

Essential Competencies of Indian School Librarians in the Digital Age: A Study

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Abstract:

The technology integration has made a swift take over among the children and youth alike. It's a proven fact that technology has brought in many opportunities to developing countries like India. Librarians have enthusiastically adopted technology for providing user oriented services. The challenge is whether the school librarians possess the competencies to adopt technology. With proper training, the school librarians can become the main link between digital resources and users. National agencies in India have proposed training programmes for librarians. An attempt is made to understand the approaches made by Indian Library Association, National Knowledge Commission, NCERT, etc in imparting digital competencies. This study lists the essential digital competencies needed by school librarians in the Indian context. Shortcomings in imparting digital competencies to the librarians are compiled through a structured questionnaire sent to a select sample of school librarians. A summary of the success of such efforts is presented with a proposed independent training module of imparting digital competencies for Indian schools.

Keywords: Competencies, digital competencies, training programmes, school librarians, Indian school libraries

0. Introduction

Digital Technology is working like a Midas touch for education in developing countries like India. It is quite contradictory to the growing belief in the developed world that constant use of digital technology is reducing the students' capacity to focus. Technology integration has made a swift take over the young readers. Be it the online book shops, the e-book readers, the web 2.0 facilities, social networking platforms, etc, every format is increasing the connection between literature and the children. It's a proven fact that technology has brought in many new opportunities. Libraries and librarians too, have benefited by this advancement and have enthusiastically adopted technology for providing user oriented services.

The challenge is whether the librarians specially the school librarians possess the competencies to integrate technology and literature. With proper training, school librarians can become the main link between the digital resources and users. Many national agencies in India like the National Knowledge Commission, National Mission on Libraries, have proposed training programmes for the librarians. School librarians need to develop certain competencies to handle the digital content taking over print content. In the following section, an attempt is made to understand what competencies are and their necessity for school librarians.

1. Understanding competencies:

A growing terminology of inter related and synonymous terms have over crowded the information landscape. In the Indian library scenario, ICT skills, technology skills, information technology skills, information literacy, digital literacy, and digital skills are being used to cover anything and everything to do with digital technology.

Wikipedia defines Competence as the ability of an individual to do a job properly. A competency is a set of defined behaviours that provide a structured guide enabling the identification, evaluation and development of the behaviours in individual employees. Competency is also used as a more general description of the requirements of human beings in organizations and communities. (1)

In the context of school libraries, there are two types of competencies discussed widely i.e. Professional and personal competencies. **Professional Competencies** are those that relate to the teacher-librarians' knowledge and skill in the areas of collaboration and leadership, curriculum and instruction, cooperative program planning and teaching, information resources, information access, technology, management and research, and the ability to apply these abilities as a basis for providing library and information services. While **Personal Competencies** represent a set of skills, attitudes and values that enable teacher-librarians to work efficiently and effectively, be good communicators, focus on continuing learning throughout their careers, demonstrate the value-added nature of their contributions and thrive in the new world of education. (2)

1.1. Digital competencies

The 21st century education scene is marked by the key concept of digital competency of professionals in the knowledge area. The nature of digital competency is exciting as well as

requires specific efforts by school librarians to adapt to the latest technology based skills since exposure to technology is still in its nascent stage in most Indian schools.

Digital competencies are defined as a set of knowledge elements, abilities, dispositions and conducts that enable individuals to know how ICTs work, what they are for and how they can be used to attain specific objectives. **Information competencies**, which are more ambitious in terms of the scope that the working group gave them, are defined as a set of knowledge elements, abilities, dispositions and conducts that enable individuals to recognise when information is necessary, where to find it, how to evaluate its suitability and how to use it appropriately in accordance with the problem posed. (3)

Though most of the personal and professional competencies are covered as a part of the curriculum in most of the library and information science courses, an additional effort has to be made by the professionals to update their skill base and be aware of the latest trends in technology applicable to their job profile. To understand the efforts made in this direction, a sweeping literature review is done of various training programmes, workshops and seminars conducted for school librarians in India.

2. Overview of training programmes for school librarians in India:

The rapid changes taking place in the area of information technology have direct and indirect implications on the library services. To keep pace with these developments and adopt suitable technologies for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the library services in the schools, continuing education programmes are essential. Here an attempt is made to identify and list some of the major training programmes and seminars conducted for school librarians. Though there aren't many papers written or programmes held on a regular basis, there are quite a few which are worth highlighting.

The Indian Library Association (ILA) is an important professional association working for the cause of library movement and development. Of its many objectives, the most important one is the promotion of the training of librarians. It organizes an annual library conference along with conducting activities like conducting workshops, seminars, etc which promote libraries and librarianship in India. ILA is a member of IFLA and the Commonwealth Library Association. The Association also drafted Model Public Library Bill and arranged advanced training and internship for Indian librarians with the British Library Association in London. (4)

The Indian School Library Association (ISLA) has been established recently with a mission to provide a national forum for those interested in promoting effective school library media programs. ISLA is affiliated to IASL. The official registration of ISLA is under process. (5)

National Knowledge Commission (NKC) was set up in June, 2005 by the Prime Minister of India, to prepare a blueprint to tap into the enormous reservoir of our knowledge base. (6) Noting the importance of school education, NKC held series of workshops and consultations around the country, to discuss issues of quantity, quality and access in school education. The commission has made a number of recommendations but those made in context of libraries were that of setting up a National Commission on Libraries, Preparing a National Census of all Libraries and revamping Library Information Science (LIS) Education, Training and Research facilities.

Subsequently a National Mission on Libraries (NML) has been set up by the Government of India, based on the recommendations done by NKC in its Report to the Nation (2006-2009). NML in its meeting on 18th May, 2012, took certain decisions for improvement in the library sector. These include: national census of libraries, content

creation and setting up of community information centres, up-gradation of the existing public libraries, school and college libraries and use of school libraries as community libraries, and improvement in library and information science education training and research facilities. NML has also decided to set up Working Groups with domain experts to prepare an implementation plan and two important ones are,

- Working Group on Up-gradation of the Existing Public Libraries, School/College libraries and use of school libraries as community libraries.
- Working Group on Library and Information Science Education, Training and Research Facilities. (7)

Information and Library Network (INFLIBNET) conducted an In-Service Training Programme for School Librarians on library automation, networking and E-Resources Management for forty five Kendriya Vidyalaya (Central School) School Library professionals from May 28th to June 17th 2004. The objective of the training programme was to create awareness about the modern technologies in Kendriya Vidyalaya School librarians. The programme consisted of comprehensive lectures and practical sessions on the topics ranging from basics of computers to website designing and digital library creation. (8)

The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), an apex body working for the improvement school education in particular, organized a one-day symposium on school libraries in collaboration with NKC in July, 2007. It was felt that there was a need to organise a national seminar for school librarians. Thus, NCERT organised a National Seminar from 10th – 11th February, 2009. The main purpose of this seminar was to facilitate a dialogue between school librarians and experts in the field of libraries and information services. Over 100 school library professionals from KVS, Navodaya Vidyalaya Schools, Government Schools, etc participated. A roadmap on the basis of the feedback gathered suggested that NCERT may conduct in-service / professional development programs for school librarians on regular basis. They also expressed that LIS courses may add school librarianship modules in universities and stressed on IT incorporation in the libraries. (9)

The Energy Research Institute organized a workshop on '*Developing professional competencies of school librarians: A holistic approach*' on 24 January 2012. The workshop was attended by 45 school librarians and aimed at creating awareness about latest trends and technologies in library and information science. During the Open Forum, the participants highlighted the constraints they face in their libraries and hoped that TERI would conduct more such workshops that would facilitate them to meet the challenges. (10)

1 THERE WAS A WORKSHOP CONDUCTED FOR 'ENHANCING PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCY OF SCHOOL LIBRARIANS IN THE DIGITAL ERA' BY MAHATMA GANDHI UNIVERSITY LIBRARY IN JUNE 2011 WITH THE COURSE CONTENT OF SCHOOL LIBRARY MANAGEMENT SKILLS, THE INTERNET, ORGANIZATION OF SCHOOL LIBRARY, PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH OF READING AND LIBRARY AUTOMATION. (11)

Anjali Gulati and R.L Raina in their paper 'Professional Competencies among Librarians and Information Professionals in the Knowledge Era', suggested that serious attention should be paid towards developing and enhancing the core competencies of the professionals. They opined that "an aspiring professional in LIS needs to know the basics of IT, particularly in the area of computer, communication and networking technologies". (12)

Prof Preeti Mahajan in her article “School Libraries in India: Present-day Scenario” in stated that “although, most of the public schools have their websites giving academic information, yet not much is available about their libraries and the services provided by them. In the current IT scenario, when the school libraries in the developed countries are being used as “school library media centers”, almost all of the school libraries are far from such a reality in India. IFLA should support international initiatives to promote school library activities and should promote the importance of school libraries through their publications. However, in the absence of set standards, the school librarians in India can use IFLA/UNESCO school library guidelines for framing up various policies. (13)

From this quick survey of the school library training programmes scenario in India, it is obvious that there is no single agency which is making a concerted and ongoing effort to equip the school librarians with the essential skills and to keep them updated with the technology application for improving library services. There is clear indication that much more needs to be done to identify the required competencies and impart training programmes for the same in the digital age on a regular basis which are focused and intensive.

3. Need for the study on Digital competencies for school librarians in India

UNESCO/IFLA School Library Manifesto says that “In an increasingly networked environment, school librarians must be competent in planning and teaching different information-handling skills to both teachers and students. Therefore, they must continue their professional training and development. (14)

The fundamental qualities and skills expected from the school library staff can be defined as follows: knowledge of information skills and of how to use information, knowledge of the materials which compose the library collection and how to access it, knowledge of child literature, media and culture, knowledge and skills in the fields of management and marketing and knowledge and skills in the field of information technology. (15)

This study has been undertaken with an intention to get an overview of the training programmes imparted and identify the necessary digital competencies for school librarians in India.

4. Objectives

This study was carried out with the following objectives in mind;

- Identify the essential digital competencies for school librarians in India
- Assess the various training programmes conducted to impart digital competencies
- Design a module for training programme exclusively for imparting digital competencies for school librarians

5. Methodology

Undertaking such a study to fulfil the above objectives required collection of the data on relevant aspects. In order to collect the data, a survey method has been used besides literature review. For this purpose a questionnaire was developed and select school librarians of various schools in India were the sample. The questionnaire (a structured and close ended) in which twelve questions were asked focussing on their understanding of skill requirement

in the digital age and their opinion on training for the same. It was sent through emails to the selected school librarians and answers were sought. In order to get the responses, follow up efforts were made through e-mails and phone calls. The data collected through the questionnaires is discussed in the analysis. On the same lines, a training module has been developed and proposed for school librarians to develop competencies required for the digital age.

6. Analysis of the study:

The questionnaires were sent to select fifty school librarians out of which twenty six responded till the date of analysis. The responses received against 12 pointed questions and have been analyzed and presented in the form of description.

The first question was asked as to whether the school librarians are inclined to adopt technology in providing effective services to their users. To which, thirteen respondents said that school librarians are inclined to adopt technology. Nine of them felt that it depends on the training imparted to adopt the latest technologies. Two said that it depends on the exposure to IT skills imparted during MLIS course. Only one respondent said that the librarians are not at all inclined to adopt the technology.

The second question attempted at checking the readiness of the school librarians to collaborate with the computer faculty and teaching staff in order to understand and implement the emerging trends and technologies for providing better services. Here, sixteen participants expressed that school librarians are willing to work in partnership with the computer faculty and teaching staff. Ten participants felt that it depends on the support of the management.

An attempt was made to understand the expertise of school librarians in evaluating learning resources in digital format both those which are subscribed and available free on the web to support the school curriculum. For this, ten respondents agreed that they have partial knowledge in evaluating resources in digital format. Eleven confidently expressed that they have the expert knowledge in evaluating digital resources. Three expressed that that they do not have a say in evaluating resources. Two frankly said that they do not have expert knowledge in evaluating resources.

For the question regarding contribution to school website and updating library webpage for the benefit of the parents, teachers and students, fourteen respondents expressed that they contribute and update as and when required. Five said that they seldom contribute to their websites. Four said that they contributed on a monthly basis, while only three expressed that they update their library page on weekly basis.

An effort was made to know whether the school librarians organize structured training programme to familiarize students with OPAC and other web based resources. In response, fourteen respondents were forth coming in their opinion that they organize structured training programme whenever need arises while eight responded that they do it once a year. Three of them said that they do it every semester. One responded that it is left to the students and teachers to learn by themselves.

When questioned on the effectiveness of professional (MLIS/BLIS) course to impart all aspects of digital technology to enable professionals to adopt it for providing effective services, nineteen respondents agreed that it helped them partially to understand while five expressed that the professional course did not help them at all and only two respondents felt that their professional course helped them completely to understand all aspects of digital technology.

When asked whether they get support of the school to attend training programmes to equip with digital competencies needed for providing better services, ten respondents expressed that, their schools support to attend but it depends on the cost, venue & duration of the training programme while nine said that their schools do not support them at all in attending such programmes. Seven clearly expressed that their schools would support them if they wanted to attend such programmes.

For the question as to whether they have attended any training programme which focussed on imparting digital skills for school librarians, eighteen respondents expressed that they have not attended any such programmes. Seven of them had mentioned that they have attended seminars and workshops on similar topics. One respondent mentioned that “I have mostly trained myself due to personal interest in IT issues”.

The crucial question was whether there was a need to design and impart a specific training programme enabling digital competencies for school librarians, all respondents agreed that there is a serious need to design and impart a specific training programme.

When the respondents were asked who in their opinion is the right agency to conduct training programmes for school librarians to acquire digital competencies; ten respondents suggested that it can be either INFLIBNET or DELNET or local library networks. Five of them felt that NCERT was the right agency and only three respondents felt that either ILA or ISLA can be the right agency. Seven respondents felt that some other competent agency should conduct such training programmes.

When asked as what in their opinion should be the essential components of a training programme to equip oneself with digital competencies, twenty four agreed that Library Automation is an essential component. Twenty one of them felt that the software tools like Operating Systems must be a part of the training programme. Seventeen respondents felt that Web Designing should also be included. Eighteen respondents mentioned that searching on the web is another area which the training has to include. Nine participants also felt Content Management should be included. Seventeen respondents again mentioned that E-resource Management is important while sixteen mentioned that Library 2.0 skills like Blogging, should be another major area. Thirteen respondents were of the opinion that Social Networking is another area that requires training. Eight respondents mentioned that Mobile Technology Applications should also be included. Fifteen respondents expressed that training should be imparted for effective use of Open Source Software. Ten respondents felt that training should include Open Access Resources. Seventeen respondents mentioned that Digital Archives & Repositories required training. Nine respondents mentioned that training was necessary for the effective use of Audio Visual Equipments & Resources.

When asked what, according to them, were the reasons for the lack of digital competencies, thirteen mentioned that it is due to lack of practical training in the essential technology. Fifteen of them expressed that lack of interest on the part of school management.

Ten of them mentioned that it may be due to the Lack of specific training programmes. Five of them mentioned that it may also be due to lack of willingness and lack of exposure.

7. Gaps identified in the training programmes & existing competencies:

The basic factor for any educational institute to move to the digital environment should be support from the management or any of the national level organizations. They should have the required digital infrastructure and expertise. Now most of the schools are making genuine efforts to adapt to the changes. With these changes, there will be positive repercussions on the school libraries too. The above study and literature review has brought into focus certain gaps that need to be covered in order to deliver efficient services. Some of the gaps are listed below.

- There is no structured training programme in imparting digital skills for the school librarians.
- The national and state level bodies working in the school education arena have not made concrete attempts to improve Information and Communication Technology skill level of the school librarians.
- School librarianship is not a sought after choice because of lack of specific training for school library media specialist and those working for school libraries have an inner desire to move to college or universities libraries and hence do not update themselves with recent trends and technology.
- Since there is absence of in-depth training at master's level of library and information science, most of school librarians lack the confidence to communicate with computer faculty as they fear that they do not know the right technical terminology and technical processes.
- They may have the necessary software awareness but when it comes to hardware, they are not so conversant with the technology.
- Most of them learn the digital skills on job, some read and acquire the skills but very few have the privilege to attend such training programmes.

The information collected through the study and the understanding gained through literature survey gave an insight into the working of the school library professionals and their skills. Based on this evidence, a list of essential competencies needed in the digital age have been compiled and presented below.

8. Digital Competencies for School Librarians:

The broad, but essential digital competencies for Indian school librarians are listed below.

The school librarian should have the,

- basic skills of Information technology
- awareness of Communication & Networking Technologies
- knowledge of Web based tools & technologies
- knowledge of different types of databases like the Bibliographic databases Non- bibliographic databases, Statistical databases, Full text databases, etc.
- library automation in-house operations
- knowledge of all types of e-resources and Web based resources
- exposure to Library Networks, Consortia
- skills of using Information Retrieval Tools and Web based Search Tools
- knowledge of design and delivery of web based services

- the flair for creating Digital Content
- the awareness of Open Educational Resources
- exposure to Content Management Systems
- some experience in creating Learning Object Repositories
- knowledge of E-learning tools and technologies
- skills of designing Library Web site
- aptitude for Integrating digital content with school curriculum
- information Literacy skills with regard to digital resources
- awareness of Multimedia Tools
- knowledge of Web 2.0 and Library 2.0
- awareness of use of social media
- skills to keep track of recent trends in information technology, digital resources

9. Proposed Training Model for imparting digital competencies:

Having listed these competencies, a training model has been designed taking in to account the above areas, specifically to impart an intensive, highly focused and practical oriented training to the school librarians in India. This model is designed keeping in mind the Indian context and the exposure school librarians have in India. It is an effort in this direction and can be modified and adapted to suit as per the requirement.

9.1. Objectives

The proposed programme should be conducted with the following objectives;

- To equip the school librarians to be competent in the digital era
- To integrate the library services into the overall schools' academic activities
- To act as a platform for collaborations between the school librarians for exchange of ideas and practices
- As a focused goal oriented training programme conducted as an academic exercise

9.2. Requirements

A separate centre has to be created with all necessary infrastructure, such as computing and networking, software tools, etc exclusively for such training programmes. This training programme can be conducted on the lines of University Grants Commission supported Refresher courses meant for library professionals working in the colleges and university libraries. It should be an intensive course with clear goals to take home the digital competencies. The course can be of six weeks duration. It would be convenient, if they are held during vacations, so that it will not affect the working of the library. The Government of India should support such training programmes on a long term basis. National agencies like NCERT, CBSE, ICSE and state level educational boards or similar level organizations should conduct these programmes. The librarians should get paid leave to attend these programmes. The criteria for selecting the librarians for the training programme should be that they should be a regular employee of the school and should have put in at least two years of service. The course material has to be prepared so that they can use it as reference. The topics should be imparted through lectures as well as practical sessions so that they get hands on experience. Some kind of assessment should be done at the end of the training session and only those who perform up to a mark can be given the certificate. This certificate should be given due weight-age while considering the librarian for further promotions in their respective schools.

Those who successfully complete such training programmes can be given incentives in the form of increments, etc. These kind of training programmes can begin as a pilot programme with government aided schools like Kendriya Vidyalayas, Navodaya Vidyalayas, etc, free of cost. The private schools can be later on included by charging certain amount of fees. Certain modules can be segregated as higher level specialized courses and may be offered to those who are interested in acquiring in-depth skills. In due course of time some specialized courses on each aspect may be offered online too. But for the training programmes to be successful, a thorough evaluation and feedback is a must. Also the topics should be handled by experts as resource persons. Course focus should be more on practical sessions. To get a global input, expert school librarians from developed countries may be invited to deliver lectures and conduct workshops. On a futuristic note the agency conducting such training programmes can have formal arrangements with IASL, IFLA and others to collaborate and create a global platform for learning and sharing.

9.3. Content for the proposed training programme:

- Basics of Information Technology
 - Computer hardwares- desk tops to tablets
 - Software-
 - operating systems
 - database management systems
 - application software
- Communication & Networking Technologies
 - Different communication technologies
 - Networking – Devices, tools & technologies
 - Wireless Technologies
 - Mobile devices – smart devices
 - Internet
 - World Wide Web
 - Cloud computing
 - Information Security
- Web based tools & technologies
- Designing different types databases- Principles
 - Bibliographic databases
 - Non- bibliographic databases
 - Statistical databases
 - Full text databases
- School Library automation
 - Planning to implementation
 - Infrastructure required
 - Selection of Library Management System- open source, proprietary
 - Metadata Standards followed in creating databases & catalogue records
 - Web based OPAC
- E-Resource Management- all types of e-resources
 - Identification, selection, procurements, organization, providing access, evaluation, renewal etc.
 - Focus on School level resources

- Web based resources
 - Scholarly resources
 - Digital Libraries
 - Virtual library
 - Portals
 - Evaluation of web resources
 - Focus on Indian resources
- Library Networks, Consortia, Co-operatives
- Information Retrieval Tools
 - OPACS
 - Federated Search Engines
 - Discovery Tools
- Web based Search Tools
 - Search Engines
 - Metasearch Engines
 - Scholarly search engines
- Design and delivery web based services
 - Over email
 - Mobile
 - Web
- Information Access Tools
- Creating Digital Content (school level content)
 - Hardware & software
 - Planning
 - Implementation
 - Standards
 - Access and evaluation
 - Preservation of information
 - Open Educational Resources
- Content Management Systems
- Creating Learning Object Repositories
- E-learning tools and technologies
- Library Web site designing-
 - HTML,
 - Dreamweaver, style sheets etc
 - Designing websites using Wordpress, Joomla etc.
 - Creating Wikis, Blogs etc.
- Integration of content with school curriculum
- Information Literacy skills with regard to digital resources
- Multimedia Tools (Audio visual resources
 - CDs, ACD, DVD, and other content holders

Handling of projectors, cameras and related tools
Teaching aids

- Virtual Reference Services
On and off campus using web tools
- Web 2.0- Different Tools, Technologies and their applications in school environment
- Library 2.0 for teaching & learning
- Use of social media in support of school curriculum & use of resources
E.g Book marking tools, blogs, wikis, YouTube etc source information and teaching and learning
- Recent Trends in information technology, digital resources, library application software
- Trends in application of technology in school libraries
- Case study- selected state of the art school libraries

10. Conclusion

Clearly, the future school libraries are going to be digitally dominated. Indian school librarians have the same level of passion and commitment to the profession like their counterparts from the developed nations. But, if they have to be on the same platform as them, they need to equip themselves with the essential digital skills and thereby enhance the teaching & learning skills of their users. Attending continuous professional development programmes however few they might be would give them an opportunity to understand the trends and latest technological developments for providing effective and efficient services at their workplace. Competence and collaboration are the key factors that may determine their professional growth and contribution.

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