

# Rethinking the educational role of school librarians

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## **Abstract**

This study examined the educational role of school librarians in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China, and investigated their qualification and professional development respectively. Questionnaires were sent to public primary school librarians in these three regions on a convenience-sampling basis, 28 responses were received from Hong Kong, 15 from Taiwan and 14 from Mainland China. The result indicated that the educational role of school librarians in Hong Kong and Taiwan were realized to a higher extent than that of school librarians in Mainland China in developing students' information literacy, fostering students' reading ability and collaborating with teachers. However, there was still some disparity of the educational role of school librarians in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

**Key words:** school librarian, educational role, collaboration, comparative study

## **Introduction**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the need to equip students with life-long learning skills takes on a more urgent tone than ever before (UNESCO, 1996). Resourceful school libraries, which provide a sophisticated 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environment (NCLIS, 2008), are essential in developing students' attributes, especially in enhancing students' information literacy and cultivating their reading ability (IFLA/UNESCO, 2002). As school library aims at helping students achieve a higher level of "literacy, reading, learning, problem-solving and information and communication technology skills" through the collaboration with teachers (IFLA, 1999), a good school library should be staffed with qualified professionals, who collaborate with teachers to engage students with critical thinking and problem solving skills to be a life-long learner (NCLIS, 2008). It is further proved that a guided inquiry process by collaboration between teachers and SLs can better scaffold students' learning (S. Chu et al., 2008; S. K. W. Chu, 2009; C.; Kuhlthau, Maniotes, & Caspari, 2007; Todd, 2006). Guided inquiry process is a student-driven process that starts with a scenario. Students will try to identify their own issues and collect resources in this process. Teachers and librarians will provide necessary help when there is a need. In this process knowledge is more retained as students acquire knowledge by experience to solve a real problem (Hmelo-Silver, 2004).

Previous studies focus more on school librarians (SLs)' impact on students' achievement (Lance & Hofstede, 2011; Lonsdale, 2003) instead of examining the collaboration between teachers and librarians. Moreover, no up-to-date English research that compares the practical instruction of SLs in the Asian context has been found. In light of this phenomenon, this study is carried out to present a more comprehensive understanding of SLs in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China. Besides, as staffing resource is an important factor which influences school librarians' professional work, qualification and professional development of SLs in these three places are investigated and compared.

## **Literature Review**

### **Research on the educational role of school librarians**

#### **Cultivating students' information literacy**

Information literacy (IL), a key part of students' life-long skills (Baule, 1999), is a survival skill in the information age (ALA, 1989). According to the definition provided by ALA(1989), information literacy refers to the ability to locate, analyze, and use information effectively to solve problems from every possible resource. SLs, as information specialists, take a proactive role in developing students' IL. SLs should have the ability to locate resources, utilize information ethically and evaluate the information, so they can apply those information skills in the curriculum, or better, infuse it into the subject course to educate students and even teachers about information literacy (UNESCO, 2003; Woolls, 1994). It is also suggested that librarians can collaborate with parents in cultivating students' information literacy by fostering a home-school collaboration environment (Kong & Li, 2009).

### **Fostering students' reading ability**

Reading ability, as one of the most important academic skills of a child (Leppanen, 2005), is impacted by reading interest and positive reading attitudes (Twist, 2004). Students who are more positive towards reading tend to have a better reading outcome (Gnaldi, Schagen, Twist, & Morrison, 2005). SLs' impact on fostering students' reading interests and improving students' reading ability is widely recognized by researchers (Fisher, 2008; Leppanen, 2005; Yip, 2007). SLs organize reading programs and incorporate reading materials into subject courses, which are found to be effective in fostering students' reading interests and improving students' reading habits (Lance & Hofstede, 2011).

### **Collaboration between teachers and librarians**

Collaboration is one of the basic ideas to guide the library media programs (AASL, 1998). SLs help cultivate students' ability in problem solving and critical thinking by integrating the information literacy into the curricula, thus librarians should actively participate in planning and developing the curricula and conduct collaborative teaching with teachers (C. Kuhlthau, 2004; Montiel-Overall, 2008). SLs also collaborate with teachers to develop the library collection and promote reading programs to enrich students' subject knowledge.

### **Research on the qualification of professional development of school librarians**

Staffing resource is the key factor to determining the quality of the library provision, normally the staff in a library consists of qualified librarians and library assistants and sometimes even the supporting members such as teachers, technicians and parents and other kinds of volunteers (IFLA/ UNESCO 2002). The School Library Guideline points out that as a school librarian, he/she should be "professionally trained and qualified" (IFLA/ UNESCO 2002, p.12). Prior research also demonstrates that when SLs have the qualification in teacher-librarianship, it is far more likely that they will have a positive impact on students' achievement (Haycock & Jopson, 1999). Moreover, it is suggested that a master's degree should be considered as the entry-level degree for school librarians (Abdullah, 1998).

Regarding the professional development of school librarians, Yeung (1998) noted that school librarians generally realized and acknowledged the importance of professional development to remain up-to-date in the field after surveying 261 secondary school librarians in Hong Kong. However, this research is outdated as data were obtained 16 years ago and the situation may have changed a lot during such a long period. No up-to-date research on the practical situation of SLs' qualification and professional development situation has been found.

### **Research Gap**

Previous research has examined the educational role of SLs, and it has been proved that a good library program results in higher attainments of students by offering a free environment through a collaborative approach. With the support of a good library program, students tend to develop better in reading skills, information seeking skills as well as subject knowledge. However, the collaboration between teachers and librarians were seldom examined in those studies. Moreover, limited research evaluated the educational role of SLs by comparison. Only one comparative study conducted by Singh (1993) was found. Singh (1993) examined the relationship between selected socio-economic variables and school library variables by surveying 64 countries, and he noted that the lack of fund, trained

personnel and physical facilities hindered the development of school libraries. However, the educational role of SLs was not investigated in this study.

### **Research Questions**

Based on the research gaps identified above, four research questions framed this study:

RQ1: What are the different school librarians' roles in developing stakeholders' information literacy in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China?

RQ2: What are the level of collaborations between librarians and teachers in these three places?

RQ3: What are school librarians' views on the factors that affect students' development of reading habits in these three places?

RQ4: What are the qualification and professional development methods in these three places?

### **Research Design**

This research is designed to examine public SLs' educational roles in cross-cultural contexts and then to explore potential ways to maximize their educational roles. This research has been conducted through a quantitative approach, as it assesses certain factors and "establishes the overall tendency of responses from individuals and note how this tendency varies among people" (Cresswell, 2008, p.51). The main instrument is questionnaire. A pilot test has been done in Hong Kong before collecting the data in other places. This study involved 28 school librarians from Hong Kong, 15 from Taiwan and 14 from Mainland China respectively. The target population is school librarians of primary schools in urban cities, thus questionnaires are sent to public primary school librarians in Hong Kong, Taiwan and major cities in Mainland China on a convenience-sampling basis.

### **Data collection**

School librarians were invited to respond to questionnaires via e-mail, phone call or through electronic questionnaires. Questions were designed on a 5 Likert-type scale: 1 refers to "Strong disagree", 2 refers to "Disagree", 3 refers to "Neutral", 4 refers to "Agree" and 5 refers to "Strongly agree". 5 sections were involved to investigate school librarians' role: (1) school librarians' role in developing students' information literacy; (2) school librarians' impact on students' reading habits and reading ability; (3) collaboration between school librarians and teachers; (4) school librarians' qualification; (5) school librarians' professional development situation.

### **Data analysis**

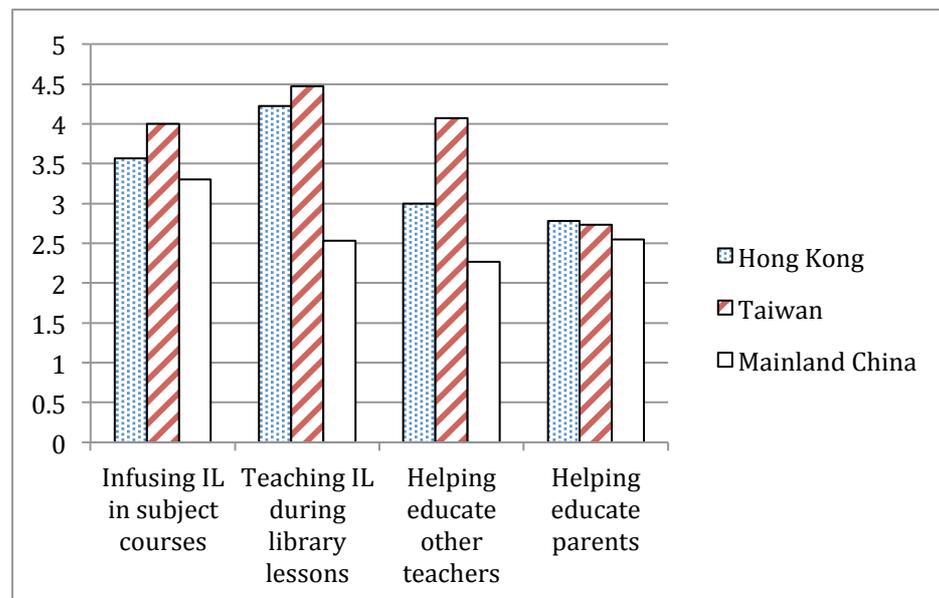
The data from the questionnaires were analyzed by using independent sample tests. Descriptive statistics were employed to analyze the data. Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests indicated questionable normality of data, thus, non-parametric test was used to compare the data sets from the three regions. The Kruskal-Wallis test was used to examine the statistical significance of the differences when comparing three regions, while the Mann-Whitney test was used to evaluate the differences when comparing two regions. Statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ . SPSS 20.0 was used for statistical analyses.

## Results and Discussion

### Educational roles of school librarians

Information literacy is pivotal as a lifelong learning skill (Bruce, 2002). To help equip students with IL skills, an information literate community with effective collaboration of teachers and school librarians is needed (Abdullah, 2008), thus SLs are important to educate not only students but also teachers and even their parents about the information literacy. For students, an integrated curriculum is regarded as the most effective way to present information and improve comprehension (AASL, 1999; Guthrie, Schafer, Von Secker, & Alban, 2000). Figure 1 shows SLs' ratings for their perceived role in developing stakeholders' information literacy, including students, teachers and parents. In terms of educating students about information literacy, the majority of Taiwan SLs and Hong Kong SLs agreed that they had taught students IL during library lessons, while Mainland China SLs tended to disagree this type of education. Significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) were noted not only between Taiwan and Mainland China but also between Hong Kong and Mainland China. This result suggests that Taiwan SLs and Hong Kong SLS took a better practice in educating students about IL. As for helping educate other teachers about information literacy, Taiwan SLs' ratings reported their positive perception of their role ( $M = 4.07$ ) while Hong Kong SLs rated their role in the middle of the scale ( $M = 3.00$ ), which signified a neutral perception. However, Mainland China tended to disagree their help for teachers ( $M = 2.27$ ). A significant difference was noted among the three regions using the Kruskal-Wallis test ( $p < 0.05$ ). Such finding indicates that Taiwan SLs most valued their role in helping educate teachers about IL. However, more than half of SLs in all the three regions did not agree that they had helped educate parents' IL with scores all below the midpoint of three. The results discussed in this section are presented in Table 1.

**Figure 1: The role of school librarians in developing stakeholders' information literacy**



**Note:** School librarians were answering the question “What is your role in developing students' information literacy?” The scale was 1-5, with 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree.

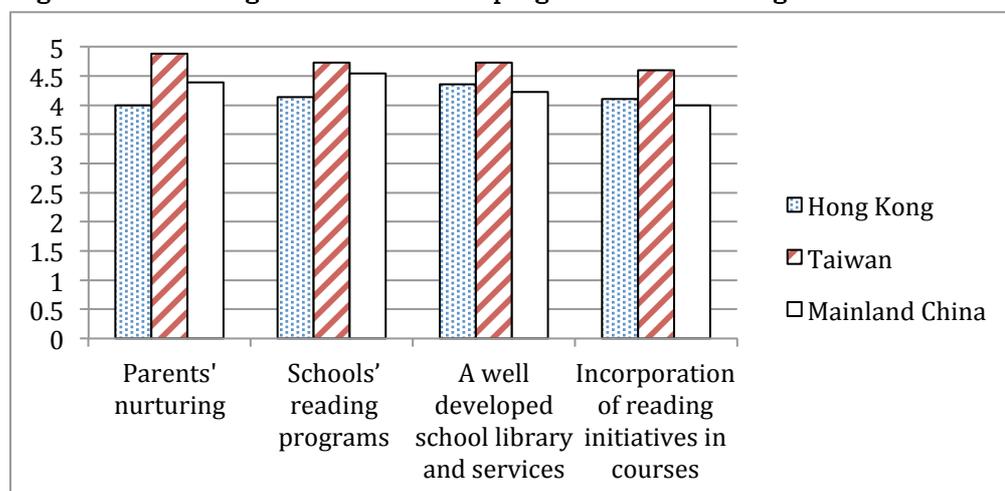
**Table 1: Mean and non-parametric tests of SLs' rating responses for their perception on information literacy provision**

Information literacy provision	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Sig. p. Value	Sig. p. Value	Sig. p. Value	Sig. p. Value
	HK N=28	TW N=15	MC N=14	Three regions	HK TW	HK MC	TW MC
Infusing IL in subject courses	3.57 (1.23)	4.00 (1.00)	3.30 (1.18)	0.266	0.252	0.473	0.113
Teaching IL during library lessons.	4.22 (0.80)	4.47 (0.52)	2.53 (0.88)	0.001*	0.415	0.001*	0.001*
Helping educate other teachers	3.00 (1.05)	4.07 (0.70)	2.27 (1.01)	0.001*	0.001*	0.028*	0.001*
Helping educate parents	2.78 (1.15)	2.73 (1.49)	2.55 (0.69)	0.748	0.871	0.451	0.748

**Note: The significant differences of three regions were tested by Kruskal-Wallis test, and the significant differences of two regions were tested by the Mann-Whitney test. \* indicates  $p < 0.05$ . HK=Hong Kong, TW= Taiwan, MC= Mainland China.**

School librarians have been regarded as key players in promoting reading comprehension in collaboration with teachers (Anonymity, 2009; Apeji, 2002). Figure 2 shows SLs' views on factors in developing students' reading habits. Factors were given from four perspectives: parents, schools' reading programs, library services and incorporation of reading in course curriculum. It is noticed that SLs from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China scored all the factors above 4, which indicates that SLs from all three regions perceived that all four factors affected students' development of reading habits. Significant differences were noted among these three places regarding the factors of parents' nurturing, schools' reading programs and incorporation of reading initiatives in course curriculum. This suggests that compared with Hong Kong SLs and Mainland China SLs, Taiwan SLs more valued the effect of parents, schools and the incorporation of reading into subject courses on developing students' reading habits. The results discussed in this section can be seen from Table 2.

**Figure 2: Affecting factors of developing students' reading habits**



Note: School librarians were answering the question "How do students develop good reading habits through?" The scale was 1-5, with 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree

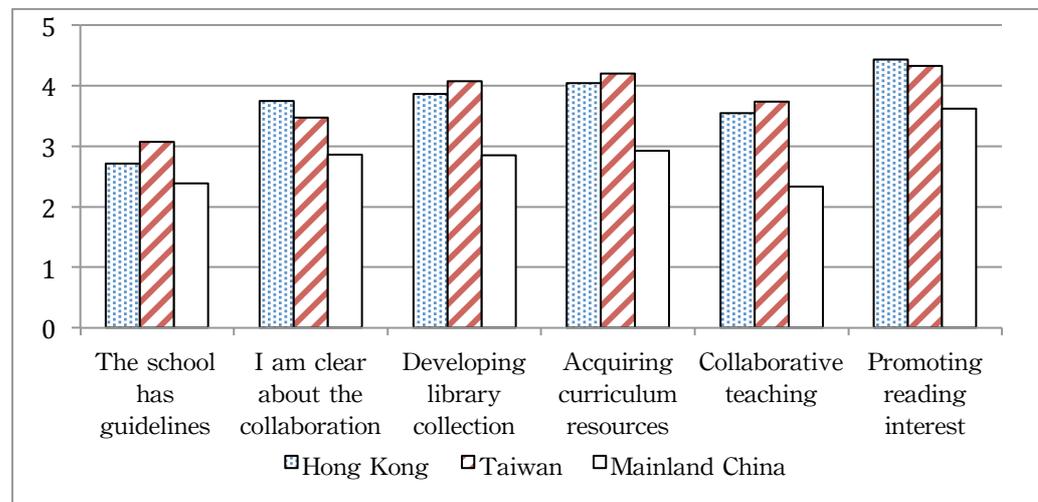
Table 2: Mean and non-parametric tests of SLs' rating responses for their perception on developing students' good reading habits

Affecting factors of developing students' reading habits	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Sig. p. Value	Sig. p. Value	Sig. p. Value	Sig. p. Value
	HK (N=28)	TW (N=15)	MC (N=14)	Three regions	HK TW	HK MC	TW MC
Parents' nurturing	4.00 (1.23)	4.88 (1.00)	4.39 (1.18)	0.005*	0.002*	0.474	0.009*
School's reading programs	4.14 (0.80)	4.73 (0.52)	4.54 (0.88)	0.011*	0.004*	0.080	0.292
A well developed school library and services	4.36 (1.05)	4.73 (0.70)	4.23 (1.01)	0.068	0.070	0.484	0.022*
Incorporation of reading initiatives in course curriculum	4.11 (1.15)	4.60 (1.49)	4.00 (0.69)	0.024*	0.015*	0.634	0.022*

Note: The significant differences of three regions were tested by Kruskal-Wallis test, and the significant differences of two regions were tested by the Mann-Whitney test. \* indicates  $p < 0.05$ . HK=Hong Kong, TW= Taiwan, MC= Mainland China.

Collaboration between librarians and teachers is a meaningful and effective way to educate students (AASL,1999). As is shown in Figure 3, SLs collaborated with teachers in four aspects: Developing library collection, acquiring curriculum resources, engaging in collaborative teaching and promoting reading interest. SLs in Taiwan and Hong Kong both gave ratings for the four aspects that were edging towards 4 whereas scores of Mainland China were all below 3 except for the point in promoting reading interest ( $M=3.62$ ). Significant differences were observed between Hong Kong and Mainland China, as well as between Taiwan and Mainland China. This suggests that compared with those in Hong Kong and Taiwan, Mainland China SLs perceived that their collaboration with teachers in developing library collection, acquiring curriculum resources and collaborative teaching were minimal. With regard to schools' guideline on the collaboration, Taiwan SLs held a neutral attitude ( $M=3.07$ ) while Hong Kong SLs and Mainland China SLs rated around 2.5. Differences were tested among three groups using the Kruskal-Wallis test, and no significant differences were observed ( $p > 0.05$ ). This indicates that the situations that schools did not provide a guideline on the collaboration were perceived to be similar by SLs from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China. Table 3 presents the data discussed above.

Figure 3: Collaborating with teachers



Note: School librarians were answering questions related to collaboration between SLs and teachers. Responses were provide with a scale from 1 to 5: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree.

Table 3: Mean and non-parametric tests of SLs' rating responses for their perception on the collaboration between SLs and teachers

Collaboration between SLs and teachers	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Sig. p. Value	Sig. p. Value	Sig. p. Value	Sig. p. Value
	HK N=28	TW N=15	MC N=14	Three regions	HK TW	HK MC	TW MC
The school has guidelines	2.71 (1.33)	3.07 (1.44)	2.39 (1.04)	0.408	0.411	0.470	0.185
I am clear about the collaboration	3.75 (1.11)	3.47 (0.74)	2.86 (0.95)	0.027*	0.275	0.012*	0.076
<b>Types of collaboration:</b>							
Developing library collection	3.86 (0.85)	4.07 (0.88)	2.85 (1.41)	0.028*	0.378	0.027*	0.018*
Acquiring curriculum resources	4.04 (0.84)	4.20 (0.68)	2.92 (1.38)	0.015*	0.614	0.010*	0.010*
Collaborative teaching	3.54 (1.20)	3.73 (0.59)	2.33 (1.15)	0.007*	0.674	0.008*	0.002*
Promoting reading interest	4.43 (0.57)	4.33 (0.62)	3.62 (0.96)	0.017*	0.634	0.005*	0.032*

Note: The significant differences of three regions were tested by Kruskal-Wallis test, and the significant differences of two regions were tested by the Mann-Whitney test. \* indicates  $p < 0.05$  HK=Hong Kong, TW= Taiwan, MC= Mainland China.

Qualification and professional background of school librarians in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China

A school librarian should be “professionally trained and qualified” (IFLA/ UNESCO 2002, p.12). As is shown in Table 4, most of school librarians in Hong Kong (86%) have received a diploma in Teacher Librarianship or an above degree while 60% of school librarians in Taiwan and 95% school librarians in Mainland China have never received any formal librarianship training.

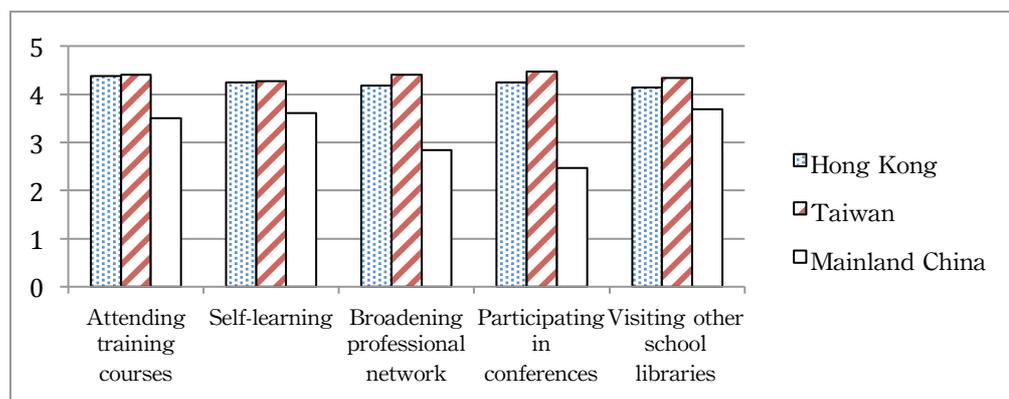
**Table 4: Qualification of school librarians**

Formal Librarianship Training		HK N=28	TW N=15	MC N=14
Do not receive any formal librarianship training		14%	60%	95%
Diploma in Teacher Librarianship	Studying	4%	13%	0%
	Completed	46%	13%	5%
Bachelor in Library & Information Management	Studying	4%	6%	0%
	Completed	25%	13%	5%
Master in Library & Information Management	Studying	0%	0%	0%
	Completed	21%	0%	5%

**Note:** HK=Hong Kong, TW= Taiwan, MC= Mainland China

Professional development is important for school librarians to keep up-to-date (Yeung, 1998). Figure 4 demonstrates 5 ways for school librarians to strengthen their professional development: Attending training courses, self-learning, broadening the professional network, participating in related conferences and visiting other school libraries. The disparity in these three regions is clear. The ratings for all the five methods given by SLs in Hong Kong and Taiwan reported their positive perception that they had received continuing education through all five ways. However, most SLs in China disagreed that they had developed their profession by broadening their professional network (M=2.85) or participating in related conference (M=2.46). Table 5 shows there were statistically significant differences between SLs in Hong Kong and those in Mainland China in developing their profession through broadening the professional network and participating related conference. The same is true for the difference between SLs in Taiwan and those in Mainland China. The result suggests that Hong Kong SLs and Taiwan SLs tended to have more opportunities to develop their profession through broadening professional network and participating in related conferences than Mainland China SLs did. Data discussed in this section are presented in Table 5.

**Figure 4: Professional development of school librarians**



Note: School librarians were answering the question “I strengthen my professional development through:” Five methods were provided with a scale of 1-5: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree.

Table 5: Mean and non-parametric tests of SLs’ rating responses for their perception on professional development methods

Professional development methods	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Sig. p. Value	Sig. p. Value	Sig. p. Value	Sig. p. Value
	HK (N=28)	TW (N=15)	MC (N=14)	Three regions	HK TW	HK MC	TW MC
Attending training courses	4.38 (0.56)	4.40 (1.06)	3.50 (1.09)	0.015*	0.280	0.012*	0.016*
Self-learning	4.25 (0.59)	4.27 (1.10)	3.62 (0.87)	0.029*	0.371	0.020*	0.024*
Broadening professional network	4.18 (0.77)	4.40 (0.83)	2.85 (1.14)	0.001*	0.256	0.001*	0.001*
Participating in conferences	4.25 (0.52)	4.47 (0.83)	2.46 (0.88)	0.001*	0.088	0.001*	0.001*
Visiting other school libraries	4.14 (0.71)	4.33 (1.05)	3.69 (1.03)	0.084	0.145	0.160	0.052

Note: The significant differences of three regions were tested by Kruskal-Wallis test, and the significant differences of two regions were tested by the Mann-Whitney test. \* indicates  $p < 0.05$  HK=Hong Kong, TW= Taiwan, MC= Mainland China.

This research investigated the similarities and differences of the educational roles of SLs in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China. Results showed that Hong Kong and Taiwan SLs were more active in cultivating stakeholders’ information literacy, promoting students’ reading ability and collaborating with teachers. This reason of this phenomenon may due to the different educational systems. In China, students need to take exams every year since primary schools and the College Entrance Examination (CEE) seems to be the only way for young people to change their destiny. In contrast, Hong Kong pupils only need to take a Pre-Secondary 1 Hong Kong Attainment Test (HKAT) to scale their internal assessment results before enrolled in secondary schools (Education Bureau, 2014) and there are no compulsory public exams for Taiwan primary students (National Policy Foundation, 2009). It seems that Chinese educational system is more exam-oriented, thus students’ life-long skills and inquiry learning may not be so valued as Taiwan and Hong Kong do.

## Conclusion and limitations

The study reported in this paper indicates the similarities and differences of primary public school librarians in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China. It can be seen from this study that the educational role of SLs in Hong Kong and Taiwan were realized to a higher extent than that of SLs in Mainland China. Moreover, Hong Kong SLs were better qualified while Taiwan SLs tended to be more involved in cultivating stakeholders’ information literacy. However, SLs in all the three regions

perceived that schools did not provide them a guideline on their collaboration with teachers and that SLs' role in helping educate teachers about information literacy was minimal.

To maximize SLs' instructional role, educational pedagogy and the perception towards SL are regarded as two key factors in this study. At the macro level, students' life-long skills should be indeed valued, just as Dewey says, "Education namely growth, namely the experience." At the micro level, we should attach great importance to SLs' work. More specifically, in China, the government and schools should more value SL's qualification. Besides, more continuing education and communication opportunities with other schools should be provided. It is also suggested to involve SLs in collaboratively developing curriculum resources and co-teaching with teachers. For SLs in Hong Kong, SLs can help educate teachers and parents information literacy and equip them with necessary information skills to provide a better learning environment for pupils. As for Taiwan, more attention should be paid on SLs' qualification, and parents' information skills can be helped by SLs.

The main limitation of this study is the small size of the sample. Another limitation is the lack of comprehensive evidence from other stakeholders such as students, teachers, parents and school administrators. A further study that involves students and teachers' views on school librarians' educational role may yield interesting findings to triangulate the research.

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