The "Social Information Section" in High School Libraries Enhance Awareness for Self-Help Through The Use of Print and Electronic Media/ Viky Horenstein (Attar)

Abstract

The present study deals with a new discipline called "Social Information Science" developed by Baruchson-Arbib (Baruchson-Arbib, 1996). This is a new scientific field within the realm of Information Science that investigates the development and application of medical and social information. The purpose of this study is the application of the theory of "Social Information" as an instrument for the development of an understanding and a sense of awareness among young people on the importance of self-help through the creation of Social information sections in schools.

The "social information" section is a special section in the school library that comprises all social information for students. This section contains two kinds of information: first, it includes direct information such as reference and guidance books, information and reference on support groups and aid organizations that help youg people, flyers, brochures and Internet sites; in sum, all the social information a teenager might need. Second, this section includes supportive information, that is, literature, belles-letters, poetry, newspaper clippings and movies dealing with social issues that might become a source of moral support and empathy.

Five schools participated in the study; three were secondary schools (two schools were situated in middle-high class soico-economic areas and one situated in middle-low socio-economic area); and two were high schools (one school situated in a middle-high socio-economic area and the other situated in middle-low socio-economic area). In four of the schools the 'Social information section' was set up within the library and in one school the 'Social information section' was set up outside the library in a part of the building were students attended classes.

The study investigated the effect that the use of the 'Social information section' by the students had on their reading habits on social subjects and reviewed the

effectiveness of the 'Social information section' in developing the awareness amongst the students of the importance in helping oneself by looking for assistance and support in printed and electronic information channels containing social information.

This study was based on seven research assumptions on the contribution and effect that the 'Social information section' might have on the students' reading habits, their use of the library and their level of awareness and interest on social information, while taking into account the students' socio-economic status, age and gender.

The study consisted of quantitative and qualitative phases. In the quantitative phase, data was collected through structured questionnaires that were distributed twice among the students, the first time before they were exposed to the 'Social information section' and the second time after they have been exposed to the section for about six months. The qualitative phase consisted of a series of observations and interviews with students and librarians after the exposure to the 'Social information section' in order to investigate patterns of use and level of satisfaction with the project.

Description of the 'Social information section'

Students at each school chose an attractive name for the section at their school. The section was set up at a distant corner of the library and was designed to be esthetic and visually enticing. In the center a low table was set up surrounded with chairs, pillows and puffs. Each shelf was labeled by subject and books were shelved by subject not by type, so it came about that reference and literature books stand together according to the subject at hand with the covers facing the readers. Each subject was assigned a specific color and a label in the appropriate color was affixed to each book containing a few words about the content. Literary and reference books in the section deal with the social issues that preoccupy the students: sexual behavior, teenage years, drugs and alcohol, family relations, disabilities, death and bereavement. The section was advertised around the school through informational brochures prepared by a group of students that were involved in the preparation of the section and by an inauguration ceremony attended by the school's principal, the librarian and representatives from the teacher and students.

Findings

All the assumptions of the study were confirmed. Findings of the study showed that the development of a 'Social information section' in the library brought a positive change in the reading habits of the students and helped develop a self-help awareness through the use of printed and electronic media. Exposure to the section brought a significant improvement in every parameter reviewed in this study: an increase in book loans, in the number of students that were able to identify the author of the book they read, in the number of students that read in order to seek information, enrichment and enjoyment. Additionally, there was a significant increase in the students' interest in social issues such as: sexual behavior, teenage years, drugs and alcohol, family relations, disabilities, death and bereavement. The frequency of the visits to the library and to the 'Social information section' also increased. Likewise, a positive change was identified in the students' recognition that books in general and belles-letters in particular, as well as Internet sites and help organizations, can help them improve their quality of life and solve their problems. Moreover, findings showed that students related to books as a source for new ideas through their identification with literary characters and that they preferred "true" stories from which they could learn from other people's experiences.

Students related to books not only as a source of pleasure and entertainment but also as a source of helpful information that could bring them satisfaction, comfort, moral support, understanding and a way to prevent future problems brought by the knowledge acquired. Contrarily, students use the Internet for the retrieval of direct and useful information with the purpose of getting assistance and practical help.

A significant improvement in all parameters was achieved for every research group as a result of the students' use of the 'Social information section'. Moreover, findings show that the use of the section erased the differences that existed between students from different socio-economic backgrounds before the beginning of the project.

From the analysis of the findings it can be concluded that the positive impact the 'Social information section' had was due to several factors: the right choice of subjects which were chosen from the students' world of knowledge and in

accordance to their fields of interest; the creation of a comfortable and pleasant atmosphere; the shelving of books by subject with the covers facing the readers as well as the accessibility of the books all contributed to the success of the section. The section also provided the students with the opportunity to learn and read in groups which fulfill their needs for social acceptance and support. Situating the section in the library but away from the librarian's desk contributed, as well, to the effectiveness of the section. Students were satisfied with the section and were very interested in its continuing activities.

The main conclusion that comes as a result of this study is that a 'Social information section' can have a positive effect in the development of self-help awareness amongst the students through the use of social information. This study proposes an instrument that can help young people cope with problems typical of the teenage years. Through the use of the section a teenager can discover and learn to know himself or herself. The basic assumption of Social Information Science is on the one hand, the need to provide utmost accessability to a wide variety of information sources and on the other hand the need to increase self-help awareness and personal responsibility.

School library can become a center for social support and assistance through the identification of needs and the mediation between students and information.

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