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School Libraries in St. Lucia: A State-of-the-Art Report

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This article provides some background on factors that have affected the development of school libraries in one West Indian island. A brief history of that development process is followed by a description of the situation as it stands today. Recent initiatives of the local professional association to work with government officials seem to hold promise for the future.

Introduction

Situated in the Lesser Antilles, St. Lucia has 238 square miles of rugged volcanic terrain topped by lush rain forests. It features two of the region's largest and safest harbors and has some of the Windward Islands' most fertile agricultural land. Its natural beauty provides the potential for rapid growth in the tourist industry if free trade destroys its fragile agricultural economy.

Its position between Martinique and Barbados ensured St. Lucia a violent and war-torn history; but it also provided this lovely island and its 150,000 inhabitants with a vibrant culture that blends African, French, and English elements. For almost 200 years after end of the Napoleonic wars, French landowners determined the mores of both the Black peasants and their English colonial administrators. A major result of this domination is the prevalence of Kweyol as the mother tongue of most St. Lucians. Kweyol is a mix of French words and African grammatical structures. Until the mid 1980s, St. Lucian Kweyol had no written orthography.

General Education

Superimposed on the Creole culture created by the residents of this lush semitropical island was the system of British colonial government. In terms of education, this meant schooling was to provide a small class of civil servants and businessmen to serve the local economy. What little demand there was for secondary education was served by church schools until the early 1960s when the first government secondary school was opened.

Universal suffrage led to self-government and then to political Independence in 1979. Throughout its stewardship, the St. Lucian government has endeavoured to increase educational opportunity for all citizens. Education is now compulsory to age 15. Students take a competitive exam at age 11 to try to qualify for a secondary school place. Since 1973, the government has

created 12 new secondary schools, but this is enough to accommodate only about half the school-aged population. Fifteen-year-olds who leave primary school or who are asked to leave secondary school face a job market where it is estimated that 45% of the population under 25 are unemployed. Those lucky enough to continue their schooling to the end of form 5 sit externally set regional examinations similar to the British "O" Levels. The curricula for these exams are Caribbean creations that seek to emphasize local relevance, but this does not ensure success. Last year, fewer than 30% of all candidates passed the mathematics exam. Although scores in other subjects were better, the results are always a disappointment to a nation firmly committed to the importance of education.

History of School Library Development

School libraries in St. Lucia, as everywhere else, began as a result of the determination of individual school principals to provide their students with the opportunity to develop their reading into a habit. Often class teachers would draw on the resources of the public library to support units of instruction. In 1969, the government secured the services of a professional librarian to organize the library at the Teachers' Training College. That gentleman, Sydney Patchett, began training student teachers as teacher-librarians. By 1974, there was sufficient interest in school libraries to require the establishment of an advisory committee on the development of school libraries. The report of that committee provided government with elementary standards (based on those published by the Jamaica Library Association in 1969) and outlined a pilot project to establish libraries in 13 schools around the island.

With the aid of another United States Peace Corps librarian, Christine Koyanagi, project schools were provided with technical support and training for their librarians. The Canadian-based Organization for Cooperation in Overseas Development (OCOD) provided a series of summer training work shops at the same time, which resulted in a cadre of over 30 trained teacher librarians by the end of 1979.

Shortly thereafter, the island's only tertiary level institution began a two year day release program for training library technical assistants. Although the course was designed originally to meet the training needs of the public library and its branches, course organizers soon realized that more than half of all course participants were trained teachers whose principals supported the development of libraries in their primary schools. Another 25 teacher librarians have been trained through this program. Unfortunately, such training is rarely rewarded financially and often results in increased responsibility. Although several of the secondary schools employ library technical assistants to run their libraries, most schools identify class teachers who are expected to keep the library open on a part-time basis while continuing to carry at least a reduced teaching load.

Progress has been slow, but by 1990 every secondary school had a functioning school library. That means a room, a collection of materials, a trained librarian, and regular opportunities for students and teachers to make use of them. Another six primary schools could meet that standard, with many more having two or more of the definition's criteria, but not all four.

The definition of school library poses problems in itself. A survey in 1991 showed that, in some minds, a room with some books (often collections of class texts), or even a collection of books that the principal rotated between classes, were counted as school libraries. However, in one case, the principal of a school with a room, some 2,000 volumes, and a trained librarian said the school did not have a library because the books were "all old."

School Library Administration and Management

Five years ago, the public library took on the task of providing centralized ordering services for all the secondary school libraries. Funding from the Ministry of Education is used to acquire suitable reference materials for these schools. The teacher-librarians do their own cataloguing and are responsible for spearheading fund raising drives to ensure that the collection of circulating books grows. Unfortunately, the public library is severely understaffed (having only one professional to serve the 15 branches, headquarters, and all outreach services). This means that there is no supervision or coordination, and little communication between the teacher-librarians.

School Library Programs

A Library Skills Curriculum was developed and circulated to all schools in the late 1980s. A number of schools continue to use this document as the basis for a regularly timetabled program of instruction. Rarely, however, is there opportunity for teacher-librarians to work with other teachers to develop content-based instruction in information skills. During the fall of 1997, Gerald Brown, a Canadian library media consultant on assignment to OCOD, spent several months in St. Lucia surveying schools and sensitizing Ministry officials, principals, and teacher-librarians to the importance of developing library programming. It was particularly fortunate that his visit coincided with the unveiling of a discussion paper on new legislation to govern the island's education system.

Professional Support and Advocacy

Two years ago, the increasingly obvious need for a proactive voice in support of information issues in the society led the local Library Association to re-examine its goals and objectives. The result was the formation of SLAIRS (St. Lucia Association of Information Services and Resources). Based on the core membership of the Library Association, SLAIRS has reached out to media workers, those involved in the promotion of the computer culture,

and other information professionals. A sudden general election allowed SLAIRS to ask politicians to address questions related to information policy in their political manifestos. The result was a government that had addressed these issues and that seems committed to insuring that St. Lucia no longer belongs in those nations that wear the label "information have-nots."

SLAIRS has sought to address the issues of the library community as well. With no national plan for an information infrastructure, library services have often withered and died. Outlining for the new Minister of Education, the history of school libraries in St. Lucia, the association identified the key stake holders in the process and what the roles of each might be (see Appendix A). As a result, the Ministry has renewed its commitment to provide a library room in every new or renovated school plan. It has agreed to add teacher-librarians to the list of specialist teachers it seeks to have excluded from the World Bank's formula for determining staff to student ratios. It has asked SLAIRS to initiate discussions about a National Plan. In that regard, and because trained manpower is our critical need, SLAIRS has developed a proposal for a staffing structure for the National Information System. This document seeks to clarify training needs and to define career paths for information workers that are on a par with those of their colleagues in the rest of the public service.

SLAIRS also sees the need to provide technical training, especially in the use of computers and their applications for its membership. A committee has formed to develop a series of training programs over the summer for its members. Special emphasis will be placed on those who work in schools. At present, only two schools have computers for student use, and few teachers are aware of the impact the information revolution has had on education elsewhere. It is hoped that teacher-librarians will be able to provide leadership in their schools.

In short, there is much to do, and few people with the energy and willingness to start things happening. But there is an awareness of the possibilities before us, and the stagnation we will face if we do not reach out to accept the challenges. This article is an effort to place school library and information services development in St. Lucia in the world context and to measure our strengths and weaknesses against those of our colleagues.

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Appendix A

The Development of School Libraries and Information Services in St. Lucia

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As early as 1976, the Government of St. Lucia saw the need to foster the development of libraries in all schools. An advisory committee established by the Ministry of Education at that time identified three goals for school libraries.

1. the provision of a wide range of materials to support the curriculum of schools;
2. the provision of instruction that would help develop life long, independent learners;
3. the provision of a wide range of recreational materials to foster the reading habit among St. Lucia's young people.

The committee also identified three requirements necessary for the development of a school library. These are:

1. the existence of a basic collection of reference, fiction, and nonfiction materials in the school;
2. the availability of space to house the book collection; and
3. an individual trained to supervise its use and to provide library skills instruction and reading guidance on regular basis.

Developments since 1976 include:

- The establishment of 13 project school libraries (only 8 of which continue in existence today);
- The establishment of functioning libraries in most secondary schools;
- The offering of training programs for teacher-librarians, which have trained approximately 50 teachers to work in school libraries;
- The development of a curriculum for the teaching of library and study skills from kindergarten through tertiary level (which is now being revised to include the impact of information technology);
- The offering of a workshop for principals on the important role they play in the success of school libraries.

The intervening years have been marked by critical problems such as natural disasters that destroyed a number of libraries and by

- The lack of reliable financial support with which schools could acquire materials;
- Lack of provision in the establishment for the existence of the post of teacher-librarian.
- Lack of coordination and supervision of the efforts of schools to develop their libraries.

Since 1978, there has been a policy by government that any new school built will have a library room, and any renovation or modifications made to older

schools will also make provision for a library. But experience has shown, over the years, that more than a library room is required-the materials provided in the room must be attractive and relevant. Sadly, experience also shows that such materials must be placed under the stewardship of an individual who will protect and promote the use of the materials. If not, they disappear or sit on locked shelves.

Recommendations

Taking into consideration the concerns expressed by the members of our School Libraries Special Interest Group, the executive of the St. Lucia Association of Information Resource Services (SLAIRS) wishes to make the following recommendations.

Considering the contributions that school libraries can make to the education of St. Lucia's youth, we ask that

The Ministry:

1. Reconfirm its commitment to provide a library room in all new and renovated schools.
2. Recognize the need to establish the post of teacher-librarian and provide training and support for teacher-librarians.
3. Make annual provision for the purchase of reference materials for schools.
4. Allow schools to raise funds to purchase fiction for their school collection.
5. Appoint a library specialist in the library service to provide training, supervision and coordination for school libraries.

We ask that Principals:

1. Provide leadership that promotes development of the school library programs.
2. Timetable library periods.
3. Make reading a central concern of the school.
4. Visit the Library regularly.

We expect that Trained Teacher-Librarians:

1. Be able to work with staff to produce materials needed for the enhancement of the curriculum at the school.
2. Be able to organize fiction books in the school library.
3. Be willing to maintain and repair school texts issued to the staff.
4. Be able to use the Dewey Decimal system to organize fiction books in the school library.
5. Be able to circulate library materials and retrieve such materials at the appropriate time.
6. Be able to maintain and repair damaged library materials.
7. Be able to maintain discipline and order among students in the library.
8. Be able to work with staff to produce materials needed for the enhancement of the curriculum at the school.

- 9 Work with their principal and bursar to issue school texts to the staff at the commencement of each school year.
- 10 Be willing to retrieve the same materials from staff at the end of the school year.
- 11 Be able to perform a counseling role to students with regards to study skills.
- 12 Be able to provide library services during lunch and at least half an hour after the official close of school.
- 13 Be a role model for students who may be become interested in information work as a career or profession.
- 14 Be prepared to take a leadership role in assisting colleagues and students to use technology effectively in the learning process.