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**Classroom Libraries: the Experience of Village Adventist  
Elementary School in Berrien Springs, Michigan**

by Felipe E. Tan

Definition: The term “Classroom Library” refers to a decentralized way of providing library services by placing library collection right inside a classroom.

Objectives:

1. To have a historical overview of school libraries
2. To view Village Adventist Elementary School in general and its classroom libraries in particular.
3. To investigate how teachers and students perceive the classroom libraries.
4. To look at the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of classroom libraries.

Significance of the Study

Fiscal challenges confront elementary schools. Many school administrators treat school libraries like sacrificial lambs to balance the budget. In a survey conducted by *School Library Journal* on school expenditures and collections for 2009-2010, it has been observed that,

“Overall , elementary school libraries continue to be short-staffed, and they had shorter operating hours than other school levels.”

– Lesley Farmer, “SLJ’s Spending Survey” *School Library Journal*, March 2011, p. 42.

Some elementary schools decentralized their libraries, and distributed their collections to classrooms. Instead of a full time school librarian, teachers were asked to manage their respective classroom collections. How effective were classroom libraries in Village School?

Methodology:

1. Library research on elementary schools and classroom libraries.
2. Descriptive study of the classroom libraries of VAES.
3. Interview with VAES administrators and faculty.
4. Survey questionnaires to faculty and students.

Historical Overview of School Libraries

1. “The idea of placing a library in the elementary school can be traced back to Europe. According to ‘Rapports des agents du ministre de l’interieur dan les departments,’ a small collection of books was to be placed in each school for the use of the pupils. The collection was under the care of the school administrator known as ‘Instituteur’.” School libraries flourished especially in France in 1800s. (Margaret L. Brewer and Sharon O. Willis, *The Elementary School Library*, The Shoe String Press, c1970, p.1-10)
2. During the 1800s, the Governor of New York, DeWitt Clinton, visited Europe and saw the elementary school libraries that led him “to place the school library in a position of prominence in his educational ideals.”

3. In 1827, Governor Clinton recommended the formation of better school systems to the New York legislature. He proposed that to have better schools, “a small library of books should be placed in every school house.” (Brewer and Willis, p.2f.)
  - It was however only in 1835 that the voters in New York passed a law permitting school districts to levy a tax specifically for library use. The school district libraries, as they were called, grew rapidly.
  - However, in 1843, authority was granted to use the library fund to purchase school equipment and payments of teachers’ salaries.
  - At that time, 125 books were the minimum recommended for districts containing 50 school children or less.
  - In 1874, the law of 1835 was repealed, which led to the gradual decline of elementary school libraries in New York.

What happened in New York was characteristic of school library development in other Northern and New England states. During the period 1835-1860, nineteen states passed legislation to promote public school libraries.

However, during the Civil War (1861-1865), schools and their libraries were deprived of funds as well as personnel and facilities. By 1890, few elementary school libraries existed. In 1900, classroom libraries were prevalent in schools. Some schools collaborated with the public libraries to bring library service to their pupils, while others had purchased books from their school funds and placed them in individual classrooms. Teachers favored the classroom library setting because they could more or less supervise what the children read.

In 1925, The National Education Association, published the “Elementary School Library Standards” which paved the way for development of centralized elementary school libraries. One factor that led to centralize library operations was the growing diversity of the type of library resources. Magazines and newspapers, victrola records among other things were introduced in addition to a basic list of 212 books for the beginning elementary school library. It became difficult to manage classroom libraries.

In 1945, the American Library Association came up with “School Libraries for Today and Tomorrow” which provided general guidelines and recommendations for school library development. In 1958, with the passage of the National Defense Education Act, funds were made available to schools for the primary purpose of building resource and curriculum materials.

In 1965, Elementary school library development experienced tremendous growth with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This act “has produced a faster growth of elementary school libraries than any previous stimulus. This growth resulted in greater quantity and quality of library materials and the development of school library standards in many of the fifty states.”

In 1969, the *Standards for School Media Programs* provided school systems with quantitative recommendations for the major resources and facilities and equipment for school libraries serving grade levels, K-12. In the years that followed, library associations and educational organizations issued guidelines to strengthen school libraries. School libraries were also referred as School Media Centers.

The importance of school libraries to student's education has been clearly demonstrated in a body of research on the relationship of test scores and library media center quality in schools in 14 states since 1990.

"Whether student achievement is measured by standardized reading achievement tests or by global assessment of learning, research shows that a well-stocked library staffed by a certified media specialist has a positive impact on student achievement regardless of the socioeconomic or educational levels of the community." – Melonie Menefee, "The Changing Library" *American School Board Journal*, Aug. 2009, p. 33.

#### Village Adventist Elementary School

Mission Statement – Academic, Spiritual and Cultural

1. For the school year 2010-2011, VAES had 178 students from Kindergarten to 8th grade.
2. VAES had an average of 20 students per grade level.
3. Ten teachers, 5 full-time staff, and 7 part-time staff.

#### Classroom Libraries of Village Adventist Elementary School

In an interview, former principal Jay Colburn said that as far back as he could remember VAES operated a centralized library. In another interview, a retired faculty, Marvin LaCourt, said that in the 1980s, the school had a centralized library with the seventh-grade teacher serving as librarian in addition to teaching responsibilities. (Interview with Marvin LaCourt, March 2011)

In 1985, the room housing the library collection was damaged by water leaking from the ceiling. Termites were found on the book shelves. The collection was moved to another room.

In 1988, Village School experienced an increase in enrollment. Village School moved from being a multigrade to a one teacher per grade level. This created a need for more rooms. At this point, the school library was decentralized and collection distributed to the classrooms which is the present set-up now.

Here is the information regarding the classroom libraries of Village School:

#### Library Collection: From Kinder to 8th grade

1. There are nine classroom libraries in Village School, one per grade level.
2. Books: 10,696 volumes or an average of 1,188 volumes per classroom library.
3. Reference books: 386 volumes or 43 reference volumes per classroom library.
4. Magazines: 11 titles
5. The kinder and first grade have a total of 107 kits which are books and tapes, and the first grade has 25 audio tapes.
6. Computers: 36 computers or an average of 4 computers per grade level. The Kindergarten has 2 computers which the teacher uses for classroom activities.

- The subject areas covered in the classroom library collections show a wide variety. The library materials are about nature, Bible stories, fiction/stories, biographies, history, poetry, art, drawing, science, sports, reference books.
- On funding, Village School allocates \$31 per child per school year. This amount comes from the registration fee. This is supplemented by a subsidy of \$11 per child per school year by the Michigan Conference.
- Village School receives donations either in cash or books. During book fairs or through newsletters, the Village School advertises book titles that the teachers want to add to the classroom libraries.

### Survey Questionnaires – Teachers and Students

About the questionnaires.

1. The survey questionnaire was devised by Anne-Marie Tarter, librarian of Ripon Grammar School, North Yorkshire, in England. Anne-Marie Tarter was School Librarian of the Year for 2006 awardee.
2. I used two sets of questionnaires. One for the school teachers and the other for the students.

### Survey Questionnaires for the Teachers

3. The questionnaire is divided into four parts:
  - a. Library use
  - b. Library resources
  - c. Internet use
  - d. Opinion on the library

VAES had ten teachers. Nine classroom teachers responded. VAES has a full-time music teacher who did not have a classroom library and could not participate.

#### On Library use:

I use the library: daily	5
weekly	2
occasionally	2
rarely	0

I use the library primarily to: (may choose more than one answer)

support my teaching	6
find materials for pupils	9
use reference materials	4

#### On Library resources

The resources in the library:

support my teaching extremely well	0
are adequate to support my teaching	8
are not adequate to support my teaching	1

The resources in the library:

are all up to date	0
are somewhat up to date	9
are not at all up to date	0

I recommend specific library resources to pupils:

frequently	7
occasionally	1
rarely/never	1

Internet Use

I would consider myself to be:

a confident user of the internet	9
a developing user of the internet	0
a beginner user of the internet	0

I use the internet primarily to:

(may choose more than one answer)

download materials for pupils	8
bookmark sites for pupils to use	6
find materials to support my teaching	8
acquire professional information	7

Open-ended question:

What additional facilities or services do you think the library should offer to encourage more use?

- a. Seven teachers wrote that they preferred a central library facility/room rather than a classroom library. They mentioned that they hope for the implementation of school strategic plan to convert the multipurpose hall to a Media Center when a building is added.
- b. One teacher suggested that all books are entered in a database so that all teachers know what is available and can borrow from each other. This teacher recommended the collection be classified using Dewey Decimal.

Survey Questionnaires for the Students

The one for students contained 22 items. These 22 items ranged from library use to evaluation of resources. At the end of the questionnaires were open-ended questions where students can express their opinions. Care was taken in selecting the questionnaire. The questions were simple enough as to be easily understood by elementary students.

Survey was administered to students from third to eighth Grade. Out of the 131 students, 122 or 93% took part in the survey. Except for number 1 and 3, I took the top three highest scores for the purpose of brevity. If anyone who is interested to see the full data can come and see me after the presentation:

1. Use the library:

Daily	11
Weekly	46
At least once each half term	23
Less than once a half term	17
Never	12

2. I use the library for: (may choose more than one answer)
- |                                  |     |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| Reading                          | 100 |
| When it is part of a lesson      | 31  |
| Finding information for homework | 28  |
3. The age of books in the library is mostly:
- |          |    |
|----------|----|
| Very new | 0  |
| New      | 47 |
| Old      | 62 |
| Very old | 13 |
4. The number of books in the library is:
- |             |    |
|-------------|----|
| Just enough | 63 |
| Too few     | 45 |
| Too many    | 14 |
5. When I cannot find the information or books I need, it is most often because:
- |                                     |    |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| The library has nothing on my topic | 60 |
| I don't know where to look          | 43 |
| The materials are already on loan   | 12 |
6. If I cannot find what I want:  
(may choose more than one answer)
- |                                |    |
|--------------------------------|----|
| I find the information at home | 54 |
| I ask for help                 | 50 |
| I go to another library        | 28 |
7. When I need information for schoolwork, I most often use resources from:
- |                   |    |
|-------------------|----|
| Home              | 77 |
| Public library    | 39 |
| Classroom library | 21 |
8. Would you describe the library as: (may choose more than one answer)
- |             |    |
|-------------|----|
| Quiet       | 62 |
| Boring      | 57 |
| Comfortable | 53 |

Observations regarding the library:

1. Quantitatively, the library collection is commendable. The book collection (regular and reference) has a total of 11,082 volumes. On the average, there are 1,231 volumes per classroom library. With an average of 20 students per grade level, Village School has an average

of 62 books per student. This does not yet include the kits, audio tapes and magazines. Quantitatively speaking, this is above the 20 books per child recommended by International Reading Association. The figure is also goes beyond outstanding level in a study led by Hoffmans. (Hoffman, J., Sailors, M., Duffy G., & Beretvas, S. "The Effective Elementary Classroom Literacy Environment: Examining the Validity of the TEX-IN3 Observation System." *Journal of Literacy Research*, 2004, v.36, p. 303-334. Cited by Denise N. Morgan, et al., *Independent Reading: Practical Strategies for Grades K-3*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 2009), p. 76.

However, qualitatively, there is plenty of room for improvement. The figures were number of volumes and there were duplicates. Also, as shown in the survey questionnaires, there were old and very old books in the collection, and there is a need for a collection development program.

2. Budget. The allocation of \$31 per student at Village School plus the subsidy of \$11 per child from the Michigan Conference making a total of \$42 per child is commendable. In one study on elementary schools in Texas, it has been observed that "Schools with the highest performance allocated as much as \$36.02 per student for library expenses while low-performing schools spent as little as \$16.52 per student." – Melonie Menefee, "The Changing Library" *American School Board Journal*, The Changing Library, Aug. 2009, p. 34.

Note: I emailed Melonie Menefee regarding the figures. She responded saying that by the time her article was published Aug. 2009, the figures were few years old already. She gave me the impression that the figures must have somewhat increased.

3. In the survey questionnaires for teachers, all faculty considered themselves as confident user of the internet. This high computer literacy of faculty and use of computers for instructional purposes is commendable. The Village School has 36 computers in the 9 classrooms.

"The median number of computers in the school library at the elementary and K-8 level was 9." – Lesley Farmer, "SLJ's Spending Survey", *School Library Journal*, March 2011, p. 46.

Village School has a full time computer technician on its staff.

4. Students find the resources of classroom libraries limited. In the survey questionnaires, the other sources the students go for information are the public library, the internet and parents.

## Evaluation

### Strengths

1. The classroom library provides the students immediate, daily access to the library collection.  
It is interesting to note the following:

“Research demonstrates that students in classrooms with a diverse collection of appealing books read 50 percent more than students who do not have access to a classroom library.” – Phyllis C. Hunter, “Classroom Libraries,” *Instructor*, Jan/Feb 2004, v. 113, Issue 5, p. 36.

“In classrooms with well-designed library centers, children interact more with books, demonstrate more positive attitudes toward reading, spend more time reading, and exhibit higher levels of reading achievement. – National Assessment of Educational Progress, cited by Phyllis C. Hunter, “Classroom Libraries,” *Instructor*, Jan/Feb 2004, v. 113, Issue 5, p. 36.

2. Teachers can supplement classroom instructions with materials from the library. For example, the teacher can select and display books prominently related to what classroom lessons.
3. The presence of computers in classroom libraries plus the guidance of the teacher will contribute to the learning experience of the students.

#### Weaknesses

1. Managing the library is an additional task to the school teacher. It is not easy for the school teacher to effectively carry out the task of a librarian while teaching full-time.
2. As a result, the classroom library collections are not cataloged. There is no integrated list of the collections of the nine classroom libraries. A teacher or student has no idea what materials are available in other classroom libraries.
3. There is no overall collection development policy for the classroom libraries. The teacher is the one who decides which books or library materials to purchase based on his classroom needs. There is no regular weeding program which meant that the classroom collections contain old and obsolete materials.
4. There are no uniform rules for using or borrowing items from the collection.

#### Opportunities

1. Organizing classroom library collection may be an opportunity for learning. Involve students in organizing the collection. In addition, the students become aware of what are available in the classroom library leading to greater interest to read.

Jill A. Jones, “Student-Involved Classroom Libraries” *The Reading Teacher*, v. 59. No. 6, March 2006, p. 576-580. Jill Jones wrote an interesting article on involving students in organizing classroom libraries can be learning experience.

2. The presence of computers in the classroom plus the close supervision of the teacher can be an enriching library experience to the students. The teachers can select websites related to the topics discussed in the classroom. Student projects can be planned to involve the use of digital resources.



3. Collaboration with the public library will enhance the effectiveness of the classroom library. School teachers can compile a list of resources from the public library catalog. The list will be posted to supplement the classroom library collection.
4. Teachers can select books for their classroom libraries from annual lists of award-winning titles. Examples:
  - a. The Boston Globe-Horn Book Awards
  - b. The Randolph Caldecott Medal
  - c. The Chicago Public Library's Best of the Best
  - d. The Children's Literature Network
  - e. The Coretta Scott King Award
  - f. The Parent's Choice Foundation Award
  - g. The Carlotta Zolotow Award
5. Teachers can improve classroom instruction and maximize the effectiveness of classroom collection by not displaying all the books at once. Display books related to the classroom topics, or themes plus some extras.
6. Teachers can improve access by using hanging plastic bags or zip lock bags.

#### Threats

1. The absence of a professional librarian places the usefulness of the classroom library at the mercy of the teacher. If a teacher has low priority on the classroom library, the tendency for neglect is great. The teacher may be so busy that he or she may not have time to properly select books nor encourage students to use the library.
2. The absence of a collection development policy means that classroom libraries have different coverage of topics. The nature of the collection will depend entirely upon the classroom teacher. A student who spent a year in a grade level where the teacher was enthusiastic with the classroom library may move to the next grade level where the teacher did not care anything about the classroom library, the student will be disappointed.
3. The danger of having obsolete and old books is great in a classroom library. Teachers with no library experience will not know how to weed the collection. The presence of old books in the classroom can have a negative influence upon the attitude of students not only upon the classroom library but also upon the school.

#### Recommendation:

1. In the strategic plan of Village School, the school administration decided to convert the multi-purpose hall or gym to a centralized library or media center. This is an excellent plan. I recommend that the school administration work on the architectural plans, construction costs based on a timetable of implementation, and formulate a fund raising program.

2. I strongly recommend that Village School include in the strategic plan the employment of a full-time instructional librarian or media specialist to work side by side with school teachers.
3. When the plan for a centralized library will materialize, I also recommend that each classroom consider having a shelf to display books recommended for reading and related to lessons taught by the teacher.