

Aspirations, Modalities and Evaluation Tools of School Libraries: From International Standards to Current French Realities

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Abstract:

The regulation of the French educational system is in an on-going transitional process because its culture, deeply anchored in a republican history, remains very present. That is how, nowadays, two evaluation models for school libraries coexist in correlation with the recommendations from the IFLA School Library Guidelines:

(1) The inspection of the librarian teacher, based on a competency framework: this evaluation is individual and punctual and impacts his or her career ; and

(2) The general self-evaluation of the school which progressively utilizes a quality approach to develop common reflexivity and to enable a regulation of policies. It also allows the introduction of changes in practices: this collective self-evaluation is more motivating and spreads the awareness of working responsibilities. It shows the team how interdependent each member is with the other, and therefore shows that strategies of improvement made for all are of interest to all. Serving the goal of permanent improvement, the quality approach increases the overall added-value of the school policy – and therefore the added-value of the library. The quality approach turns the school into a ‘learning school’¹(Bouvier 2001), always questioning and improving, in which the librarian teacher evolves in his or her practice, thanks to a collective experience and a unifying empowered role with educational and pedagogical projects.

Keywords: inspection, self-evaluation, quality approach, school library, librarian teacher

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1. Introduction

The regulation of the educational system in France is in an on-going transitional process, and therefore two evaluation models for school libraries coexist: the traditional inspection of the school librarian and the self-evaluation of the school which progressively fits into an emerging quality approach. Both of these modalities correlate logically with recommendations from the *IFLA School Library Guidelines* and address the requirements of professional practices, in school libraries as well as within schools themselves, in order to obtain better results.

2. The evolution of schools governance and its impact on libraries' regulation: A context, a necessity... What responsibilities?

- From an administrated system to a 'driven' system.

In France, in the past, in the name of an equal treatment for all students regarding public educational services, all schools of the territory had to work identically. Since the 1980s, this unity in public services, which is submitted to a state monopoly and to its uniform norms of 'top-down' policy, has been progressively questioned for several reasons, among others:

- the diversification of the public sector has made this kind of governance less and less effective and efficient;
- the research has proven a 'teacher effect' and a 'school effect', independent of a social effect on students' results; and
- laws on decentralisation and devolution of powers have given schools a margin for increasing autonomy.

The governance process has thus gone from an administrated system which provided the means and controlled the conformity of evaluations, to a 'driven' system which attributes resources according to constant dialogues and joint evaluations, to get better yet equal performances. The current regulation lies on principles of subsidiarity (decentralising what can be done more efficiently in each school), of transparency, and of plasticity. Each school has keys for improvement, provided that overall material organisational and professional resources is always investigated and optimised, including those of the library. Each headmaster shall thus give responsibilities to the school's stakeholders for a local development strategy (a school's project) as well as self-evaluation measures that will enable a good appreciation of the relevance of the objectives, the efficiency of the actions and practices, and the quality of the results obtained.

This last model of governance is based on the previous model but does not crush it entirely, choosing to give double responsibilities to the librarian teacher, both individually and within an organisation that is moving towards a constant improvement. The inspections of librarian teachers are perpetuated and remain appreciated by them. The global process of self-evaluation is nearly systematic in schools and the quality approach is emerging in some of them.

- School libraries within schools.

In France, school librarian teachers who work in junior high schools and high school are recruited and trained at the same education level as other teachers (master's level) and have the same status as other teachers. They normally work for thirty hours weekly within the school and are given six more hours of research and preparation for their service. Until the last few years, almost all libraries were configured on the same model of organization and operation. They each were managed by one or two librarian teachers.

The national coherence of the documentary policy is insured by ‘general inspectors’, who work in close relationship with the minister of education and who have expertise, supervision, and evaluation functions. Regional inspectors evaluate the librarian teachers and support the schools and school libraries in their local strategies, optimizing the national directions established by the State whilst considering local characteristics. They also help schools and school libraries in leading their own quality approach.

3. The inspection of the librarian teacher for human resources management and activity regulations purposes: A position, an aim... What aftermath?

- A French competency framework in harmony with the *IFLA School Library Guidelines Draft* (IFLA, 2015)².

In France, the competency framework for teachers³, (Référentiel de compétences des enseignants, Ministère de l'éducation nationale, 2013) includes the *IFLA/UNESCO School Library Guidelines* (IFLA, 2002)⁴. It presents a list of educational skills whose mastery must be accomplished:

1. by every teacher, so by a school librarian :

- Share the principles of the French Republic
- Act as a responsible educator according to ethical principles – “Ethics and social responsibility”
- Incorporate elements of the digital and media culture which are necessary in the good exercise of the job – “Digital and media skills”
- Cooperate amongst a work team – “Communication and collaboration skills”
- Contribute to the actions of the educational community
- Cooperate with students’ parents and partners of the school
- Master the disciplinary knowledge and their didactics/pedagogy
- Build up, practice, and host teaching and learning situations that take into account the student diversity
- Organise and insure a way of working in group which will favour the students’ learning and socialization
- Evaluate the students’ progress and acquisition of knowledge
- Commit to a program of constant professional development – “Commitment to lifelong learning through continuing professional development”

2. specifically by a school librarian:

-as a teacher in charge of a media and information knowledge acquisition for all students:

- Master knowledge and skills specific to media and information education. - “Competencies needed to provide school library programs: Collection development, storage, organization, retrieval; Information processes and behaviors (literacy, information literacy, digital literacies...)”

- as a person in charge of the organization of educational resources within the school and their disposition:

- Put into practice the documentary policy of the school that he helps developing. - “In collaboration with the school’s administrators and teachers, the librarian develops and implements curriculum-based library services and programs that support teaching and learning for all”.

- Take care of the resources centre and the diffusion of information inside the school. - “This includes the library facilities (both physical and digital environments), the material resources (both physical and digital), and the pedagogical programs and services (both physical and digital)”.

-as an actor opening the school to its educational, cultural, and professional environment:

- Contribute to the opening of the school towards an educational, cultural, professional, but also local and regional, national, European and international environment.
- Take part in the creation of paths for students.

“The role of a school librarian encompasses a wide diversity of teaching situations, with individual students, small groups of students, classes, and also includes sometimes informal professional development of teaching colleagues”.

Pedagogical frameworks are used as guidelines: a Curriculum which implements media and information literacy⁵ (Socle commun de connaissances, compétences et de culture), and Benchmarks for the implementation of the learning path to an information culture⁶ (Repères pour la mise en œuvre du Parcours de formation à la culture de l’information).

- Proceedings and tools regarding the inspection of the librarian teacher.

The inspection revolves around:

- A pedagogical approach to support the student; with the help of the librarian’s pedagogical media and of the students’ individual and collective productions, but also by both observing and analysing a documentary research session or a cultural activity. Evidence of students motivation and learning are expected, as well as, among others: an active personalised and socially constructive pedagogy; care for students in difficulty or particular educational needs; a relevant and kind evaluation of the students; and a digital education.
- A systematic approach to support the school; through the school library policy and the annual activity report, and during an interview with the librarian teacher and the headmaster. Projects and activities that are various and flexible to answer the goals of the school’s project are appreciated, as well as the promoting of reading, an initiating and federating role within team work and outside partnerships, the opening to cultures, and innovations.
- A technical approach; be Librarianship to support the information ecosystem, during a visit of the school library. Equipment and resources are observed, as well as: digital communication and media; media and cataloguing tools; and monitoring and diffusion of information to the educational community.

The inspection results in a report stating assessment and recommendations, as well as a mark over 60 (which could achieve 60 at the end of the career). This mark increases with each inspection (a mark is never reduced and rarely maintained, except in case of gross professional misconduct) and accelerates the librarian teacher’s career. A career goes through more than ten salary grades and changing grade depends on the addition of both (pedagogical) inspection marks and a second mark given by the headmaster about the quality of service provided.

- Effects and limits.

Over the whole territory of France, individual inspections control and guarantee school library teaching; services for documentation and information; and cultural activities which are consistent with the textual quality requirements. Normative and top-down, evaluations give directions, a national Framework and a guideline to librarian teachers. Today, the inspection remains a tool for human resources management of strong social concern, for it may or may not favour a boost in professionals’ careers.

However, some limits can subsist:

- There is a reduced number of inspections, of a five to six year periodicity average. From then on, the teacher is efficient on the inspection day and consent to the recommendations but may lose sight of them over an extended period of time and in the school's context.
- The inspector has a pedagogical authority over the librarian teacher, yet the latter chooses his working modalities. Although the headmaster has administrative authority, the librarian teacher seizes his own pedagogical liberty within the library. Even if he leads initiatory pedagogical sessions on research and builds several internal and partnered cultural projects, his independence leaves him a margin of possibilities.
- The improvement of librarian teachers' practices lies more in other factors (professional training, personal dynamic, students' behaviours, team work or pair work...) than in the inspector's advice.

In such conditions, the inspection is little formative and can't produce its full effect only if the teacher takes all opportunities of professional development he meets.

4. The birth of a quality approach for both the school and the school library: A questioning, a collective... What promises?

- Quality in the *IFLA School Library Guidelines* and its development in France.

“Evaluation of school library services and programs is an essential aspect of school library development. it [Evaluation] helps to determine if the school library services and programs are meeting the needs of the school community. It helps to ensure that the library's programs and services support the goals of the school. Evaluation also should contribute to the ongoing transformation of school library services and programs by influencing stakeholders thinking about the school library and developing their support for the school library” (IFLA, 2015, Section 1.9). “Evaluation is a critical aspect of an ongoing cycle of continuous improvement.” (IFLA, 2015, Section 6.4)

French approaches integrate one or several modalities of the *IFLA School Library Guidelines*:

- inquiries or meetings to identify student feedback on the school library's services and resources. - “What are your needs ?” “What should we do more of to make school library better?” (IFLA, 2015, Section 6.3)

- interviews and exercises for measuring the value-added of school library activities to student learning. - “ability to identify the source, the reliability, the validity and the relevance of information, ability to create reliable and well informed products... School librarians and teachers try to see how students have developed their knowledge and understanding of curriculum content as well as information handling and process skills”. (IFLA, 2015, Section 6.3)

-“evidence-based practice”, particularly “evidence OF practice” to show the results of what school librarians do (Todd, 2009)⁷ and the more interesting aspect for the school, “evidence IN practice” “to use data for decision-making and transforming practices.” (IFLA, 2015, Section 6.3)

- Proceedings and tools regarding the quality approach to self-evaluation.

The obligatory self-evaluation approach and the academic authority are joined every three years in a ‘contract of objectives’ for the school. It consists in a collective and systematic reflexion, which associates every stakeholder of the school. Starting from students' needs and the critical examination of indicators, it aims at determining:

- what are the strengths and weaknesses of the school (and the school library);
- how effective and efficient are the actions taken;
- what explanatory hypothesis can be phrased;

- which priorities to focus on for the next three years;
- what actions can be considered and integrated in the school's project to improve and/or correct?

The concept of self-evaluation relies on a methodology, in order to build an analysis, to create more effective solutions, and to involve the greatest number in the choice of strategies. Strategies used amongst others include: criteria of reference (we will have succeeded if...), indicators both relevant, valid (measure what they are meant to), reliable, available, measurable and durable (viewpoints).

The quality approach, beginning and emerging today in some schools in France, driven by the ministry, called "Qual'éduc" is more thorough and continuous than the three-yearly self-evaluation. It is also focused on the relevance and coherence of actions taken in regard of results. Entries and exits indicators are consequently insufficient and teams must question the policy, the actions taken, the practices of teachers and librarian teachers, and the students' learning process. The quality approach touches as well the way stakeholders feel, relying on some subjective elements that spring from inquiries. It selects and multiplies self-evaluation questionings in a collective way: What are our results? How are we doing this? Why? How do we feel about it? What are everyone's needs and expectations? Should we keep on doing things that way? How can we do better? What evolution schemes should we use? Who should do what, and how? The quality approach relies on an ethics of both evaluation without judgement and common thinking.

The quality approach "Qual'éduc" of a school is not, contrary to foreign or business worlds, a national program that is procedural and totalitarian. It is a permanent process that remains nonetheless local and always specific to each school collective. It is an observation/reflexion/projection/(re)action process without strict national norms which would paralyse the school system. The quality approach is intended to be 'performative', aiming both at improving the actions of the school and at enhancement of its human capital, that is, the potential, competencies and performances of students and staff. It is about evaluating to learn and improve, about 'evaluation for evolution'¹⁰ (Gaudreau 2011).

When the inspector steps in as a quality approach consultant, his role is not to establish a model but to help and form.

The necessary coexistence of an inspection with the quality approach finds a new meaning: it progresses towards support that is useful to the school as well as its students. It helps the librarian teacher in reading and problematizing reality, and in overcoming the tensions knotted between what he would like, what he should do, and what he could do. It helps him to outdo himself within the local constraints by encouraging creativity and the opening to new possibilities--possibilities to explore with a collective organisation and intelligence.

- Effects and impediments.

The self-evaluation collaborative of the school's policy and results enables the development of shared responsibilities which ease up a genuine compliance of all stakeholders, especially as it is registered in a continuous quality approach. This approach leads everyone to a more systematic representation of his own action; each teacher being more conscious of his role, each being able to identify clearly which result he contributed to. Each staff member feels that his work weighs on the workings and results of the school, by the association of all competencies. This feeling is thus motivating and unifying.

The quality approach generates a much bigger share of competencies between the various school functions.

The quality approach "Qual'éduc", in its process, generates 'double-loop learning'⁹ (Dodgson 1993): more than the regulation of professional schemes, the school questions and modifies its procedures, objectives and policies. This strategic learning creates a change in beliefs, competencies, knowledge and practices. With the quality approach, the team becomes a proactive organization in its

environment, in which it faces both needs and results from users. Members learn from each other and from their actions thanks to a constant vigilance, an ongoing comparison and a self-evaluation as well as a capitalisation of the learning for the improvement and transitions of their own practises. The approach makes the team a learning organization “skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights”¹⁰ (Garvin 1993). It changes the school into a ‘learning school’ (Bouvier 2001) and promises progress for students and stakeholders.

However such promises encounter some impediments within schools, impediments that may limit a spread of the quality approach:

- The quality approach requires a lot of common time for evaluation, observation, analysis and planning. This amount of time must stay reasonable in order to perpetuate the development process.
- The quality approach requires ethic behaviours and is built on trust. It needs common values, a political will and a well-organised management.
- Professional cooperation was until recently only defined informally and by affinities. Today, the staff must break down this romantic representation of cooperation, and accept cooperation within an imposed team as a better way to work with others and to be better themselves.

5. Provisional balance

The librarian teacher evolves better as he finds room for reflexion amongst the reciprocity of a work team. Conducted within schools, self-evaluations offer such conditions as they are participative.

More thorough and continuous, the quality approach “Qual’educ” favours professional development of stakeholders, as well as changes in practices and improvement of actions. It turns the team into a ‘learning school’ in which the librarian teacher evolves in his practices, with a lift up from collective experience and a unifying and empowered role for educational and pedagogical projects.

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