison can be conducted to examine the similarities and differences in equipping students’ multiple literacies skills.

**Leadership and Changing Developments**

The Australian School Library Association (2014) mentioned that teacher librarians should have recognized qualifications in teaching and in librarianship. Both teacher librarians from two schools obtained certain qualification in librarianship, together with certificate or postgraduate diploma in Education. As they are interested in working in the school library, they have also taken some library-related courses. For example, Teacher Librarian A took courses relating to reading strategies, and she joined various library talks to learn experiences from other practicing teacher librarians. Also, Teacher Librarian B received training related to online databases. By investigating the academic background and further training / staff development needs of the practicing teacher librarians could reveal what kind of new skills and knowledge are needed for being a competent school library professional in the digital era.

In addition, using ICT is vital in the 21st century classroom. Both interviewees showed that they recognized and supported the teaching of information searching and retrieving skills to their students. Ebrahimi (2009) stated that the teacher librarians should acquire special knowledge and skills before working in the library. In his view, teacher librarians should be able to search the Internet and databases as well as teach problem-solving and research skills to students. Moreover, teacher librarians should know the techniques of using software and hardware and how to select, assess and use information resources and systems. Therefore, Ebrahimi (2009) concluded that teacher librarians should develop their professional practice by consistently learning new and varied knowledge and skills related to ICT. Although Teacher Librarians A and B were asked questions specific to IL, their responses did not elaborate on where the participants learned these skills, and how they kept their ICT knowledge up-to-date. It is therefore suggested that researchers further look into what virtual learning platforms the teacher librarians used, and how they benefit their professional development. For example, there are associations, such as American Library Association, Hong Kong Teacher-Librarians’ Association, Australian School Library Association and School Library Association of Victoria, which provide teacher librarians with different professional learning materials and tools including tips, strategy plans, readings, news and library courses and resources, etc. Teacher librarians can learn the skills and acquire the knowledge they need on the websites of these associations.

As for changes, both the two interviewees explained their rationales and stressed the importance of renovating and expanding their library space into a learning commons that looked like a commercial bookstore or a café, a strategy that has been recently shown empirically successful in tertiary institutions (Lo, Chiu, & Chu, 2013). A learning commons is “a full-service
learning, research, and project space” (EDUCAUSE, 2011, np), which may become a possible future of library. A research question is “how would this be applicable to schools?”

Further, libraries are no longer limited to physical space, where physical books and printed magazines are stored. It could be a bookless library, digital library and learning commons. Creation of virtual learning commons (VLC) with the use of technology and Web 2.0 tools will meet EDB’s guideline on the functions of school library as ‘a virtual dimension, in which to conduct inquiry, use information technology to navigate for information and create knowledge independently or collaboratively’ (The Curriculum Development Council, 2002). Based on the interviews, there are several roads for future research to explore the future position of school library and its usefulness from school management, library administration and social perspective. From physical library, learning commons to virtual learning commons, an interesting research is to investigate how teacher librarians foresee their role as a change agent to bring new ideas and innovative tools for empowering users as 21st Century learners.

From the future research, it is expected to see VLC as a knowledge-sharing platform, which allows students to create, comment and share their own virtual learning folder. Student-driven learning model motivates students to be more active in learning via collaboration and communication. If virtual library and IL lessons are carried out, this can be an alternative solution when teaching schedule is too tight for each subject. This is because these two interviewees also reflected that they have to ‘borrow’ or ‘share’ other subjects’ lesson time to conduct library lessons.

Furthermore, from the library administrative perspective, how teacher librarians manage resources and provide access via VLC would be another useful aspect to investigate. When digital library is incorporated in VLC, reference and circulation service is possible to conduct online. If electronic books and interactive bookshelves are gradually adopted in school library, circulation of virtual collection will be more efficient and user-driven. Focus of collection development will change from tangible to intangible, and ownership to access. This will provide more just-in-time collection as digital library will record the usage and search pattern of users. Space and cost problems mentioned by the interviewees may be partially overcome at least.

**Administration, Funding and Policies**

School funding and professional organizations’ policies often affect teacher librarians’ roles and library development because varying policies can result in resource-allocation difference that could seriously affect the long-term development of a school library. For instance, in some communities, the gap between libraries of private school and public school funding is having a more noticeable impact on providing library services and resources (AlQudsi-ghabra, Safar & Oaabazard, 2013). Further research is needed for examining the changing and enhanced roles of the teacher librarians as educational and recreational programme administrators. Case study of teacher librarians’ job allocation in different perspectives is a good start. For instance, this can be related to facility planning and maintenance (Woolls, Weeks, & Coatney, 2014), selecting resources and foreseeing future adoption of technologies in collection and public services (Hughes-Hassell & Mancall, 2005). If additional or adequate funding were provided, it would be interesting to see how adoption of technology, for example using Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology in self-circulation and stocktaking, in school libraries will streamline the teacher librarians’ daily work.

Generally speaking, the school cultures and supportive staff and administrations in School A and School B were very helpful in allowing the teacher librarians to conduct their library work. Future research should also focus on how constraints on teacher librarians’ time can affect library objectives and outcomes – constraints such as: inadequate funding and resources, excessive workload demands (such as the need to take up other non-library-related classroom teaching
duties), and conflicting expectations from higher management and other subject teachers, etc. For example, research could examine how much time is required for a teacher librarian to organize and plan library activities/programmes, and the amount of time spent on performing other non-library duties.

Last but not least, it may be valuable to further investigate teacher librarians’ professional initiatives, and their impact on what is seen as possible or valuable for the execution of school library programmes. Since some schools may lack resources to support teacher librarians’ professional development, they might employ more supporting staff to manage the school library’s daily operations. For this reason, it would be of interest to examine how teacher librarians with good initiatives explore different ways to learn the needed skills and knowledge for handling the daily work more efficiently, as well as facilitating learning experiences for their students.

The common element of a successful library programme comes from the presence of a collaborative culture, the collaborative leadership style of the principal and the high expectations for the students and staff (Howard, 2008). With more support from the school, teacher librarians will be able to build and conduct more successful library programmes. Here again, differences in culture and learning needs are no doubt an important direction for further investigation.

**Conclusion**

This study was intended to be exploratory and to reveal more details about participants’ perceptions than a questionnaire or survey could provide, in order to raise interesting and emerging research questions for an agenda. The results of this study were based on the qualitative interviews with only two teacher librarians practicing in Hong Kong. Because we did not conduct observations or large-sample surveys, the collected interview results about professional competencies, attitudes and working conditions may not be generalizable amongst the teacher librarians within and across the same region.

Through two interviews, we examined the teacher librarian roles of teacher, instruction partner, information specialist, leader and programme administrator in the context of the Hong Kong education system. Major findings centred on the influence of school and school library programme diversity; varying education and professional backgrounds; and distinctive working styles and expertise on teacher librarians’ perceptions of their roles.

The value and significance of this study lie in the fact that professional practices among teacher librarians in Hong Kong have been little studied. Previous studies were limited to small numbers of empirical quantitative studies on the same issue. In fact, this is one of very few qualitative studies reporting the professional practices and changing roles amongst practicing teacher librarians in Hong Kong. Results of this study are of practical interest to the education-policy makers, school administrators, practicing teacher librarians, as well as educators with a vested interest in capitalizing on the school library’s potentials to positively affect students’ achievements. Despite limitations and other constraints, the interview results indicated that teacher librarians could play a crucial role in implementing activities conducive to meeting the educational needs and recreational interests of young students. Findings of this study also indicated that it is crucial for the teacher librarians to create opportunities for effective collaboration with other classroom teachers. An effective way to gain recognitions and lasting success is to take up a proactive role in providing other classroom teachers with the support and resources to meet the curriculum needs, as well as to create a literate environment for fostering the students to become information-literate.

Findings of this study further substantiate the list of factors pointed out by McGregor (2003) and Haycock (2004). The factors that are crucial to the effective collaborations between the
teacher librarians and other classroom teachers under a long-term and ongoing basis, and there factors include:

**Staff Characteristics**

- Principal’s mental model
- Teacher librarian’s curriculum knowledge
- Teacher librarian’s prior knowledge and experience
- Ability to see the big picture (understanding the school culture)
- Ability to lead

**Process and Structures of Collaboration**

- Effective communications
- Shared purpose (as cited in Yang & Chen, 2007, p. 4)

In short, both of the participating teacher librarians were expected to serve as a “natural bridge” for interdisciplinary instruction within their school communities. In keeping with previously published research about teacher librarians and libraries in East Asia, this study’s findings suggested that that successful library programmes are a result of close and effective collaborations between the teacher librarians and subject area teachers. A supportive principal also plays a key role in fostering successful library programmes and fruitful collaborations between the school librarians and other subject teachers. With these supports in place, teacher librarians can be active participants in the curriculum, and earn supports and recognitions for the school library from both the principals and classroom teachers. Teacher librarians must develop and communicate a deep understanding of interdisciplinary instruction and of their schools’ culture, i.e., including an awareness of the resources and options available to build the programme and support collaboration. This understanding could no doubt ensure that library programmes are developed in line with the school’s philosophy and practice.

This study has offered practical advices and examples for becoming a successful teacher librarian in the Hong Kong educational context. While this study reports the perceptions of two teacher librarians, their experiences suggest numerous interesting research questions that could yield results that may be generalizable and scalable, in the local context, an East Asian context, and even a global context. We are currently exploring all these issues and invite worldwide collaborations for comparative and cross-cultural studies.

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**References**


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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Can you give me a brief account of the history of your school and what scheme and syllabus does your school follow? Please also give me information about the teacher and student population.

2. Are you a second-career teacher librarian? Meaning that did you have other careers before becoming a teacher librarian in Hong Kong?

3. How important do you see the role of teacher librarian in general?

4. The principal and other classroom teachers – what are their perceptions towards you (as the Teacher librarian) and the school library in terms of supporting the learning, teaching and recreational needs of the whole school community? What roles do they expect you to play in the school community as a whole?

5. Do you agree information literacy (IL) skills are an important component of the school library curriculum? If you agree, why do you think it is so important?

6. Do you also organize workshops and orientations for other classroom or subject teachers on a regular basis, aiming to help them familiarize with the different and new resources available at the school library, and to encourage them to integrate these library resources into their teaching?

7. To what extent do you collaborate with other classroom teachers, when the objectives, structure, and curricula of the secondary education in Hong Kong are extremely exam-oriented?

8. Were there situations where you could apply their previous professional skills and experiences in implementing any major library projects?

9. Does your principal see the school library as an important resource for educational activities? More importantly, what are the critical success factors for gaining support from the school’s senior management?

10. Since there is no region-wide syllabus to follow, do you think this makes the job of a teacher librarian much more difficult, in comparison to the work of other mathematics, history or English teachers?