Themed collections in the age of the National Curriculum

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At last, a national curriculum. Teacher, parents and principals have been craving this for many years. But what opportunities and challenges does this provide for school, public libraries and academic libraries?

If we think about it, a national curriculum means that all Australian children, regardless of their geographical location, will study the same thing at roughly the same time. The textbook will again reign supreme and all school libraries will need to stock the same stable of books. To take it further, if a definitive list of titles that relate to the national curriculum is created, we could even do away with librarians and teacher librarians.

Shocking as this scenario is, it's not impossible. Unless teacher-librarians and school libraries change their approach to collection management, they may begin to get overlooked by teachers and school management in the Age of the National Curriculum.

So, how do we, as teacher-librarians, aid teachers in this era of the national curriculum and continue to demonstrate our value to education stakeholders?

As we in the profession know, a great majority of what teacher-librarians and school libraries provide is unseen. As the National Curriculum also represents an increased level of monitoring and accountability, how can a school library create a visible and tangible response?

Yes, a national curriculum does make it relatively easy to collect in line with the topics being taught. However, key to the national curriculum are the cross-curriculum priorities:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures
- Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia
- Sustainability

For more details see: http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/CrossCurriculumPriorities

These are to be represented as much as possible in all subjects at all levels. In the busy lives of our teachers, these also present the biggest challenge to incorporate into teaching and learning in a meaningful way.

Although good practice in librarianship is to collect in line with the curriculum, there is relatively little literature relating to how academic and school libraries in particular are responding to the national curriculum. Likewise, there is little written about themed collections as they relate to curriculum rather than a traditional definition of relating to a collection of a genre of fiction books. Another monogram for themed collections is "special collection". This is most frequently used to designate material of a sensitive or rare nature. However, for this new era of collection management, a themed collection should include fiction and non-fiction, print and electronic resources relating to a theme or idea. In this case, the theme is a cross-curriculum priority.Literature review

In 2012, the Ethical Culture Fieldston School library in New York began to question if Dewey was the most effective way to arrange their collection for their students (Kaplan et al, 2012). They rightly

questioned the benefit of separating fiction and non-fiction relating to the same topic and pointed out that a merging of fact and fiction presents students with the opportunity to naturally move between the two worlds where a thirst for knowledge leads to a love of literature and vice versa. As a result, librarians at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School rearranged their collection into a series of themed collections, named by their students. However, the decision to replace Dewey was motivated by a desire to deprioritise the "curriculum focus [Dewey] demands". I applaud the library for its bold move but the role of the school library is more than simply getting kids to read. While this is important, it should not be elevated above the need to support the teaching and learning of the institution.

In the article, the Ethical Culture Fieldstone School reports a significant increase in their circulation figures as a result of their changes. However, one could rightly expect that as the current student cohort had a key role in the reorganisation of the collection, they would utilise it more. Therefore, as the cohort changes, so will student reading tastes and circulation would be expected to reduce. Similarly, as staff change, how can such a subjective model be maintained?

In this case study the school reports that the changed structure and layout of the library has increased the ease with which students can locate what they are seeking. This is also a key objective for the themed collections at Bialik College. However, by using their themed collections, students at the Ethical Culture Fieldstone School gain only the skills required to utilise their school's collection. By keeping Dewey and author call numbers in themed collections at Bialik College, students are learning about information organisational structure that exists in most libraries, especially at universities.

Let's look now at a very different case study in collection development. Between 2006 and 2009, Macquarie University undertook a series of reviews of its teaching programs. Quite rightly, the library took this (as well as a move to newer and smaller building) as an opportunity to reconsider what items in their collection needed to be on the open shelves and which could be removed or relocated to off-site storage. In an article discussing the changes and decisions Kattau (2012, p21) outlines that another key motivation to collection decisions was "the provision of tools and an environment that builds a sense of self-efficacy" for students. This aim is also supported by educational research outlined in the article that shows a link between a student's ability to find a resource independently and increased academic performance. The outcome for Macquarie University was a smaller collection, arranged in line with the curriculum, with as few physical locations as possible.

These two case studies, although vastly different in outcome and motivation, share one overriding similarity: a desire to foster self-efficacy in their patrons. This, too, is an anticipated outcome of the move to themed collections at the Bialik Library.

The Bialik journey so far

While the biggest and most extensive themed collection at Bialik College were created to support the national curriculum cross-curricular priorities, there are also several other themed collections. All collections were gathered to promote ease of use and allow meaningful integration of resources in teaching and learning.

All themed collections bring together fiction (including picture books), non-fiction and interfiled DVDs. These collections have been gathered together by teacher-librarians, who use their experience as teachers and librarians to select the most meaningful resources.

The current themed collections are:

- Kitchen Garden
- Australia's Neighbours
- Indigenous Understanding
- Sustainability
- Middle School Wellbeing
- Senior School Wellbeing
- Sport
- Graphic Novels

The Bialik College library also has more traditional fiction-only genre collections. However, the process of creating next generation themed collections has prompted a gradual migration for these too to include a mix of fiction and non-fiction. For example, a biography on J.K. Rowling is likely to languish on the non-fiction shelves so has been moved to sit naturally with the Fantasy Collection. Similarly, the joke books, which normally hide in the 800s, are now enjoying their place alongside humorous novels in the "Just for laughs" section. As mentioned before, this allows our students to move seamlessly between fiction and non-fiction.

The first thing we had to decide when beginning on our themed collection journey was how to label, catalogue and physically organise the resources, especially as there was no desire to change the existing call numbers. Key to the decision to move to themed collections was the deliberate retention of Dewey and author call numbers as it was felt that to bring in a school-specific system would rob our students of the opportunity gain transferable information literacy skills.

All of these aspects were integral to the success of the collection. If the physical labels are not clear, we cannot expect patrons to locate them. Likewise, if our cataloguing is confusing, it will not alert the patron to a clear location either. It was also important to catalogue in such a way that allows reporting of each collection.

We started by simplifying the names of each collection. While "sustainability" is pretty simple, the title "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures" does not really roll off anyone's tongue, not even our year twelves and least of all our grade two users. As such, we renamed those two cross-curriculum priorities:

- Indigenous understandings
- Australia's Neighbours

Next, working with Vipa (http://www.vipalibrarysupplies.com.au) a spine label manufacturer, we developed a series of spine labels which included an image and the name of the cross-curriculum priority. The image that featured on the spine label was also incorporated into our collection signage using a fold back in the corner.

Here are our three collection signs for the cross-curricular priorities:

As a result of working in partnership with Vipa, the spine labels are now available to purchase. In the same spirit of collaboration, Bialik College is proud to offer an unbranded version of our collection signage at http://elib.bialik.vic.edu.au/library-resources/275-curriculum-signs-resources for other schools to utilise.

Being an Amlib school, all resources in our collection use a three tiered combination of branch location, floor location and StatsCode as well as call number to indicate where the item is located. The StatsCode designates the collection (e.g. Junior Fiction, Graphic Novels) and controls our lending policies and circulation statistics.

However, to give all resources a code for a collection, such as AU for "Australia's Neighbours" would not take into account the vast age-range of our resources. For example, if the themed collection was to include fiction and non-fiction, there would be some fiction titles not suitable to be borrowed by Junior School students. As such, we had to create a StatsCode for each subsection of the collection: AUJNF (junior non-fiction), AUPF (picture fiction), etc.

Having decided on the practical aspects, we then physically gathered the collections together. This involved a consideration of location for prominence and access, while trying not to have to move the entire collection. The first collection to be gathered was a picture book collection. Located in a specialised room dubbed "Story World" the signage had to be clear and the shelving heights appropriate to the size of the users (grades 2-5).

==photo of the storyworld themed collections==

Although the collections have only been in place for around six months, anecdotally, patron behaviour has changed. For students, there have been numerous examples of a "mixed lollies" approach. That is when a student takes a title from each collection. For staff, they are able to find what they need more easily. In terms of a national curriculum, this is an excellent result as it allows

an effortless insertion of the cross-curricular priorities into the regular reading lives of our students and into the teaching and learning programs of the college.

Due to the limited size of these collections, at least while we grow them, and to ensure equitable access, borrowing limits have had to be imposed on our patrons of two titles per specialist collection. See the following table for details. Despite being a restriction, this measure has actually served to promote the collections as specialised and elevate the need for funding.

Collection	Lending rights
Australia and Asia	2 items for 7 days, can renew once and reserve 2 items
Indigenous understanding	2 items for 7 days, can renew once and reserve 2 items
Sustainability	2 items for 7 days, can renew once and reserve 2 items
Kitchen Garden	2 items for 7 days, can renew once and reserve 2 items
Graphic Novels	2 items for 7 days, can renew once and reserve 2 items
Main collections e.g. Middle School Fiction	5 items for 21 days, can renew 3 times and reserve 5 items

This year the library is focussed on putting together a set of collections for each of the three cross-curricular priorities in both the junior and senior school libraries (a single building, separate floors). In the junior library we have also added a "Kitchen Garden" collection to support the college's new kitchen garden. These collections combine fiction and non-fiction, physical and electronic resources.

On a school level, we are very excited about the new collections, buoyed by the example set by the picture book collections. However, for the profession, there are still many facets of themed collections and how they relate to and support the national curriculum that need to be discussed. For example, the cross-curricular priority, as a subject field, needs to be incorporated into the MARC record of materials to allow schools to draw on the expertise of others. As no standard SCIS or LC subject heading exists, it could be incorporated into the 658 field: curriculum objective. However, there is no point in entering in the data unless it has been embraced by the profession en masse. We have begun this conversation with SCIS and hope to hear the chorus of many professional voices join in the discussion in the near future.

Bibliography

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