Mapping Library Spaces: Measuring the Effectiveness of School Libraries using a Socio-Spatial Approach

Chin Ee, Loh
National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

There are a number of studies showing positive correlation between an effective school library and academic achievement (Lonsdale, 2003; Todd & Kuhlthau, 2005), and quantitative research have demonstrated that factors such as having certified school librarians, information literacy programmes, greater librarian-teacher collaboration are some of the factors that contribute to effective school libraries (Small, Shanahan, & Stasak, 2010). However, beyond these measures of effectiveness, how else can school administrators and educators measure the effectiveness of their school libraries to cultivate a love of reading (McKechnie & Rothbauer, 2006) and develop critical information literacy skills (Kapitzke & Bruce, 2006) for the 21st century?

In this article, I propose a socio-spatial approach that schools can use to measure the effectiveness of their school libraries.

What is a Socio-Spatial Approach?

A socio-spatial approach proposes that attention to the social and the spatial through detailed observation and mapping of the use of space over time can help librarians and educators to better understand how students are using the library. While quantitative results measuring numbers (such as library attendance and frequency of book loans) can contribute to our understanding of library use, examining the organization of the physical, social and affective space of the library over a period of time provides insights into the *how* and *why* of library effectiveness.

Mapping the *physical space* of the library highlights the resources that are available as well as the placement of the resources. Spatial arrangements dictate social relations, and have an implication on how students interact within the library space and how students feel about the

library. Mapping the *social space* of the library requires attention to the kinds of social behavior observed in the library, and mapping the *affective space* requires a commitment to understanding how students feel about the library. Taken together, this three dimensional snapshot of the school library can reveal effective spaces as well as spaces for improvement.

Research Methodology

This research was conducted as a case study, which allows for the understanding of "complex social phenomena" (Yin, 2003, p. 2). I draw on ethnographic methods of observation, interviewing, and fieldnotes to understand the culture of students. The study was conducted in Tembusu Secondary School (a pseudonym) over a year, from October 2013 to October 2014, as part of a larger study on the literacy practices of students in a Singapore government school, and the effectiveness of the school's reading programmes.

The library was identified as an under-utilized space based on a school-wide survey of 1,113 students. Findings revealed that only 40.9% of the students visited the school library, out of which a dismal 21.8% were regular visitors (at least once a week). Given the schools' effort at promoting reading, the research question that I was interested in was: Why were students not utilizing the school library?

Mapping the Space of Tembusu Secondary School

I demonstrate in this section how a socio-spatial approach enabled me to understand why the library was not perceived by students as an effective space for promoting reading and the acquisition of information literacy. The library had all the appearances of a library: there was a librarian's desk, fiction and non-fiction in shelves, trolleys and on display, magazines and newspapers, some multimedia resource, sofas and armchairs to lounge on, and tables and chairs

for students to work. Yet, it was severely under-utilized and generally gave an impression of being empty rather than full most times I visited.

Mapping the Physical Space

TEMBUSU SECONDARY SCHOOL
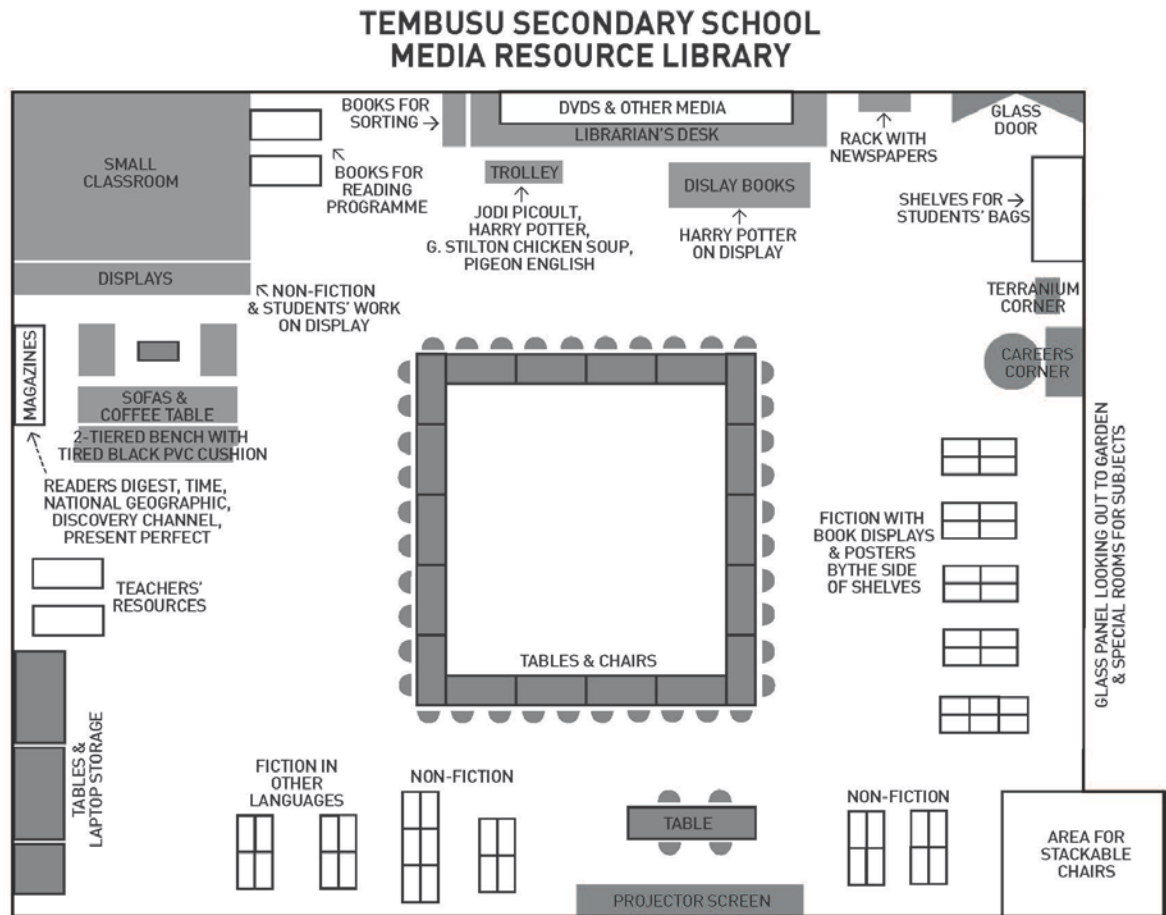## MEDIA RESOURCE LIBRARY

Figure 1. Map of Tembusu Media Resource Library

The two-dimensional map gives a bird's eye view of how the library is organized. What stands out in the diagrammatic representation is the arrangement of the tables and chairs in the middle of the room. The tables and chairs are moved according to need, often in rows, to facilitate the use of the library as an extra air-conditioned classroom space for student work.

The location of resources and organization of space shapes the social uses of the space, and in this case, the arrangement of the library as a classroom space reflects the social use of

space. In my observations at the school, the library was often utilized for classroom work, which tended to be word processing rather than information exploration tasks. There were limited non-fiction books in that library for students to use for research.

Figure 2. Picture of Layout of Tables and Chairs in Library.

Adding to the impression that the Tembusu library was not a space for the acquisition of information literacy was the fact that there were no computer stations in the library. Instead, the computers were located elsewhere in the school. Laptops were locked up and could only be accessed by teachers for classwork. Symbolically, the lack of computer terminals signaled that the Tembusu library was not the place to go to for acquisition and application of critical information literacy.

The most well-coordinated section in the library is the cosy Careers Corner located at the entrance of the library. Updated magazines and information surrounded a brightly coloured table and stools from Ikea, and information about various career options were easily located. This is in line with the school's priority with helping students make appropriate educational and career choices for their future.

Figure 3. Careers' Corner

While books were displayed near the librarian's desk, these books were not specially curated for the student population or in consultation with teachers. This was because the school had outsourced its library management services to an external vendor who allocated a library clerk to assist with the management of the library. Since the school does not have a teacher-librarian, book displays are dependent on the external vendor. Over a period of six months, the display included a Harry Potter selection, books by Jodi Picoult and books by Geronimo Stilton.

Mapping the Social Space of the Library

To map the social space of the library, I visited Tembusu Library for five days over two weeks to observe the patterns of usage. As mentioned earlier, Tembusu Library was often utilized for the completion of written work. In addition, I observed that the library was often utilized in the afternoon by staff, whether for meetings or for hosting visitors. In addition, it was used as a space for detention students to stay after school to complete their work. Typically, the library was used in the following ways:

> *Morning: The library is empty except for the librarian who is busy sorting out the books for the compulsory reading programme. It is mandatory for students who do not have class to report to the library. They usually do their work or chat with each other. Quite often, teachers bring their students to the library to work, often on written tasks requiring the use of the laptop.*
> *Recess: Most students go to the canteen or stay in the classroom. Typically, no more than 10 students visit the library during this period. Some read, some do their work, some chat. I observe two or three students browsing and/or checking out some books. Those who are chatting tend to move to the corner with the sofas, out of the librarian's line of sight.*
> *Afternoon: After school, the library is usually quiet except for a few students who have either chosen to stay back at the library to work or have been made to stay back for detention. Three days out of five, the library may be closed to students. I observed the library being closed for a staff meeting once, to host foreign visitors another time, and to hold briefings for students.*

As a social space, I seldom observed students using the library for reading or for the acquisition of knowledge. Instead, the few students who do go to the library tend to do their work and to spend time chatting or doing groupwork.

Mapping the Affective Space

Interviewing the students for their perception of the library gave insight into why the library was not a popular social space. Desire motivates and drives actions, and at the same time, space can motivate desire and action, as research on reading and motivation from both sociocultural (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008) and educational psychology (Gambrell, 2013) perspectives

have demonstrated. Understanding students' emotional responses to the library can help us understand the under-utilization of the library space.

No one goes in and out of the library. There's nothing there. It's boring.

(Edward, reader)

In my interviews with 12 students, the word "boring" recurs at least six times when asked to describe the library. Even Edward, who is an avid reader who visits the public library on a weekly basis, feels that the school library is unattractive dead space. What was striking in the interviews that students saw the amount of activity in a library as indication that it was not a place worth going to. The fact that "no one goes in and out of the library" reinforced the students' perception that there was nothing attractive in the library.

You only go to the library if you have detention! I never go to the library!

(Cass, non-reader)

In addition to the perception of the library as dead space, the library was in fact seen as a negative space. Cass points out that the fact that the library is used for detention contributes to students' negative emotional responses to the school library. Kate, an avid reader, suggested that the library needed a major revamp "with beanbags and stuff" to make it attractive for students. Rather than blaming students for not using the library, it seemed from the student feedback that the library space was not sufficiently conducive for the kinds of reading and information literacy activities that the school wanted to promote.

Conclusion

Using a socio-spatial approach to map the physical, social and affective responses of students to specific libraries can allow educators and librarians to figure what specifically in their library is absent. The mapping in this specific case study demonstrated that despite the school's commitment to improving students' reading and literacy skills, the library space was not

effectively equipped or organized to encourage student to use it as a reading space and a space for information acquisition. Re-conceptualizing the library as social space highlights the kinds of activities that are privileged in the space provided. In Tembusu Secondary, because teachers tend to use the library for work, and because of the table arrangement, students tend to perceive the school library as enforced work space rather than a reading space or a social space for engaging in book-related activities. In addition, the design and use of the library determined students' affective responses to the library, which in turn dictated whether they chose to use the library or not.

Taking a socio-spatial approach provides us with a qualitative way to map out the effectiveness of individual school libraries, which are situated in their specific contexts of need. Rather than blaming students for not using the library, mapping the ground and listening to students' voices may be a better way to find out how to make our libraries more effective for the specific needs of each school.

References

Gambrell, Linda B. (2013). Reading motivational engagement: research trends and future directions. In Pamela J Dunston, Susan King Fullerton, C C Bates, Pamela M Stecker, Mikel W Cole, Anna H Hall, Danielle Herro & Kathy N Headley (Eds.), *62nd Yearbook of the Literacy Research Association* (pp. 43-52). Altamonte Springs, Florida: Literacy Research Association.

Kapitzke, Cushla, & Bruce, Bertram C. (2006). *Libr@ries: changing information space and practice*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Lonsdale, Michele. (2003). Impact of school libraries on student achievement: a review of the research. Victoria, Australia: Australian Council for Educational Research.

McKechnie, Lynn, & Rothbauer, Paulette M. (2006). *Reading matters: what the research reveals about reading, libraries and community*. Westport, CN: Libraries Unlimited.

Moje, Elizabeth Birr, Overby, Melanie, Tysvaer, Nicole, & Morris, Karen. (2008). The complex world of adolescent literacy: Myths, motivations, and mysteries. *Harvard Educational Review, 78*(1), 107-157.

Small, Ruth V, Shanahan, Kathryn A, & Stasak, Megan. (2010). The impact of New York's school libraries on student achievement and motivation: Phase III. *American Association of School Libraries*.

Todd, Ross J, & Kuhlthau, Carol C. (2005). Student learning through Ohio school libraries, Part 1: how effective school libraries help students. *School Libraries Worldwide, 11*(11), 63-88.

Yin, Robert K. (2003). *Case Study Research: Design & Methods* (3rd ed.). CA: Sage Publications.

Acknowledgements

Author Information

Chin Ee, Loh is an Assistant Professor at the English Language and Literature Academic Group at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.