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# School Libraries in Hong Kong: An Update Report

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*With the changes in the Hong Kong education environment, school libraries have changed little in physical condition, but there have been gradual changes in the professional development of library staffs and the service that school libraries provide. Although Hong Kong has been late in developing its information technology education, the school libraries are ready to be on the road leading to the information highway.*

## General Education

The number of schools in Hong Kong has increased to 498 secondary schools and 856 primary schools, serving a student population of about 930,000 (Hong Kong Annual Report, 1997). The nine universities take about 107,000 full-time and part-time students.

Preschool education is not included in compulsory education, but parents usually send their children to kindergartens or nursery centers in order for them to be in a better position when they apply for primary school. Students normally take six years of study in primary schools and are promoted to secondary school through the Secondary Schools Places Allocation system (SSPA). In secondary school, the students complete junior secondary in three years, and this ends the compulsory education period. With the Junior Secondary Education Assessment (JSEA), they may get a place in the Secondary 4 and 5. At the end of five years of secondary education, the students take the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE). After this, they may be promoted to a two-year preuniversity class, Secondary 6 and 7. They then take an Advanced Level Examination (HKALE), and they may use the examination results (along with their HKCEE) to apply for university admission.

As recommended in the Education Commission's Report No. 4, a framework of teaching targets and target-related assessments (TTRA) has been developed to set a clearer direction for teaching and learning. This scheme was initiated in primary schools in the three basic subjects of Chinese, English, and mathematics. The scheme generated much discussion about the lack of administrative and support staff for the new initiative. This plan was later changed and the Education authority launched a more "systematic" scheme called Target-Oriented Curriculum (TOC).

Recently, the policy of language of instruction has changed the learning environment tremendously. In the past, the schools decided on the language

of instruction. Some claimed to be English-language schools but used Chinese for most subjects. To correct this problem, the Education Department enforced a strong guideline. All the schools should use Chinese as the medium of instruction or risk being punished. Schools may apply to use English as the medium of instruction, and the Education authority will assess these schools (students and teachers) to determine if they are able to use English as the medium of instruction. The assessment process and the policy itself sparked objections and complaints. Nevertheless, from September 1998, all the schools (other than those assessed to be able to use English) must use Chinese in everyday teaching.

From early 1995, the Education authority launched the massive School Improvement Program (SIP) aimed at improving the learning environment. This program included building new blocks to enable the primary schools to have central libraries to replace classroom book boxes.

In October 1997, the SAR government announced a plan to push school education into a new era of information technology. The government will provide 2.6 billion dollars to improve the education environment and to increase the use of computer in education. A massive installation of updated equipment, which would enable students and teachers to access the Internet and other multimedia educational information, will be available in the libraries. The whole plan is expected to be completed in 1999.

### History of School Library Development

Since libraries were first established in 1979, most continue to develop. School libraries in secondary schools have developed from locked bookcases to a 3-4 classroom space that students and teachers are eager to use. With the development of new towns in the 1990s, more and more old schools moved to new school buildings that have more space for a library. Standard schools with central library premises are being built, and most have more than 100 sq m (1,200 sq ft).

Until 1997-1998, primary schools had limited central libraries, and only about 40 libraries were established. With the implementation of the School Improvement Program, which will eventually increase the space available in all primary schools, each primary school will be expected to have a central library within four to five years.

An Education Department survey in 1994 shows that the schools have a library stock of more than 10,000 volumes, with an average daily issue of 51-80.

Book stock (vol.)	6000-	6000-8000	8001-10000	10001+
Percentage of school libraries (%)	20	16	15	48

*Figure 1. Library stock.*

Daily average issue	20-	20-50	51-80	81-110	110+
Percentage of school libraries	9	16	51	13	11

Figure 2. Library issue rate.

Usually, school libraries subscribe to 15-25 periodicals and three to five newspapers. As both English and Chinese are important in the schools, most schools have a ratio of three English to four Chinese items.

### School Library Administration and Management

Each secondary school may have one teacher-librarian, as stated in the regulation, but there is no allocation of clerical staff or assistants. Most are one-person libraries. *Primary school teacher-librarian* is a new title and is only now coming into existence in 1998. We expect there will be more teacher-librarians in primary schools in four to five years.

The Library Section of the Education Department serves the school library community. They advise on all academic and technical aspects of the school library and help coordination with other subject sections. They also advise the school heads on school library matters and on how the library can help in leading the school in curriculum development and information technology education.

The school authority always has the final decision on practice in library matters. Although some of the schools have library committees, this is not common practice. Therefore, most librarians have to build a good relationship with the principal and other subject heads in order to gain their support in library matters.

From 1979 on, schools receive no separate grant for library use. It is the sole responsibility of the principal to allocate funds for library use. Thus some schools receive only several thousand dollars (US\$500-1,000) to spend on the library, but others may have up to \$100,000. The 1994 survey showed that only 21% of schools received more than \$40,000 (US\$5,200). An unofficial estimate is about \$50 (US\$6) for every student in school; the average population of a secondary school is 1,200.

Automation has been extensively installed in most school libraries. The Education Department had only granted one computer for administration purposes in the standard equipment list for several years. As automation is not standard in school libraries, most schools must allocate their own funds for the automation project. In the late 1980s, one of the librarians, Mr. Poon, developed a useful library system, and some 30-40 schools also bought it. Some other schools developed their own software according to their needs. In 1994, some teacher-librarians (including Mr. Poon) approached a system librarian in a university to develop a professional system, School Library System (SLS). The result was a PC-DOS-based system that can work with or without a networked environment. The system was designed to be simple

and easy to use and needed only basic hardware, because some libraries are still using old hardware with i486 as CPU. The system has now been developed to its 3.0 version, which supports a Windows platform. The SLS uses USMARC as the standard, and users can share their catalog within a few steps of export and import. The user group has developed a version of union catalog (containing about 15,000 titles), and they are now working on a citywide union catalog that works on an Internet interface. About 150 schools are using this system, and the number is growing.

The current problem of automation is the policy of autonomy in choosing a library system. Some schools write their own systems, which do not read or export MARC records, and have no means to share their catalog. So a study group is now researching to look for the best system for Hong Kong secondary and primary schools. The idea is to suggest that the Education Department buy a license for all the school libraries.

Members of the profession in Hong Kong are now working to organize librarians to enable them to share their experience and even their physical resources. Display boards in school libraries promote books and introduce books with a given theme. The libraries share their display materials and worksheets in order to minimize overlap.

The Urban Council and the Regional Council have organized those public libraries in Hong Kong that have a similar setting, the only difference being the region they manage. Public libraries offer support to school libraries and have recently worked closely with school libraries to promote the reading habits of the students.

### School Library Programs

The role of the library in each school depends on the principal's perspective of the library. In these few years, more and more principals have realized the importance of the library in the school and have given appropriate support to librarians.

Librarians work closely with the subject teachers in purchasing books, planning activities, and developing book exhibitions that support each subject. Some schools may have the librarians sit in on academic committees or curriculum planning meetings. Because more and more schools will teach all subjects in Chinese, the Chinese book stock will eventually become the larger portion of the school library collection.

Increased self-learning and research-based assignments have changed the library use extensively. The role of the teacher-librarian is no longer seen as that of helping students to borrow and return books, but as the key to the world of information. Librarians can help users to seek and evaluate the information they find. Junior students may need different kinds of information for their projects. With the introduction of Liberal Studies as one of the AS-level subjects in secondary 6 and 7, senior students must now learn research skills to complete their assignments.



Students are the main library users; teachers and administrators do not use the library much. Parents are seldom involved in library use; few schools would open the library to parents.

Some libraries organize library lessons either in connection with subjects or separately. As this is not a part of the regular curriculum, only a small number of schools have this kind of plan. Other libraries, therefore, work hard to find opportunities to educate the users. In schools that do not schedule library lessons, librarians must organize library orientation programs to teach students to use the library effectively.

Nevertheless, in 1992, a group of teacher-librarians in the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union published a workbook called *Library Skills*, and this is widely used in conducting library lessons. In 1995, the Curriculum Development Institute published a modular curriculum on *Information Skills*, and next year a textbook on this will be issued by a commercial publisher. As yet, teaching information or library skills is still not a general practice, either as a separate subject or an integrated part of other subjects.

School libraries usually have one or two reading programs. Schools may organize some of them, whereas some others are run by educational organizations. These popular schemes and programs can attract more than 10,000 students. Some other reward schemes and competitions based on submitting book reports are run annually, or occasionally by publishers and cultural organizations.

More media materials are being purchased for school libraries, and they are always "hit" items. Video CD, videotapes, audiotapes, and even computer CD-ROMs and disks are becoming more important in school libraries. Some libraries purchase cassette tape-players, video-players, television sets, even VCD players to enable use of media collections directly. Because of the lack of equipment, currently only a small number of schools have Internet access through the libraries. But this will change in two years' time, as the information technology plan includes the library as an important outlet, and an Internet server and at least three terminals for user access will be located in libraries.

### School Librarians/Teacher-Librarians

To become a teacher librarian, first one must be a practicing teacher for two years. After being employed in a school as the teacher-librarian, a teacher would be sent by the school to complete two years of part-time, day-release (one day each week) inservice training. Teacher-librarian is a certificate master's (CM) rank post that does not require university graduation. This situation has changed in 1996, and the government allows schools to employ graduate masters (GM) to become teacher-librarians. There is no official continuing education for teacher-librarians; most who wish to study further must apply for courses overseas. The Library Section of the Education Department also organizes occasional seminars and workshops for teacher-

librarians to enhance their professional practice. A refresher course, also organized by the Library Section, is offered to teacher-librarians who have more than five years of experience so that they may update their techniques and skills.

In 1994, an Australian university offered a distance-study course that granted diplomas and master's degrees in information science to successful candidates. In 1995, the University of Hong Kong offered an undergraduate course for CM teachers that offered Library Studies as one of the major subjects.

Teacher-librarians are paid as much as the teachers in all other subjects. Most of the schools require the teacher-librarians to work the same hours. Other schools may require the teacher-librarians to work in a different timetable and even extra hours during the holidays. There is no standard requirement, and it depends on the agreement between the individual principal and librarian. An assistant is also not standard. Some schools may offer a full-time or half-day clerical assistant to the library; others may have no assistant at all. More than 80% of the libraries organize a group of student-librarians to help with the routine duties.

The professional duties of the teacher-librarian have not changed much, but as information technology becomes more and more important in school education, we expect there will be greater demand for information skills and knowledge of technology for librarians. Until the school year begins in September 1998, there are no teacher-librarians in primary schools. The induction of teacher-librarians into the primary school means many new challenges.

### Standards: Professional Standards and/or Legislation

The Education Department initiates all the standards; this is to ensure that when students change schools they will have a similar environment. Physically, the Education Department maintains a list of standard furniture and equipment. Libraries can then request equipment from the government budget.

Two classification schemes are used for Chinese and English collections. Lai's Decimal Classification scheme is used for Chinese collections, and the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) scheme is used for English collections. Most schools use AACR2 as the basic guideline for cataloging standards and a modification for Chinese materials. As more libraries are automated, there is a greater need for using the same standard for share cataloging. As mentioned above, the SLS is the only automation software that uses USMARC, which is widely used in Hong Kong school libraries. The HKPTUSLG is working on developing a special subject-heading list that librarians could use in an automated environment.

### Professional Support

In Hong Kong, we have four professional units that help the professional development of school librarians. The Education Department Library Section is the closest, and has ready assistance of all kinds. They are especially helpful in establishing standards and on the administrative side. They also organize reading schemes and competitions for school libraries.

The Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union (HKPTU) maintains a School Librarians' Group, run by a group of practicing teacher-librarians, which organizes activities for libraries and visits and seminars for librarians to develop their professional knowledge. The group does not have membership, but serves all school librarians in Hong Kong and is well known among them.

The Hong Kong Library Association (HKLA) is the professional body of the library community in Hong Kong. Only recently, the HKLA accepted school librarians as full members, and we now cooperate more on organizing professional activities for school libraries.

The Hong Kong Teacher-Librarians' Association (HKTLA) aims at organizing people of the same profession to get to know each other and share experiences. They also organize activities and seminars to discuss common problems.

The HKTLA publishes a half-yearly newsletter, which gives librarians an opportunity to express ideas. The Education Department also publishes a newsletter twice a year in which librarians share their experiences.

### Conclusion

The future of school development greatly affects the development of the school library. The implementation of Chinese as the principal language of instruction helps students to read more for pleasure. The importance of information technology brings school libraries into a new era of the virtual and electronic library. The Quality Assurance Education sees the school as a whole and the library as a major part in "value added" education. Future primary school teacher-librarians will give students a new way to learn, which they can start at an early age.

With the changes in the Hong Kong education environment, the school libraries have changed little physically, but they are gradually changing in professional development and the service they provide. Although Hong Kong's development of information technology education is recent, school libraries are ready to take a leading role. School librarians in Hong Kong secondary schools are facing great changes and challenges. The increasing importance of information technology, the intensifying use of computers in the library environment, the growing awareness of professional knowledge: all these contribute to the quest of professionalism of teacher-librarians.

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