

THE PRACTICING LIBRARIANS IN THE CONTEMPORARY SETTING: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of the librarians in the practice of their profession, how they coped with the challenges as well as their aspirations in making their professional life meaningful. Phenomenological approach was utilized with 17 professional librarians. In-depth interview and focused group discussion were conducted which revealed that the librarians chose the librarianship as a profession because of the opportunity for professional growth and for personal achievement. The practice of their profession made them feel fulfilled but they faced challenges and difficulties such as working on a limited budget and the low regard for the librarian profession. To cope with these challenges, the librarians continued to develop their profession, collaborate and coordinate, provide quality and excellent service and tried and tested several management approaches and strategies. The librarians aspire to make their professional life meaningful through the provision of satisfactory service, being able to contribute to the advocacy of information as well as for the full support of administration and school community. They also desire to earn a masters or doctorate degree and to continue to update learning as a librarian; to be able to adapt to change and being ready to change gears; and, to preserve the prestige of the library profession.

Keywords:

Contemporary Settings. It refers to the recent existing practice of librarianship in terms of the role they play, handling recent information technology development, etc.

Practicing Librarians. It refers to a person who is responsible for a collection of specialized or technical body of information or materials.

Phenomenological Study. It is concerned with the study of phenomena as actually experienced by individuals. It is reliving the experiences of the participants involved in the study, going deeper into their thoughts to surface complex issues, identifying the essence of the experience as described by the participants, through interviews and group discussions.

INTRODUCTION

“The person responsible for leading and managing the school library should be a qualified teacher-librarian. As a member of a school's teaching team, the teacher-librarian has a role in the planning, implementation and evaluation of educational policies, curricula, outcomes and programs, with particular reference to the development of students' information literacy.”

-Australian School Library Association-

Practicing librarians have a multi-faceted role but central to the role are the contributions to the learning goals of the school. Librarians with dual qualifications are professionally balanced between education and librarianship, and can draw on both areas of expertise to support teaching and learning in schools. The Australian School Library Association (2012), in its policy document describes practicing librarians as having three major roles: as curriculum leaders, information specialists and information services managers.

Moreover, a librarian is a person who looks after the storage and retrieval of information. In a workplace, the librarian is usually a professional who is trained and educated to deal with information in a wide variety of formats and settings (WordiQ, 2010). It is them who offer a helping hand for users to find out the required piece of information and to use it for personal and professional purposes (BLS, 2011). Recent developments such as the introduction of the internet, the world wide web and the proliferation of online catalogues, the role of the librarian has changed (Rao & Babu, 2001).

Nowadays, librarians are no longer simply custodians of bookshelves of books, but their work now includes taking care of electronic resources. Thus, recently some librarian posts are known as either information managers or information scientists (Armstrong, 2007). Many librarians have the responsibility to build up their collections. Furthermore, Armstrong described that librarians, especially in the university sector, can be research-active can be meticulous and precise in their work of ordering, recording and caring for books and can also be very friendly and customer-oriented for the outward-facing parts of their job, thus it is a great dilemma on their part.

However, librarians are currently faced with formidable stressors in their day to day professional lives. These include ever-declining budgets and the requisite need to do more with less; rapid technological change; information overload; and continually redefined professional roles and models of librarianship. Librarians are by nature multitaskers; at the reference desk, they often will split our time and energy between helping students with their research questions whether in-person, via text message, or by phone, prepping for an upcoming library instruction session, handling collection development work, catching up on professional reading, and checking e-mail (Hillesum, Smelik, & Pomerans, 2012).

For some time now, many librarians, work can be an overwhelming pressure. Many have been working in the industry for a number of years, gaining valuable workplace experience in library as well as information management. In the library workplace, the professional hierarchy and the accompanying roles are well-defined. After years of working in support roles, librarians take on a position of authority and professional esteem. However, in certain areas such as the big city, professional roles can be few and far. Most of the librarians start as part of the pool of library staff (Finegun, 2014).

At the same time, the aging of the profession, particularly of leaders in the field of library occupation, has been the focus of several studies (Wilder, 2003; Hernon, Powell, and Young, 2003). During the 2000s librarians joined the academic library workforce in record numbers to meet the increased demand for enrolment in higher education at that time. By the beginning of the twenty first century, these baby boomer librarians were retiring. Wilder noted that the general demographic trends of academic librarianship

were mirrored in the demographics of ARL directors and upper level administrators (Moran, Marshall, & Rathbun-Grubb, 2010).

In the Philippines, the major challenges of the practicing librarians are the librarianship curricula of most library schools, budgetary constraints, inadequate IT infrastructure in libraries, ineffective leadership, low professional status and pay scale, poor information literacy skills and digital literacy, inadequately trained and skilled manpower, limited library resources, insufficient communication skills, lack of accreditation, lack of incentives and inactive role of LIS professional associations (Shakeel Ahmad Khan, 2012).

Other than the mentioned challenges, low information literacy rate among LIS professionals and users, lack of awareness about e-resources, and inadequate promotional activities are major challenges faced by LIS professionals in developing countries. This implies that their journey in the profession, upon entry up to the present, goes beyond what is written in the codes. It can be contextualized in the library environment where the librarian belongs (Rao & Babu, 2011).

It is in this view that the study intends to capture the journey of practicing librarians in Region 12, as they experience their work in the contemporary setting. This study looked into the phenomenon of their being in the library profession particularly in the roles, characteristics, professional identity as well as their performance in the work place. This study hopes to contribute to the dearth of data on the experiences of practicing librarians especially about their profession.

As a matter of fact, no qualitative or quantitative research has been done specifically on the journey of practicing librarians. Many still have that notion that being a librarian isn't hard and does not involve anything other than stamping books, and that anyone would find it easy to volunteer to run a library. In fact, this is not the case. There are limited resources to argue the case with solid examples of what really librarians do. Thus, I considered it important to do a study on their experiences as practicing librarians in the contemporary setting.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the professional journey of librarians from the entry of their work up to the present position they hold; articulate the experiences in the profession particularly in the roles they play, characteristics, identity as well as their performance in the work place and to make recommendations for further improvement in the practice of their profession.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of librarians in the practice of their profession?
2. How do librarians cope with the challenges in the practice of their profession?
3. What are the aspirations of librarian in making their professional life meaningful?

METHODOLOGY

Presented in this chapter are the nature of the study, the research design used with regard to presentation, analysis and interpretation, the philosophical assumptions, role of the researcher, research participants, the data collection process, data analysis, trustworthiness which includes the following: credibility, conformability, transferability and dependability of the study and all individuals involved and the ethical considerations in the process.

Research Design

In this research study, phenomenological method was applied. Phenomenology is concerned with the study of human perception of events or phenomena from the actual happenings in the real world. It is reliving the experiences of the participants involved in the study and going deeper into their thoughts, identifying the essence of the experience as described by the participants, through lengthy discussions (Campbell, 2011; Creswell, 2007; Speziale and Carpenter, 2007; Willis, 2007).

We used the phenomenological approach since it is a powerful tool in getting a clear understanding of human experiences, penetrating into their thoughts, feelings and actions in order to gain insights from their experiences. It clearly illustrates the specific details of the experience and how the subjects in the situation saw them. It is an appropriate instrument in my study wherein I needed to envision and explore the actual experiences of librarians in their professional journey.

Role of the Researcher

Since this study has a personal meaning to us, being an educator, we explored some of the challenges of the participants from a population whom we were dealing with. Our personal background could also be an assurance that conducting this research could be deemed with high regard. Choosing the topic on practicing librarian in the contemporary setting is considered relevant. We have the knowledge of who may be our participants and we have already the rapport needed since our informants who are practicing librarians, are also the same with us. It is in this context that we are credible enough to conduct the study.

We personally gathered the data by conducting the in-depth interviews with all the ten (10) informants and seven (7) participants for the FGD, with the assistance of a colleague who took notes during the interviews and FGD and served as one of my independent readers and analysts. Moreover, we asked the assistance from another independent reader and analyst. The three of us analyzed the data gathered from the audio recordings of the interviews and FGD. After coming up with the findings, we employed the expertise of a professional data analyst for data analysis and interpretation and thereafter, form our personal insights.

Research Participants

The identified informants were the librarians from Region 12, whom we chose through purposive sampling as our participants based on a pre-selected criteria relevant to the research study (Richards and Morse, 2006; Saunders, 2012; Speziale and Carpenter, 2007).

Collection of Data

In the collection of the data of the study, we observed the following processes, namely: in-depth interview with the study informants, conduct of focus group discussion with the participants and note-taking.

Before conducting the actual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with the study participants, we made sure that ethical considerations will be properly observed. We applied the key principles of ethical issues (Bloom and Crabtree, 2006; Bricki and Green, 2007; Kaiser, 2009; Mack et al, 2005) that should be considered in any research study which are consent and confidentiality.

Analysis of Data

Analysis of data in a research study involves summarizing the mass of data collected and presenting the results in a way that communicates the most important features (Hancock et al, 2007). Data was analyzed using a method which included data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing and verification (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2007), adding that qualitative content analysis is “any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings.

Trustworthiness

To establish the trustworthiness of the study, We observed four components. These are the following: credibility, conformability, transferability and dependability.

Ethical Considerations

As part of research rigor, several safeguards were applied that erased the fears of the participants that eventually promoted trust. This study was guided by ethical principles as described by Mack et al. (2005), namely: respect for persons, beneficence, justice, consent and confidentiality.

RESULTS

Presented in this chapter are the experiences of the librarians in the practice of their profession, how they cope with the challenges as well as their aspirations in making their professional life meaningful in the practice which emerged from the information gleaned through in-depth interviews and focus group discussion.

The following research questions made possible the production of data from the informants:

1. What are the experiences of librarians in the practice of their profession?
2. How do librarians cope with the challenges in the practice of their profession?
3. What are the aspirations of librarian in making their professional life meaningful?

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Table 2

**Themes and Core Ideas on the Experiences of the Librarians
in the Practice of their Profession**

Major Themes	Frequency of Responses	Core Ideas
Professional	General	Being able to attend trainings, seminars,

Growth		conferences, workshops, book fairs; exposure to new trends in the profession
	Typical	Became active officer of local and regional association of librarians; organized seminars for librarians; meet other librarians
		Invited to be resource speaker; being able to propagate/share learning on librarianship to others
		Helped improve the library; implement library innovations i.e. OPAC, in-house periodical system
		Earning additional degree (post graduate)
	Variant	Managed to see our school through PAASCU accreditation three times
		Became seasoned in my field of expertise
		Being a library advocate
		Being a licensed practicing librarian
		Bringing my team to win in a national competition
Personal Achievement		Being able to handle different personalities
	General	Chance to be of service
	Variant	Being published in a magazine for testimony on good reading habits
		I get to do what I love doing most
		I am abreast and have free access to information;
		Opened doors; career path opportunities
		Chance to work in the government after retiring
		Living the life I have always wanted
		Being able to travel outside the country; attend international seminar
		Chance to teach LIS courses

Table 2 (Continuation)

Themes and Core Ideas on the Experiences of the Librarians in the Practice of their Profession

Major Themes	Frequency of Responses	Core Ideas
	General	I am happy and fulfilled with my profession

Fulfilment and Satisfaction	Typical	I am contented and satisfied with my job
		Take pride in being a librarian
	Variant	I enjoy entertaining and helping patrons in their academic and research needs
		Enjoyed my profession even after retirement
		I feel challenged and motivated
Challenges and Difficulties	Variant	Seeing my students practice the profession and involved actively in the promotion and upliftment of the profession
		Dealing with difficult/arrogant, hard-headed clients
		Indifference of some teachers and students; when patrons ignore the library and follow trend
		Receiving complaints/criticisms about library services
		Failing at accreditation
		Inability to control library scenarios, i.e. minimizing noise, etc.
		Keeping the library conducive to learning/study
		Techno stress; information overload
		Resistance to change and development
		Handling conflict between and among staff
Logistical Constraints	Typical	Lack of support from fellow librarians
		Working on a tight or limited budget
	Variant	performing all the responsibilities as librarian; task overload
		Managing three special libraries
		Very limited library space
		Requests for library improvement turned down by school management
		advertising library holdings and collection
		Lack of library introduction/orientation
		Failure to help clients in their query; knowing there is a collection but can't locate it
		Poor internet connection
		Book accountabilities (losing books)

Table 2 (Continuation)

Themes and Core Ideas on the Experiences of the Librarians in the Practice of their Profession

Major Themes	Frequency of Responses	Core Ideas
Low regard for	Variant	Myopic view of the librarian's role as custodians

the profession		I feel “ordinary” since people say I perform mechanical and routinary functions in the organization
		Librarians are still struggling to become active species in the labor market
		The typical perception for librarians must be challenged
		Receiving negative feedback about the profession
		Stereotyping of librarians as second-class citizens

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Table 3

Themes and Core Ideas on How Librarians Cope with the Challenges in the Practice of their Profession

Major Themes	Frequency of Responses	Core Ideas
Continued Professional	General	Update oneself on new trends in librarianship; continued learning; exposure; benchmarking

Development		Attending training, conferences, seminars and workshops
	Typical	Build social network with other librarians; be active in library organizations
		Read professional journals/literature not only for librarians; keep reading
		Earning additional degree (post graduate)
	Variant	Understand our role as librarian and embrace the totality of the profession
		Keep an open mind
		To never stop learning, share learning
Collaboration and Coordination	Typical	Get recommendations from administrators, students, faculty
	Variant	Maintaining good working relationship with administrators and colleagues
		Coordination with other offices/departments
		Get full support of library staff; meeting with staff, good relationship with staff
		Seek expert advice; consult authorities
		Ask feedback and opinion from colleagues
		Proper communication; especially with ICT
		Teach younger librarians how to organize a library
Quality, Excellent Service	Variant	Continue building/updating library collection
		provide each and every need of clients
		Extend patience, widen understanding
		Not to take the users for granted
		Stick to the rules and regulations implemented without being nasty or disagreeable
		Keep things always in order
		Strict security in the entrance/exit
		Always doing one's best
		Always strive for excellence
		Resourcefulness and creativity
		Being knowledgeable in the field
		Conduct library instruction and orientation
		Be a good example to everyone

Table 3 (Continuation)

Themes and Core Ideas on How Librarians Cope with the Challenges in the Practice of their Profession

Major Themes	Frequency of Responses	Core Ideas
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Tried and tested management approaches and strategies	Variant	SWOT Analysis
		Make a strategic plan; do advance planning and preparation
		Good time management
		Proper delegation of work
		Good public relations
		Community outreach
Divine Providence	Variant	Ask guidance from the Holy Spirit
		Keep on praying

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Table 4

Themes and Core Ideas on Aspirations of the Librarians

Major Themes	Frequency of Response	Core Ideas
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Legacy of Excellent Service and Worthy Contribution	Typical	Provide satisfactory service to clients, give them satisfaction in their library needs
	Variant	To make a mark in the community; leave a meaningful influence to students and colleagues
		To have a worthy contribution to the advocacy of information, media and technology literacy
		To be remembered as a proactive librarian; as a role model in the profession
		To be able to work in big libraries in the Phils
		Opportunity to do library outreach programs for less-privileged
		To live up to a more productive and purpose-driven mind set
Support and Recognition	Typical	Full support of admin and school community
		Support of other librarians/organizations
		Appreciation for job well-done;
		recognition of the importance of our profession
Growing in the profession	Typical	Earn masters or doctorate degree
		Continue to update learning as a librarian
	Variant	To learn from every experience encountered
		To be able to explore new horizons as a librarian
		Treat bad experiences as opportunities for improvement
Flexibility and innovations	Typical	Adaptability to change; always ready to change gears; adopt/learn technology innovations
	Variant	Adopt library technologies yet maintain card cataloguing system
		Learning to take risks
		Build library collection in various format
		Feel the pulse of the clients
		Willingness/openness to learn
		Implement reward and punishment to curb library noise
Prestige for the library profession	Variant	To ultimately change the old notion about librarianship
		That many young adults will enrol in library science;
		That others will see it as a rewarding profession
		That the law of librarianship will be implemented
		Give importance to library profession
		To find meaning and fulfilment in the profession
		There is no such thing as perfect job

Summary

From the results of the study taken from the responses of both the in-depth interview informants and the FGD participants, the following issues were identified:

First, the experiences of librarians in the practice of their profession revealed that they have the opportunity for professional growth. Almost all the key informants disclosed that they are able to attend trainings, seminars, conferences, workshops, book fairs; have the exposure to new trends in the profession, which accounts for it being classified as a general core idea.

Second, the informants' responses to the strategies in coping with the challenges in the practice of their profession as a librarian revealed five main themes, namely: Continued Professional Development; Collaboration and Coordination; Quality, Excellent Service; Tried and tested management approaches and strategies; and Divine Providence.

Meanwhile, the informants aspirations centered on legacy of excellent service and worthy contribution; support and recognition; growing in the profession; flexibility and innovations; and prestige for the library profession.

Implications for Practice

Findings of the study provide the Philippine Government the basis to strengthen librarianship practices in all public and private libraries in Region XII.

The government may reinforce policies and guidelines of inclusion to the extent that the curriculum is made relevant to the needs of librarians in the contemporary setting. There is therefore the need to develop competencies and skills to adopt and develop curricula and more inclusive context. The building of librarianship capacity to be co-developers of such curricula is an important part of the process.

Implications for Future Research

In as much as the study was limited to library professionals in Region 12, the following implications for future research are advanced:

Since the findings of this particular study are not generalizable beyond the 17 participants, future research may be conducted that would investigate involve library professionals even beyond the confines of Region 12 to substantiate the findings.

Second, future research may be conducted investigating the experiences of librarians in handling the new information technologies as well as the facilitating and hindering factors to the application of these information technologies.

The findings of this study were viewed from the lens of the professional librarians. Further research could be conducted to find out the library users' experiences as well as the challenges and coping strategies in the use of the libraries in the region. This could serve as a compliment to the findings of this study.

Concluding Remarks

The phenomenological study on the experiences of the librarians in the practice of their profession, their coping mechanisms with the challenges, and their aspirations in making their professional life meaningful has highlighted the significance and the necessity of such study. The findings substantiate the findings of studies done by several researchers. Ali & Bakshi (2010) explored that the library profession is facing many challenges such as lack of finance, inadequate infrastructure, lack of knowledge and training, lack of high quality teaching staff and many others. Jestin & Parameswan

(2002) found out in their study that the introduction of computers and new technology was a challenge to librarians. Thus, librarians need to be ready to participate in the process of generating and distributing information and knowledge for quality of life and education. In the aspect of coordination and collaboration, this substantiated the findings that librarians feel the need to unite to withstand the revolutions that will occur in the information field (Dasgupta, 2009).

The data from the in-depth interview with key informants and the focus group discussion produced similar responses. The focus group discussion completed the components of the triangulation technique, which as Creswell (2007) asserted, is a powerful technique that facilitates validation of data through cross validation from more than two sources – the first being the readings on cheating, second, the in-depth interview and the third, the focus group discussion.

The contributions of this study lie in its making available the experiences of the librarians in the practice of their profession, how they cope with the challenges and their aspirations in making their professional life meaningful. Moreover, it brings to fore the advantage of using the qualitative approach in understanding certain experiences. It has also opened opportunities and ideas for future researches in as much as there is a great deal more to be learned about the practice of professional librarians.

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