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From old school to new profession
Presentation for New Professionals Conference, 6 July 2009

Introduction

Slide 1 - quote

"I don't get it. Why do I need to do this survey? Isn't it obvious to everyone that we have to have our school library to do all our school work. It's impossible to do without it, that's for sure."
 (Unnamed 8th-grade respondent to the Ohio School Libraries Study student survey quoted in Todd 2003, p.2)

While the need for a school library may be blindingly obvious to the young student quoted here, it is sadly not so readily apparent to all in the library and information or education worlds.

Slide 2 – montage of negative headlines

Many in the audience will be familiar already with the many stories of threats to school library provision, of cuts to staffing and book budgets, of the inevitable replacement of the school library by the Internet and the school intranet, etc. etc.

Slide 3 – images of new school libraries / library activities

Yet how many are also aware, say, of the stunning achievement of new libraries integrated both literally and metaphorically into the heart of new-build schools, of the inspirational work of recent School Library Association School Librarians of the Year, or of the involvement of children across the country in shadowing the CILIP Carnegie children's book award through the work of their school librarian?

Part 1: Secondary education and the New Professional

Slide 4 – Clip art figure of New Professional + keywords

The secondary education sector is frequently overlooked by New Professionals considering their first professional LIS post. This presentation sets out to explore the important contributions New Professionals have to make to this sector and conversely, the rich opportunities and stretching challenges it offers to them. It will draw on the personal experience of myself and my contemporaries, on professional research literature and on promotional and campaigning work in the field.

There are a few key questions which we should address first of all: what is a New Professional? What does the secondary education sector look like nowadays? It has seen many changes in recent years – even since the youngest of us was last there [and that's not me!]. Finally, in this educational context, what does the LIS professional actually do, what can the New Professional expect from the role?

We have already encountered many descriptions of the figure of the New Professional today. The New Professional may be a new graduate from library school, a career changer or an experienced LIS worker moving on from a non-professional post. They all however by definition bring to their work the fact that they are new; thus they offer a freshness of perspective; and what we might term a ‘professional self-understanding’: an awareness of their role in a shared occupational endeavour, a sense of their work as underpinned by a framework of ethical values and an acceptance of responsibility for their own practice and development.

Slide 5 – Image of traditional school crossed through

The secondary education sector today encompasses an enormous diversity of institutions: schools which specialize in languages, technology, sport, business and enterprise; new academies; schools whose students spending part of their week in occupational settings or further education colleges; schools offering international qualifications or providing vocational training; faith schools, sixth-form colleges, independent schools: the list goes on. All these diverse institutions share however their experience of recent major changes to educational practice and structures. These include the implementation of the Every Child Matters framework ensuring children’s well-being and development across all sectors of education and care; the ongoing moves towards a new more broadly-based structure for 14-19 education; an increased emphasis on individualized, personalized learning; preparations for the implementation of the Extended Schools programme; and more generally the challenges of harnessing the potential of rapidly developing information and communications technology for learning, and of preparing students for the future in an increasingly globalised world. In the words of two important professional commentators however, it is as true now as it was in the past that ‘Schools should be places where everyone of its community tastes the confidence that comes with success in some form or other’ (Brighouse and Woods 2008, p.xii). They go on to identify the activities of today’s school which make for success as follows:

Slide 6 – A framework of school processes

- *Leading at every level* – while recognizing the need for different styles in different circumstances and at different times.
- *Managing* – again at different levels, ensuring that everyone plays their part in getting the detail right.
- *Creating a fit environment* – visually, aurally, behaviourally and in a way that encourages learning.
- *Learning, teaching and assessing* – the bread, butter and jam of schooling. It occupies everyone’s time.
- *Developing staff* – not just teachers but all staff, by making sound appointments, providing thorough inductions and extensive further professional development, which combines individual and collective need.
- *Self-evaluating and critically reviewing* – an activity that prompts gradual or great change and which is now back centre-stage after some years in the shadows. (Brighouse and Woods 2008, p. xii)

So how does the LIS professional fit into this context? The school library, or learning resource centre, or whatever other term we use to describe it, has the potential to form the very heart of today's individualized, globalized and networked mutually supportive school community. According to the IFLA and UNESCO school library manifesto, adopted in 1999:

Slide 7 –UNESCO/IFLA School Library Manifesto

The school library provides information and ideas that are fundamental to functioning successfully in today's information and knowledge-based society. The school library equips students with life-long learning skills and develops the imagination, enabling them to live as responsible citizens. (UNESCO/IFLA 1999, para. 1)

It is interesting to see how the role description of the school librarian, as recently defined by CILIP, maps closely onto the description of the processes of successful schools outlined earlier:

Slide 8 - CILIP Role Description for School Librarian (abridged), on its own, then mapped onto the Framework of School Processes

- **Advise** senior management and other colleagues on policies for the provision of learning resources across the curriculum. Support the educational aims and objectives of the school, and monitor the effectiveness of the learning resource centre's contribution to learning and teaching.
- **Mediate** between learners and resources to enable learners to identify, locate and access the information they need.
- **Lead** the teaching of transferable information, learning and knowledge access skills which are the core skills of independent lifelong learning.
- **Manage and promote** a wide range of resources in a variety of formats, traditional and electronic, and where appropriate, the equipment to access them.
- **Promote** the development of reading and literacy skills for information and recreation and take a lead in creating a whole-school environment which encourages reading for pleasure.
- **Manage** a study environment for both curriculum-based and independent learning. This involves the management and integration of both physical areas and virtual learning environments to create positive learning spaces.
- **Enable** teaching staff to maintain a high level of awareness of professional development and relevant resources through the provision of appropriate professional materials and information.
- **Participate** in school – wide improvement through attending the regular cycle of meetings with senior staff.
- **Collaborate** with feeder primary schools to support transition between Primary/Secondary School.
- **Work** with FE institutions to develop information literacy strategies to support 14-19 vocational learning.
- **Work** with Youth Connexions to provide personal and social information for members of the school community.
- **Involve** the school library in home-school liaison projects that develop and support family learning.
- **Support** the engagement of parents/carers in their children's learning and curriculum needs.
- **Ensure** that the library supports all aspects of every student's development through understanding the Every Child Matters outcomes, supporting the PSCE programme, providing images for self-esteem and developing social skills through participation in library based activities. (CILIP 2009, pp.8-9)

There exists a significant body of recent research which has conclusively demonstrated the benefits to learners of access to professionally-managed information resources within their institutions: too much material exists to go into detail here, but a useful overview is

provided by the UK-based critical literature review published in 2001 by researchers based at The Robert Gordon University.

They found that:

Slide 9 - *Impact of School Libraries on Achievement and Learning literature review*

Where there is evidence of impact on learning, there are associated key factors of collection levels, library staffing levels and collaboration between the librarian and teacher.

(...)

There is no clear evidence to indicate the contribution made to learning by the various models of school library provision, although flexible scheduling appears to be an important factor in encouraging student use. The presence of a librarian and the quality and frequency of their instructional input has an impact on learning but the relationship between this and qualifications and personal attributes and experience is less clear. However, school librarians who take a professional and proactive approach to their role within the school can cite evidence of their impact on teaching and learning; and are more able to reflect, self-evaluate and develop further.

(Williams, Wavell and Coles 2001, Abstract)

Another important source is the Ohio Study quoted at the start of my presentation, which, importantly, includes a significant body of findings from a large-scale student survey - giving a voice in the debate to the users themselves.

The official authorities concur with the findings of the professional research. In 2006 Ofsted published its report *Good School Libraries*. It acknowledged that 'in the most effective primary and secondary schools visited, libraries and well trained specialist librarians had a positive impact on teaching and learning' (Ofsted 2006, p. 2).

Part 3: Opportunities for the New Professional

Potentially, then, the education sector offers an ideal opportunity for the new LIS professional to become involved in an inherently worthwhile undertaking. Due to the usually fairly small-scale nature of the operation and limited numbers of LIS staff within any individual school it also offers a unique opportunity for the full exercise and development of the new professional's skills. Thus it is potentially a worthwhile undertaking from the point of view of career considerations as well. Collection development, systems management, operations management, staff and volunteer supervision, budgeting, marketing, exploitation of Web 2.0 technology, partnership working, policy development and institutional reporting are all part and parcel of the role – and that's even before mentioning the children, and the most important part: the excitement, the limitless reach and the sheer fun of being involved in enthusing an even newer generation about books, information and the big wide world out there... On a personal note it is this excitement and fun which attracted me to make the move from academic libraries to schools; I find the intersection between the worlds of libraries and learning fascinating.

We know moreover that we will be needed; although precise figures are difficult to obtain it is clear from anecdotal evidence that many current LIS post-holders in schools are nearing retirement and the professional bodies and advocacy groups are keen to recruit new talent. The current generation of New Professionals is clearly highly suited to

today's rapidly changing educational world. One recent commentator has described the new information professionals of the so-called Generation X (those born between 1965 and 1980) as being defined by their experience of 'growing up at the dawn of the information revolution' and the following generation, moreover, 'have grown up with the accoutrements of the information society already formed and well-integrated into their lives' (Urigo 2000, p.2). They are characterized by the fact that they 'share similar life experiences all over the world': they are 'a small group with a global reach and the first generation to exploit truly borderless opportunities' (ibid., pp.14-15). They are comfortable with the library moving into the virtual world and they recognize that their own best opportunities may lie outside the traditional labels and outside the traditional physical library building (ibid., pp. 29 & 42). It seems to me that one particular strength they bring to the job is their comfortable but also critical perspective on both print materials and ICT: in a library world which sometimes seems polarized between supporters of the book and the screen they are in an ideal position to mediate and to ensure much-needed balance.

Part 4: Challenges for the New Professional

Tellingly, however, they also embody for employers a 'new workplace bargain', demanding job satisfaction and work-life balance as a compensation for loss of security, and taking charge of their own careers:

Slide 10 - The New Professional's 'new workplace bargain'

They (...) know they will not work at the same job for life, because they have learned early on that no job lasts forever. They know that they will have to maintain a steep learning curve for years to come, regenerating old skill sets and gaining new ones. They will have to stay ahead of changes by preparing for their next position even as they begin their current one, because they never know when the library's budget is going to be cut or their position eliminated (ibid., p. 38).

All this is in fact a very apt description for the experience of the New Professional in the secondary education sector as it is today. In potentiality it is an ideal place for the New Professional to start his or her LIS career. In actuality it poses them a number of stretching challenges.

Firstly, there is a very wide variation in current school library provision; thus New Professionals in different institutions will find themselves in very different physical settings, working as part of contrasting staffing configurations and within divergent budgetary conditions. While this may sound attractive in terms of variety on offer, it also means that the profession within this sector is relatively fragmented. It can be difficult for the New Professional to get a sense of what is on offer and indeed there are major issues with both entry to the sector and professional recognition within it.

To my knowledge, only one postgraduate librarianship course, the distance learning course at Aberystwyth, currently offers a module devoted to library and information work in schools. Modules covering the wider range of children's services, including schools, are available at five other institutions. It seems to be the case that rather than representing a common first destination for new library school graduates, the educational library

sector is rather reached via a roundabout route as a second step in a library career or as a sideways move from other library sectors or the teaching profession. One respondent to my request on the 'School Librarian's Network' mailing list for career experiences and reflections of recent entrants to the profession seems fairly typical in their experience:

Slide 11 - A New Professional's perspective

"(...) school librarianship was never really presented to me as an option when I was doing my MA. I applied for a job because my job was deleted due to Public Library cuts and I saw an advert at a school in the CILIP Gazette. I wasn't sure if schools were where I wanted to be (but it turned out to be the ideal place for me!)." (Anonymous e-mail correspondent, 20/05/2009)

Once the New Professional starts to look a little more closely at the sector, moreover, he or she will discover that the posts available vary considerably in status. According to a survey by Booktrust in 2007, only 42% of school libraries in the study were run by a full-time chartered librarian. Others were run by library assistants or teacher/librarians (Booktrust 2007, pp.33-34). It is worth noting that the *Good School Libraries* report by Ofsted identified the most effective staffing combination as being a full time and well qualified librarian supported by a part-time librarian employed during school hours (Ofsted 2006, p.10). It is not even compulsory for a school to have a library as there is no statutory requirement for this - as there is for a prison however!! In line with status, pay also varies widely and does not always parallel that of teaching professionals. The audience may be familiar with the recent *Update* article 'How much is a school librarian worth?' (Ritchie 2009) which related to the Scottish system and also identified discrepancies between school and public librarian salary scales; it might be a worthwhile exercise to obtain similar data for England and Wales.

As we might expect, in consequence, within individual school settings, the library or learning resource centre is accorded widely varying levels of recognition and usage. CILIP has identified the problem that 'Heads and other senior school managers are often unsure of the roles and capabilities of a professional school librarian and do not make the most effective use of the school library in delivering the learning and broader child well-being objectives of the school' (CILIP 2009, p. 5). Thus while some posts offer New Professionals the ideal opportunity as described above to play a full role in the life of the school, others may find themselves marginalized, or worse, as the first target of cutbacks. A recent article for Booktrust has highlighted this discrepancy. It quotes Anne-Marie Tarter, SLA School Librarian of the Year 2006:

Slide 12 - A School Librarian of the Year's perspective

"We're fighting such an uphill battle because school libraries and school librarians are not statutory in this country. You get individual pockets where they're working as we do and everybody thinks the library is the heart of the curriculum. Then you get schools where they're closing the library because they have the internet." (Travis 2008, para. 12).

Furthermore, even where the librarian is afforded true professional recognition and is able to fully exercise his or her skills, opportunities for straightforward progression are limited both within the individual school and within the sector more generally. As one of my e-mail respondents noted:

Slide 13 - Another New Professional's perspective

I do worry that the prospects for school libraries are somewhat bleak (...) I'm concerned that I might not be able to get a job which pays enough in the future (...). There isn't much scope for me to work my way up a payscale as I get older, unlike in other professions (...) The biggest thing I feel is that I need to be flexible in the future - to gain as many skills as possible, keep up with new technologies and developments, keep up with what is happening in the Education world, and to keep proving to my managers how invaluable I am! I feel like I have to continuously validate my existence, otherwise I might find myself out of a job.

(Anonymous e-mail correspondent, 20/05/2009)

In addition to these structural issues, work within the sector also poses day-to-day challenges for the New Professional. The most significant of these relates to the special nature of the setting. In addition to their professional duties, New Professionals here also face significant demands on their interpersonal skills. The challenges range in my experience from supporting learners with special needs through to last-day-of-term crowd control! A typical preoccupation of my e-mail respondents was 'ensuring pupils use the Library appropriately' (Anonymous e-mail, 22/05/2009). High on their wish-list was more targeted training, in relation to behaviour management and teaching skills, either as part of MA courses or as CPD. Interestingly, on this point the New Professionals' demands parallel the findings of the professional literature: the literature review cited earlier highlights the fact that much of the evidence supporting the view that school libraries can have a positive impact on academic achievement came from countries where school librarians also have teaching training, and thus one of the review's main recommendations is that more consideration should be given to pre-service and professional development. Importantly however they consider that this should apply to both librarians and teachers, to encourage mutual professional understanding (Williams, Wavell and Coles 2001, Abstract). As might be expected, another major day-to-day issue facing New Professionals in the school library is learning to network and work in partnership with teaching staff and also with a wide variety of external agencies. Another key concern is gaining respect and recognition as a young LIS professional in a field which can seem overwhelmingly dominated by more mature workers.

Conclusion

The secondary education sector, then, might not represent an ideal opportunity for the New LIS Professional but rather a real opportunity: a real opportunity to become involved in a genuinely critical situation at a key moment, when research has highlighted the benefits to learners of professionally-managed information resources but in many institutions this access is under threat; a real opportunity to exercise and develop the full range of the LIS professional's skills, and more personal qualities besides; and a real opportunity to be involved in information provision which is not an end in itself but rather the means for engagement with the world and discovery of the self - arguably the very essence of what the New Professional should strive for. It is clear that as things stand, New Professionals entering this field will have to take charge of their own careers and employ much creativity in directing their own progression - and by doing so will begin to exert pressure for wider structural change. In this, however, they are likely to find inspiration all around them, since working in a school library offers a very special opportunity to be at the heart of creative development and self-actualization every day:

Slide 14 - Quote from Spufford, *The Child that Books Built*

Literacy allows access to a huge force for development. When an adult in a remote village rejoices that ABC is mastered, it isn't just because books bring the world to them; books bring them, in new ways, to themselves. If the new reader is a child the situation seems even more charged with promise. We grow yet more certain that the book in the hand is a tool of growth. Fiction's onward movement fuses there, not with the ordinary traffic of our existence, but with the accelerated coming-to-be that we do in childhood. (Spufford 2002, p. 9)

Slide 15 - montage of Dame Alice Owen's School Library photos

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