

School Libraries Should be Equipped to Operate in the Virtual Space

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, online activities have increased exponentially in the library world. Like public and academic libraries, school libraries have expanded their offerings and improved their online presence to ensure students continue accessing their services. However, Adventist school libraries in the Caribbean have not received the support they deserve and are not equipped to function in the online world. Many either kept their doors closed or reassigned the space for other activities. In some cases, librarians have been assigned different tasks. The teaching of information literacy skills was placed on hold. In this online presence, Adventist school libraries and librarians have a role to play in assisting their students in navigating the information highway and developing their literacy skills. There is also the likelihood that many online services will continue after the pandemic. Adventist school librarians in the Caribbean should be prepared to operate in the new virtual space.

The Impact of COVID-19 on School Libraries

In 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted life and living as we had come to know it. As a result, sports and sporting activities were shelved, restaurants and diners were closed, and travel and tourism almost halted. Schools in the Caribbean were not spared the disaster. The resulting school closures left many students without instruction due to a lack of internet access. Because these students were not prepared due to the loss of teaching hours, exit exams had to be postponed. In a May policy briefing, the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (2021) reported that many students, especially in the subregions,

were disadvantaged due to the lack of internet access and devices that would facilitate online learning. This difficulty occurred despite all the efforts made to continue students' education during the pandemic.

When schools closed their doors, academic and public libraries transitioned into a proactive mode. More than ever, they promoted their databases and online resources. Yes, it is the online era. There are online classes, online-exams, and online physical activities. The COVID-19 pandemic has elevated online activities to a new level. In light of this and the likelihood that many online services will continue after the pandemic, school librarians and libraries in the Caribbean should be prepared to operate in the virtual space.

Rand and Shepard (2020) observed that with the onset of the pandemic, academic libraries were forced to have more online delivery of content and services. Librarians and relevant personnel needed to come up with new ideas and strategies to expand existing library services. In some instances, library websites were updated or configured to accommodate online deliveries. Web or systems librarians collaborating with IT departments moved expeditiously to incorporate social media platforms to promote and reinforce library services. Online reference librarians and chat services were fully engaged. Libraries that had not offered these services were quick to add them. Academic libraries also needed to continue supporting educational programs. They responded by promoting e-resources (Essex, 2020). These activities became necessary to keep in touch with patrons and ensure that the library supported the teaching and learning process.

Public libraries also found new ways of serving patrons online. Goddard (2020) related that public libraries were quick to move their activities online and, in some instances, created new services for their patrons. They instituted a curbside service to deliver the books that patrons requested online to ensure some of the library offerings continued during the pandemic. Audiobooks, e-books, and other online resources were promoted. Storytime, book clubs, and book chats moved online to keep patrons engaged. King (2021) noted that although the building was closed at the onset of the pandemic, services such as e-book check out and ask-a-librarian continued. Libraries engaged websites and social media platforms to keep patrons informed.

Unfortunately, Adventist school libraries in the Caribbean failed to follow the same trends. As classes and other activities moved online, the libraries remained closed, or the space was repurposed. This issue, it seemed, was not unique to the Caribbean regional Adventist education system. Stephens (2020) noted that many school library spaces were redesigned to accommodate social distancing requirements for other teaching schedules during the pandemic. The library was used as a meeting room in some other cases, and the librarian was assigned other activities. Lim (2018), referring to schools that deliver programs online in the pre-COVID-19 environment, asked a pertinent question. "Are the internal processes set up so that

online students can access the school's library services" (p. 9)? That question is now even more relevant.

Libraries generally are not given the recognition they deserve. While academic libraries may fair better, school libraries do not receive anywhere near the same attention. Reis (2015), executive director of American Library Association (ALA), while making a plea for the support of school libraries, stated that in many schools, libraries and librarians have been eliminated based on budget decisions. Yorio (2020) suggested that when some librarians returned to school for the new academic year 2020-2021, there would be no library to return to because the spaces would be redesigned to accommodate classrooms and the required social distancing.

Many schools shelved the teaching of information literacy (IL) and library skills during the pandemic because of other perceived priorities. This gap is unfortunate because this deprived our students of these necessary skills in an era when misinformation and fake news has flooded the information highway. The need for research and authentic news has become even more urgent. Timm (2020) expressed the urgent need for students to be taught how to decipher the fake from the real. She pointed to surveys that show that many students and teachers alike lack the necessary skills to decipher fake news. The information literate student can analyze and evaluate information and make informed decisions.

Children need to learn to appreciate their school library because it will help them at the university level when they require scholarly information for research and assignments. With strong foundational skills, finding reliable and authentic information would be conducive to academic success. At the elementary level, while children are using various electronic devices for online activities, they should be able to find their school library online. This library portal should become a place for reading and discovering ideas and innovations.

Moving Forward

One suggestion school libraries should consider in moving forward is implementing an integrated library system (ILS). Within the Seventh-day Adventist context, for local conferences that operate a group of schools, the implementation becomes more manageable. For example, at West Indies College Preparatory School (WICPS) and Northern Caribbean University (NCU), the university's ILS was networked to be used at the preparatory school. WICPS became the first private preparatory school in Jamaica to institute an ILS. The IT department at the university played a role while library staff took on the project of organizing, classifying, and cataloging the resources. A library assistant was employed and trained to carry out the functions of the library. Both the principal and vice-principal at WICPS were fully engaged.

An ILS empowers the librarian to better control library resources, enhance efficiency, and save on the costs associated with paper-based recording. An online catalog allows students to browse the collection, and in a time of crisis, as with COVID-19, a system could be implemented where students call or email their request for a book loan. A curbside service could then be implemented to accommodate drop-off and pick-up. This ethos of doing whatever it takes to continue serving our students and meeting their literacy needs during a crisis represents the norm for the profession.

According to the American Association of School Librarians (2020), the pandemic is an opportunity for school librarians to get innovative. They may need to collaborate with other organizations to make a significant difference. Adventist school libraries in the Caribbean need to work together to acquire e-resources, audiobooks, and online learning activities. They can form a consortium for sharing research databases and other online resources. School libraries in the Southern Union (n.d.) in the North American Division (NAD) benefit from this type of collaboration, and a similar service should be replicated in the Caribbean.

Notwithstanding, many Adventist primary and secondary educational institutions struggle with finances to a point where principals and administrators must prioritize in what areas the limited funds are to be spent. The library is sometimes in one of the last places down the list. Administrators, however, must see the importance of the library and make provisions in the budget for its operation. One solution could be to seek sponsorships and partnerships for the development of school libraries. Friends of the library and other well-wishers should also be engaged. Where donors are willing to contribute to specific school programs, the library could be considered for special donations.

Even though implementing an ILS could be a problem for some schools because of the subscription fee, schools should create a website. General information about many Adventist primary and secondary schools may be found on conferences' websites, and some may have a Facebook page. But they do not have a website, hence no library page. IT personnel should work with the librarian in organizing and providing content for the webpage. In times of crisis, this will be useful in allowing librarians to add and update relevant information such as reading activities, educational videos, audiobooks, and other online resources. Because there is the digital divide issue and the challenge with internet connectivity for schools in rural areas, librarians will need to be innovative and, where feasible, to take the library to the students using other means. Lawton (2021) described several creative ways public librarians responded to COVID-19. He explained how librarians in one county in Virginia decided to take the library service to communities when schools were forced to close because of the pandemic. They used personal cars to distribute books to children at venues such as churches, parking lots, and

fire departments. In many other places, librarians utilized bookmobiles in various shapes and sizes for dropping off books in communities.

Schools that have broadband access should take advantage of the opportunity of building a website and ensuring that virtual space is provided for the library. With a website in place, librarians have an opportunity to showcase their skills in web technology. Today's cadre of librarians are technology specialists in their own right, with web technology courses forming part of their course of study. In times of crisis, librarians could be an asset by uploading and updating library pages with relevant information in addition to teaching teachers and students how to access relevant information or how to use resources on the internet responsibly. Maughan (2020) highlighted a survey done by the American Association of School Librarians on changes in the role of school librarians during the COVID-19 pandemic and gave some insights on new tech-related roles. Through mediums such as email, phone, and chat sessions, they could assist students in accessing electronic resources using written instructions or recorded lessons. They also took on organizing and suggesting titles and technology tools to assist with instructional teaching. The web is a necessary tool in the virtual world. Where online education continues, library skills and relevant services should also continue online.

Keep the School Library Open

There are excellent reasons to keep the school library open. Firstly, it will instill a desire for research and combat some of the misinformation that is circulated. The internet is an excellent tool and has many advantages. However, it may not be the most reliable source for authentic and reliable information regarding scholarly work. An appreciation for reliable information should start at the primary level. The school library is one of the best places to start.

Having worked in a higher education setting for many years, I discovered that students, especially at the undergraduate level, are not diligent in their research and other assignments. At times they copied and pasted information from the internet. The school library will help children develop an appreciation for reading and discovery. The school librarian plays a role in assisting students in developing an early appreciation for quality research, including the proper use of sources.

Secondly, at the school library, there is the opportunity to include resources that reflect the school's core beliefs while supporting the curriculum. Adventist Christian education has a unique character. While other resources are necessary to meet the requirements of government and other governing bodies, the school library has the opportunity to include materials that will support subject areas that are unique to the Adventist education system. It is also an opportunity to counteract false claims and teachings.

As life returns to normalcy, online platforms are here to stay. Stephens (2020) stated, “Schools everywhere are operating under emergency conditions, and their librarians should move out of the library, get into online learning spaces, and be ready for battlefield promotions” (p. 21). Stielow (2014) proposed that as communication evolves and grows exponentially, libraries and professionals need to reinvent themselves to continue meeting the challenges that present themselves. While providing traditional services to patrons, librarians in this digital world must be engaged in web-based activities to be even more effective.

When the pandemic comes to an end, online deliveries and virtual activities, I believe, will be here to stay. Our school libraries should become equipped to operate in this virtual space. There is no going back to what we had come to appreciate as normal. It is a new era. Electronic resources and online activities will take on new dimensions and will become more prominent. If the school library is not actively online, then it will vanish. Can we afford that?

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