

# There is nothing so practical as good theory

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As individual teacher-librarians and their professional associations update their rôle statements, how often do they include organisational theories in the literature review? Are they aware of Lewin's aphorism: *There is nothing so practical as good theory*? Organisational theories seek to explain why organisations are structured in particular ways, why people in organisations behave in particular ways, and the significant factors which affect the organisation and the people in them.

In the school context, to what extent does the school's structure and culture enhance/limit the teacher-librarian's rôle and the execution of that rôle. For example, if all classes and subjects in the school are rigidly timetabled, then does the teacher-librarian (who believes that flexible scheduling for the resource centre is educationally the best way to encourage independent and resource-based learning) have time to work at loosening the school-wide timetable before introducing flexible scheduling for the library? The physical structures which constrain are well known to teacher-librarians. Seating, the size and range of the collection, and the hardware and software available all affect teaching methods and timetables. The school's organisational culture, that is its values, assumptions, beliefs and patterns of behaviour, is equally important. If political correctness of whatever hue is embedded in a school's culture, to what extent does it influence consciously or unconsciously the teacher-librarian's selection of resources?

The division and coordination of work concern organisational theorists. How is it done in schools? Ever since parents transferred the education of their offspring from the family to an outside organisation, the school, children have been organised into groups with each group having one adult in charge. The groups may be arranged either by age, subject or level of ability. Therefore, in terms of organisational theory, it can be argued that the classroom with one adult in charge is the basic building block for schools. All other school structures presume classrooms as the corner stones.

If this premise is accepted, then how does classroom structure affect the teacher-librarian committed to team teaching as part of cooperative program planning and teaching (CPPT)? Team teaching requires two adults in charge of one group, even if the students are divided into two groups, at a time when the dominant educational philosophy is economic rationalism and for doing more with less. How does CPPT line up with the productivity targets in enterprise agreements? How does individualised instruction succeed in the structural (classroom) organisation of schools? I suggest that this latter issue is one which teacher-librarians have solved in the collection management.

The traditional library dictum is *the right book to the right child at the right time*. Yet in managing collections, teacher-librarians select materials relevant for a group of students, and the one or two students doing Latin or Sanskrit may be referred to other sources for information. Do the organisational theories on division of work suggest that teacher-librarians need to reassess team teaching and stress more their other teaching rôles — for example teaching in the new formats? If the classroom is the basic grouping for schools, should the library/resource centre be considered as a specialist teaching room in the same way as music rooms or laboratories? If teacher-librarians respond Yes to either of these questions, do they have to re-examine their rôle within the schools?

However, division of work is only half of the equation. Where

is coordination? Are other staff beside the Principal responsible for coordination? If teacher-librarians consider themselves the schools' gatekeepers to external information networks, how do they ensure that they are able to coordinate these networks? Is there a dedicated telephone with modem in the school library? Take a school-wide example. To what extent have school development plans, as they are called in South Australia, and national profiles proscribed the teacher's autonomy and introduced more specific goals such as developing in students the skills of information processing rather than perhaps the more familiar and abstract goal of educating students for life — a goal which can be interpreted in many ways by all the individuals involved — students, teachers, governments, employers, and parents? How many teacher-librarians have struggled to have CPPT and/or information literacy written into a school development plan because they recognise instinctively that if CPPT and information literacy are parts of the structural organisation of the school (that is, parts of the school's Aims and Objectives) they are more likely to be implemented?

If teacher-librarians are interested in these issues then I suggest they read the literature on schools as organisations, for example the writings of Sergiovanni and Corbally (1984), Handy and Aitken (1986), to name but a few. A more familiar starting point would be Jean Brown's article, *Changing teaching practice to meet current expectations: implications for teacher-librarians*, in the November/December 1988 issue of *Emergency librarian*. In this article, Brown reviews the research on the nature of teaching and in a striking table compares it with the expectations for teaching as exemplified in the school librarianship literature.

The school librarianship literature records many examples of the powerlessness of teacher-librarians excluded from the managerial structures of the school and some of these articles read as if teacher-librarians are powerless because they lack the necessary inter-personal skills. However, as Kantor (1979) argues power in organisations requires *access to resources and information and the ability to act quickly*. Even when the school's information specialist, the teacher-librarian is not the person with the greatest access to resources and information as budget allocation demonstrates. The teacher-librarian recommends an appropriate budget for the resource centre but may or may not be part of the final decision-making committee.

One final devil's advocate question about the workers in schools from an organisational theory point of view. Handy and Aitken in their book, *Schools as organisations*, ask how we consider students. In an organisational sense, schools are like prisons. They have a non-voluntary clientele. Handy and Aitken have observed that elementary and primary students seem to be treated as co-workers, year 12 students as clients for whom the school provides the necessary resources and other secondary students as products who are shifted around from subject to subject. How do teacher-librarians regard and treat students — as information literate co-workers, products or clients? ■

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