



LIBRARIES AS A TOOL FOR EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Exploring the situation of school libraries in post-apartheid South Africa

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The role of school libraries in enhancing education and promoting reading, different kinds of literacies and democracy can be essential in the development of a new society. In 1994, South Africa held its first democratic election ever. In 1997, in line with the newly adopted constitution, a national policy for school libraries was proposed. This article explores the situation of school libraries in the country based on research developed in two schools in Gauteng and Western Cape.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1994, following South Africa's first democratic election ever, the new government started a process to transform the country from an apartheid society to a democratic, non-racial society^[1]. In 1997, in line with the newly adopted constitution, a national policy for school libraries was proposed: it stressed the importance of library services to facilitate the resource materials needed by learners to fulfil the national curriculum's outcomes.

The commitment to the country's transformation was reaffirmed after the elections held in 1999 and in 2004. However, many of South Africa's old structures linger on: they have left deep imprints and are not easy to overcome. Segregated and unequal education during the first part of the 20th century and the Bantu Education -part of the racial segregation that the Nationalist Party government institutionalized as from 1949- still hamper development.

In South Africa, there are nine provinces with provincial governments and departments. Education is compulsory up to the 9th year and since 2002, one year of preschool - grade R, or "Reception year" - is provided. An educational action plan called Tirisano - "working together" - was created

during the administration of Kader Asmal, minister of Education between 1999 and 2004, to change the education system by working together with state departments, provinces and local governments (the communities).

The government has made great efforts and allocated relatively large amounts of money to education. However, many rural schools remain poorly resourced, without adequate accommodation, equipment or books, and even without electricity or running water. The former white schools are often better off, with libraries and computer equipment.

Changes are needed in many different domains pertaining to education, such as for instance language. In the new rainbow nation, a vivid discussion regarding languages is taking place and 11 languages have been declared official, with Zulu and Xhosa being the more extended ones. Indeed, the 1976 uprising against education in Afrikaans being forced upon students was one in the course of events that led to the defeat of apartheid.

Books in African languages are being produced, but still there is too little indigenous literature. Illiteracy rates are still high and very few people have the habit of reading. Many people are more interested in their children learning English properly than studying their mother tongue.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

I believe that the role of school libraries in enhancing education and promoting reading, different kinds of literacies and democracy can be essential in the development of a new society. As a school and public librarian and a communication for development Master's student, I decided to investigate the situation of school libraries in South Africa.

I had visited the country twice before I undertook my fieldwork; both times in connection with school libraries. In 2001, I went to South Africa for the first time as a participant in the Swedish-South African project *Library Practice for Young Learners* (LPYL) 1997-2002, at a time when Sweden's cultural development policy towards South Africa was being discussed. Swedish development cooperation with South Africa then led to *The Swedish-South African Culture Partnership Programme*, currently administered by The Swedish National Council for Cultural Affairs. The experiences derived from the LPYL project helped establish subsequent cooperation between Sweden and South Africa.

LPYL focused on the development of human resources and was designed to explore some of the then still untested innovations in South African educational policy among a sample of school librarians in all of the

country's 9 provinces. The project was also formulated to promote the exchange of knowledge and expertise between Swedish and South African library personnel. One of the project's main purposes was to encourage the development of school library plans for the future and the establishment of school library committees in schools.

LIBRARIES FOR THE PEOPLE OF AFRICA

In their book *The Quiet Struggle. Information and Libraries for the People of Africa*, Sturges and Neill (1990) refer to the (sad) role of libraries in Southern Africa in the 20th century. The Anglo-American tradition, exported to Africa by returning expatriate librarians, stagnated and did not fulfil its mission. This old paradigm began to break down in the 80s. In 1982, the Tanzanian librarian K.J. Mchombu wrote an essential article entitled "On the Librarianship of Poverty", quoted by Sturges and Neill.

Sturges and Neill also refer to an investigation from 1988, which showed that although South Africa had a network of public libraries, the black community did not use them. To date, there is still a feeling among some South Africans that libraries are not for them and changes in this respect seem to be very slow.

SCHOOL LIBRARIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

During apartheid, there were 19 racially based education departments, and the white schools had fine libraries.

In the 80s, "school libraries, where they existed, remained on the periphery of the school's learning programme" (Hart quoted in Wettmark, 2002). In the late 80s, the so-called coloured and Indian sectors began to have school libraries and staff of their own. As from the 90s, the huge actual disparities were no longer allowed (Hart, 2001). The old departments were shut down, and the old policies went down with them. However, according to Hart, "In 1996 only about one quarter of today's teachers had any exposure to libraries in their childhoods... only so-called middle class schools have effective school libraries. Schools in working class communities have not been able to maintain their libraries" (Hart in Wettmark, 2002).

The critical situation of school libraries has not changed much in the last decade.

According to current literature on the subject, "By mid-2003, South Africa had more than 11,373 libraries, with 77 higher education libraries, 9,416 school libraries, 79 government departmental libraries, one national

library with two branches, and 1,800 public libraries provided by provincial and local government (library services and metro libraries). Less than 10% of secondary schools had school libraries” (*Education, South Africa Yearbook 2004/2005*).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHOD

My key questions were:

- How are school libraries being used to improve teaching and learning in South African schools?
- Which role do school libraries play in this educational process?
- What kind of library materials and resources are the schools using?

In order to find answers to my questions I used a multi-method approach to field work. I made interviews in two schools and their school libraries and observed the way in which those libraries were used. I complemented that with a revision of the schools’ plans and other relevant documents, interviewed regional staff and undertook a literature review to frame the analysis of documents.

Another aim of my study was to investigate how important a national plan or policy for school library development is –an aspect of my thesis that I will not discuss in this article.

I will refer here mostly to the situation of the libraries in the two schools I explored.

IN THE FIELD

During my fieldwork in South Africa in March 2005, I visited two school libraries that had been involved in the LPYL project and interviewed their school library staff, teachers, principals and learners about their attitudes to the school library and uses of it. I chose a Primary School (grades R to 7) and a High School (grades 8 to 12), both situated in disadvantaged areas, though in relatively wealthy provinces: Gauteng and Western Cape, respectively.

I developed different interview guides for the different categories of interviewees (Kvale, 1996): learners (the term used in South African schools to refer to students), teachers, principals and teacher librarians, as well as provincial staff involved with the educational libraries and information officers. The interviews were semi-structured. Some of the questions were included in all the interviews.

From teachers I wanted to obtain certain specific quantitative information: How often did they use the library? Could learners go to the library during lessons, if they needed material? How often did learners go to the library?

From school library staff, I wanted information about opening hours, time devoted to managing the library, and how much it was used for teaching and learning in their opinion.

From learners I wanted to know how much they used the school library and how this helped them: positive and negative experiences, and wishes for the future. I asked them if they could remember a time when the school library had really helped them (Ross and Kulthau, 2005).

From the principals I wanted to obtain a view of “the school culture and ethos; vision and consensus of teaching and learning; goals, aims and objectives” and find out about the support they actually provided for the school library (Streatfield & Markless, 1994).

My interviews and observations were structured around three main themes:

- How and how much is the school library used?
- Attitudes to library use
- Teaching methods and pedagogy

INTERVIEWING THE PROVINCIAL STAFF

As part of my research, I aimed at interviewing and gathering data from parties other than schools, such as provincial (regional) educational authorities and staff, to explore attitudes towards and plans for school libraries' development. The two provinces I visited had their own provincial educational governments.

Gauteng

In Gauteng, where the Primary School is situated, my two contact persons worked in the provincial Educational Department, and it was easy to interview them. One was coordinator of the school libraries' facilitators, and the other one was head of the Library and Information Department of the Educational Department of Gauteng.

My interview with the coordinator of school library facilitators was the most comprehensive one, and gave me a broad picture of the situation of

school libraries in Gauteng and the work done in the Educational Library and Information Department regarding school libraries. The coordinator had both negative and positive things to say.

At a meeting with district school-library facilitators in the Gauteng Educational Library in Pretoria, I had the opportunity to talk with facilitators and observe them while they planned their work. Gauteng is divided into 12 districts, and almost all of them have a school library facilitator with the task of supporting the schools and organizing workshops. Facilitators work with up to 200 schools each.

Western Cape

The second province I visited was Western Cape. The Educational Department of Western Cape is situated in Cape Town, and I did not have the possibility to visit the staff there. However, I contacted some members of the staff by phone.

I talked to the head of the Educational Library and Information Service of Western Cape (EDULIS), who told me that they were struggling and fighting for school libraries in their 1,600 schools. Western Cape is divided into 7 educational districts, which should have 7 advisors for school libraries, and 7 for information literacy, but not all of those had been appointed by then.

I also talked to a teacher librarian working at a resource centre in the town of George. At the time, he was developing a school library in a high school. In Cape Town and in the centre in George, teachers could borrow material to support the curriculum. Membership was free and reservations could be made by post, phone or SMS. Although books in the Xhosa language were difficult to find, there were some in Cape Town.

THE TWO SCHOOLS AND THEIR LIBRARIES

The Primary School

The Primary School in Gauteng was a grade R to grade 7 (black) school. Learners in the Reception year are 6 years old, and in grade 7 they are 12 to 13 years old. The school is situated in a township in Soweto, Johannesburg, with a high rate of unemployment and poor families. The school's principal said: "The economy of the school is poor. All schools in the area are poor. The situation has not changed in the latest years. We have lots of unemployment. This is one of the oldest townships in South Africa. As a result, it is full of old people. The children who come here come from homes where they are looked after by their grannies. That's a problem".

The Primary School had 16 classes with 36-59 learners in each, totalling an estimated 730 learners. There was a public library situated five minutes away from the school. I interviewed 6 learners, 4 teachers (the former and the acting teacher librarian included), and the principal. I also observed some classes and group work situations.

Most of the learners spoke Zulu, and a few of them spoke Sotho and Xhosa. The language used for teaching is English. Zulu was taught as an additional language. In years R to 3, learners spoke Zulu in class, and as they grew up teachers tried to use English more. In grade 3, kids could read English storybooks aloud, but did not speak much English. The only existing books in Zulu in the school were language textbooks.

The school library

The library consisted of two rooms. The first one was a reading room furnished with tables and chairs plus a computer and a TV, but no books. The computer was not connected to the school's network. This room was used by the new teacher librarian and for committee meetings after school. The second room contained shelves and books. There was a library desk, but it was not in use. One of the teachers had a working place in a corner.

I was told that the library committee was working with the library and reorganizing it. Books had been moved into the classrooms in order to have a book 'box library' in each classroom. Learners had helped pick suitable books for their classes or been appointed as monitors of the boxes. In previous years, the library had received many books from READ [2], but by the time of my visit, the organisation had started working through the provincial departments instead, and was not providing books anymore.

At the time I was in the school, the library was being reorganized. Although it seemed difficult to find information in there, some learners and teachers said that they liked it and used it.

Library use and situation

The library's door was open all day. Some learners and teachers went in every now and then, but mostly the library was empty. So far, the school had not found a way to manage the library's organization of books and make it usable. One of the teachers (Johnny, grade 5-7) said, "School library is very essential for education. Sometimes the teachers' guides they have not enough. If you have a library, it can reinforce... We need more information... We know that we must have a library. But we don't have the librarian skills".

Some of the older children came to the library while I was there waiting to conduct interviews, looking for information and books for the class or a book to read. There was no one there to help them, although the doors were open: “I think the library is beautiful, but not now. I try to pick up books. It is difficult to find books in the library”, one girl in grade 7 told me. However, some of the children I interviewed said that they could find books. They did not use the school library much, but said they would like more books in it; some of them said that they liked to sit in the library.

Teachers said that they wanted the library to be better. The two who had been most active in its management were busy with other matters by the time I interviewed them, and the former teacher librarian was tired and thought it was too much work to be both a teacher and responsible for the library. No one questioned the existence of a library, but it seemed very difficult to make it work with an alternating schedule for the teachers to be in charge of or help in the library. However, that remained the only realistic solution in sight for them.

Several teachers mentioned that they would like to have a full time teacher librarian. The new working teacher librarian said: “It should be only one teacher or an unemployed librarian. It should be someone that was responsible. ...There are library students in Johannesburg, who could help... But there is no funding for that”. The principal seemed to be waiting for the provincial department to come up with a library position, or else the teachers in the library committee to manage the library themselves. He would have welcomed intervention from the Educational department: “There is no willingness to treat it /the library/ as a priority. It should be treated as a priority. There should also be a teacher librarian in the budget... The post is not there. We don’t have a say in how many posts is there... It is a policy matter. The department comes with a policy –not us.”

The school’s library committee

By the time I conducted my fieldwork there, the school’s library committee, which included many teachers, had been working in the library during weekends, trying to sort out the books. They were trying to find solutions to the problems involved in managing the library.

The committee members were responsible for the library together with the teacher librarian and the principal. The library committee had the intention to get all the educators involved in taking responsibility for the library. With learners’ involvement, technology and adequate fundraising, they planned to get it going again. However, they wanted a person to take full responsibility; they had not succeeded in developing a new library schedule for the teachers.

Cooperation with the Public Library

In previous years, the school had received help from one of the public librarians in the library close to the school ^[3], who assisted them with the library and storytelling. At the time of my visit, the Public Library did not have the possibility to continue providing that service. However, the school cooperated with the Public Library in several respects.

The school's principal encouraged learners to go to the Public Library and provided them with library cards. Besides assisting learners who attended the library to obtain information or read, the library arranged yearly national and regional reading campaigns and competitions ^[4] for the schools.

The Public Library's outreach services reached 12 primary schools and 5 high schools. Learners at the school I visited told me that they used to go to the Public Library.

Computers

The school had recently installed 23 new computers for 6th grade learners and 1 computer for the teachers as part of the provincial project "Gauteng Online", expected to provide computers for 45 schools in the province plus training to use them. This was the school's second computer room: the ones they had been given two years before were said to be too old for new programmes.

Technical staff was working with the computers, which were not in use by the time of my visit. They had been online for a while, and supposed to have access to Internet and Microsoft software, including the Encarta Encyclopaedia. Burglary and vandalism from outside the school had further complicated the chances of putting them in use.

The new teacher librarian, together with another teacher, was in charge of the implementation of the new computers in the school, which took a vast amount of his time.

The High School

"I like to read, I read poems, books about the past, everything about nature, about animals. I read every day, every night... I borrow books here at the school library or at the library in /the location/. Monday, Wednesday, Saturday. Because it's a library near me. When I'm lonely I go to the library to do my homework and to read... I come to the school library every week, sometimes every day, when I'm lonely and when I

don't have any lunch money. I must come on Thursdays, because then it is my library day as a library helper"

(a high school learner in grade 9).



Library helpers. Photo by Maud Hell.

The High School in Western Cape Province is situated on a hill overlooking the lagoon in the city of Knysna, some kilometres away. It has 1,100 (black) learners from grades 8 to 12 and 32 teachers, with an average of 50 learners per class. Learners come to the High School from different primary schools in a rural area of many small villages or locations on hills. Some of the learners have begun school late, which explains why their ages range from 13 to 23 years.

In this school, I interviewed six learners (5 girls and 1 boy), five teachers and the principal. I made most of the interviews in the library. The teacher librarian was my guide in the school.

The language used for teaching is English, but the majority of the children speak Xhosa and their English is not so good by the time they reach grade 8. They study Xhosa as a compulsory language. A language teacher in English and Xhosa said that it is problematic for the children to express themselves in English, because they speak Xhosa most of the time. When they read and write in Xhosa, she said, "They seem to disconnect what they speak from what they write. We have not so many books in Xhosa. We do have Xhosa language textbooks, but the reading material is not much". Another teacher said that their language is not good when they write history essays. He thought that their "cell phone language", mixing English and Xhosa, would make things even worse. The teacher librarian said: "whenever anyone asks what I want, I always say Xhosa books, because we don't have many of those. I believe the reading should actually be in their home language and from that they could develop another language and then move on".

The school library

The school library was a rather big well equipped room, with shelves along the walls containing encyclopaedias, fiction and non-fiction books, magazines and posters and other information materials, e.g. on HIV/AIDS. The room was furnished with tables and chairs for about one whole class to sit. The teacher librarian had decorated the library with information materials.

Library use and situation

Teachers used the school library mostly for assignments and projects for the learners and did not go there themselves very often. One teacher said that she sometimes brought her own books to the teacher librarian when she wanted the learners to get information from titles not available in the library. The teacher librarian helped her guiding the learners.

The library was open for one hour every day at lunch break, when the teacher librarian was there together with learners acting as library helpers: two different library helpers every day, 10 in all. Since there was no functioning library committee in this school, the library helpers were a great aid.

The teacher librarian got one hour allocated each day as compensation for working during the lunch hour. Her biggest wish was to get more time for the library, she said. She taught library lessons in grade 8 in which the learners were trained to use encyclopaedias and atlases.

The library was also open half an hour on Wednesdays after school. One of the most important activities developed in the library was finding material for project work, often photocopies from reference books that could not be borrowed.

High School learners used the library to get information for school projects and assignments. They looked in encyclopaedias and other books and made photocopies. Sometimes the library was full of learners reading magazines and doing their homework.

Several of my interviewees said that they got good help from the library and the teacher librarian. Some of them said they would have liked more books in Xhosa. They thought that the library should be open more. One learner complained of the noise in the library and the lack of space when it got crowded.

The teacher librarian had noticed that learners came to the library more often with the new way of teaching introduced in the Curriculum 2005 ^[5]. She had not been to courses on OBE ^[6], but noticed that learners were now requested to find information. She thought that the library should be open more; that there should be more cooperation with teachers and the library more integrated into the teaching.

One teacher wanted the library to promote reading through providing more of what the learners like to read. He thought that new books were necessary. Teachers also thought that the library should be open in the

afternoons too, with a full-time librarian.

The principal said he thought that the library should be more integrated into teaching: “that’s probably its prime function”. Talking about promoting reading, he said: “First and most of all we have the library. It is a very user-friendly library and it’s probably the best library of all the schools in Knysna. It’s open and it’s free and we do encourage it as much as possible”. However, he had not allocated time or training for teachers to learn how to integrate the library.

Interaction with other libraries

Since learners did not have enough time to go to the school library while it was open, they had to find resources somewhere else. According to the OBE, they are supposed to learn to find information. Many learners went to other libraries in their leisure hours. There was a small public library in one location and a church-driven activity centre/library in another location – mostly aimed at the Xhosa-speaking population, according to the principal.

There was also the Public Library in Knysna. Both learners and teachers used it. Public librarians from the library sometimes came to the school and arranged book displays for the teachers. The teacher librarian could borrow block loans (a selection of books that can be borrowed for a longer period) from the public library to the school library. Sometimes younger kids went into town to go to that library without telling their parents or guardians, which led to problems.

Some of the teachers used the provincial educational library service in Cape Town, mostly for ordering videos. However, one teacher said it was too much trouble to order from there and/or to send things back in time.

Computers

The High School had two computer rooms, which were frequently used. The school was involved in an ICT development project and had received a large amount of computers. Learners were working with a mathematical programme and the Encarta Encyclopaedia.

The teacher in charge of the computer labs had no cooperation with the teacher librarian in terms of computer use. She was also teaching biology and she said that she gave the learners assignments where they had to use the library. Regarding library materials, she said: “I’m sure there are many computer books that we could have, a wonderful computer magazine, they are all very expensive. That would be very nice to have that. A lot of children are very interested”.

Some teachers and learners said that it would be good to have computers with Internet access in the library.

HOW TO IMPROVE THE SITUATION OF SCHOOL LIBRARIES IN SOUTH AFRICA? REMARKS AND SUGGESTIONS

School libraries could help improve the quality of teaching and learning in South African schools. My interviews with teachers and learners showed that they would all want to use libraries more and that they obtained valuable help from them.

Although my interviews did not provide as much new information as I had hoped, perhaps because neither my interviewees nor I had English as our first language, I still got a picture of how the libraries were used and how they could become more connected to the curriculum and further support learning and teaching. The possibilities were there, but the level of priority assigned to the libraries and the will to improve them were not strong enough.

More time for cooperation between the person responsible for the school library and the rest of the school staff, and more time in the library for guiding learners, would be necessary. There must be networking activities on all levels to give opportunities for teachers, library and information staff to meet and best practices to be spread. The strong dynamic individuals who were already working in the school libraries and their struggles should be supported and rewarded. Further and better cooperation with regional library services and public libraries is essential.

As regards the incorporation of ICTs to school libraries, education planners, specialists and school managers tend to think that these are a solution per se. Instead, a synergy of traditional library-based resources and ICTs should be sought. The installation of ICTs in schools does not eliminate the need for a teacher-librarian. If teacher librarians receive adequate education in terms of how to integrate ICTs in the school library and information services, this would lead to improvements (Karlsson, 2005).

More than ever before, full-time teacher librarians need to be appointed, because they have a mediating role to play to bring teacher, learners and technology together and guide learners in effectively making meaning of, using and repackaging both print-based and electronic information. Their particular expertise in relation to information literacy and use needs to be better understood by education managers (ibid.). Library students could serve many purposes in the school libraries, if adequately incorporated to assist teacher librarians while improving their education.

Training courses and workshops -in information literacy, the use of literature, reading and storytelling in teaching and integrating libraries and ICTs in education- should be available (if possible in cooperation with the universities that offer library and information education). Preferably, they should be organized in the schools, school community centres or public libraries present in every community, and include principals, politicians, parents and adult learners.

As a result of proper training, the services of the school libraries could become better connected to realities in their communities, and participation from community members and a joint use of resources might become more easily achieved. This would in turn provide opportunities to promote reading.

Moreover, it could facilitate a merger of the “western” culture of reading with the “African” oral culture of storytelling. The storytelling tradition is not something natural for the youth of today, but is taken up by artists and authors who try to revive the tradition. School libraries can support oral expression by talking books, reading and storytelling.

Last but not least, school libraries should also be supported with appropriate funding.

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[1] For information about South Africa, see the history project website South African History Online, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/>

[2] READ Educational Trust is a non-government educational organisation that has been active in South Africa for 26 years. Funded by private sector and foreign donors, it works with the Education Departments in all nine provinces, conducting literacy programmes for previously disadvantaged groups. “Learning for Living”, for instance, was a 5-year project that delivered classroom materials and in-service training to educators in nearly 900 schools. READ also promotes reading activities such as READATHON, a yearly national literacy campaign (<http://www.read.org.za/> retrieved 1.08.2005).

[3] By confidentiality reasons I do not mention the name of the township – I just name it The Public Library.

[4] E.g., the “Want to Read Project” sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation –an American grant making foundation- aims at developing a culture of reading in primary schools. The

project includes the "Story Skirmish", an inter-school knockout quiz for English as a second-language speakers in standards two and three in the greater Johannesburg area. The Carnegie sponsorship also allows Johannesburg's libraries to train five young librarians over a 3-year period. De Beers –a mining company- sponsors a similar quiz, "Battle of the Books", for children in grades 6 and 7, involving 48 schools in the greater Johannesburg area. The quiz focuses on set books, half of which are South African. The aim is to bring about interaction between children, schools and libraries. Heinemann Publishers, Oxford University Press and Exclusive Books sponsor the prizes

(<http://www.johannesburg.gov.za/services/libraries1.stm>)

[5] Curriculum 2005, the new curriculum introduced in the schools in 1998, was based on concepts from modern pedagogical theories used in other parts of the world, e.g. USA and New Zealand, such as an outcomes-based approach to teaching and learning (Outcomes-Based Education or OBE).

[6] "OBE regards learning as an interactive process between and among educators and learners. The focus is on what learners should know and be able to do (knowledge, skills, attitudes and values). It places strong emphasis on co-operative learning, especially group work involving common tasks. The goal is to produce active and lifelong learners with a thirst for knowledge and a love of learning" (Education, South Africa Yearbook 2004/2005).

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