

# SCHOOL LIBRARIES IN SOUTH AFRICA: PAST, PRESENT – AND FUTURE?

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First of all I would like to congratulate the Zimbabwe Library Association on hosting this important event. By placing school libraries at the centre of its gaze, it gives an example to other professional associations such as my own, the Library & Information Association of South Africa. As an ex teacher and school librarian and now as a librarian educator, I believe that school libraries have a crucial role to play in educational reform in Africa - reform that aims at bringing our school-leavers into the global information society. But I also believe that this role is not yet recognised among educators, policy-makers, and even our own colleagues.

There is a widespread, often tacit, assumption that school libraries are unaffordable *luxuries*. One of my aims today is to show how the problems in the implementation of our brand new curriculum in South Africa can be attributed partly to the non-existence of school libraries. The new curriculum has thrived in schools with libraries – usually in the historically advantaged white suburbs – and it has failed so far in the typically disadvantaged schools within our townships (thus in the vast majority of our schools). If we are to have the kind of learner-centred ethos and methodologies promoted in our new curriculum then school libraries are indeed *necessities*.

## *Key events in the development of school libraries in South Africa*

My talk today identifies what I consider to be the key events and factors that have shaped and will possibly shape school librarianship in South Africa. The position is precarious, as you will see. However there are now opportunities and doors opening that we must enter with confidence.

The key factors and events are, I believe, as follows:

- The legacy of our apartheid past
- Two government sponsored surveys in 1997 and 1999 that have audited school facilities nationally – and found huge disparities between sectors and between provinces.
- Educational legislation since 1994 - the result of and cause of rapid change throughout our education systems
- The *National Norms and Standards for School Funding* – brought in by the Department of Education in 1998 in an attempt to redistribute recurrent non-personnel expenditure to the most needy schools.
- *Curriculum 2005* – the new outcomes-based curriculum being phased in from 1997. After much controversy and debate, late last year the Minister of Education appointed a review committee to investigate problems in its implementation.
- The *National Policy Framework for School Library Standards* – produced after wide consultation in 1998 by the Department of Education's Directorate for Educational Technology and Distance Education whose responsibility it is to develop school library policy.

- Within the library world recent high-level moves to bridge the gaps between school and public library governance structures. Each sector falls underneath a different ministry and a committee on school and public library co-operation has been set up to investigate ways of removing hindrances. It is perhaps too early to report on this as its report has not received final approval by government.
- Increasing concerns over the poor reading abilities of South African learners – 2001 has been declared by the Minister the *Year of the Reader*.
- The Department of Education's *TELI (Technology Enhanced Learning Initiative) Policy Framework* in 1996. Government is clearly looking to information and communications technologies (ICT) to overcome backlogs and to bridge the gaps between so-called information-poor and information-rich schools.

There isn't time today to cover all of these in detail so I propose to highlight the most significant issues and then to suggest some strategies to improve the present rather depressing situation.

### ***The legacy of apartheid***

The position of school libraries in South Africa today reflects our apartheid past. Remember that we had 19 racially-based education departments. Overduin and De Wit's survey (1986) of school libraries in the mid 1980s showed that the schools in the white sector of education had libraries perhaps equal to any in the world whereas libraries in the African schools were virtually non-existent. Despite the generous provision of school libraries within the advantaged white sectors of schooling, Overduin and De Wit found that the libraries were on the whole under-used. Several writers in the early 1990s made the point that the South African curriculum – with its stress on textbooks and rote-learning and examinations – would explain this under-use. Schools that valued learner-centred approaches and encouraged independent research projects would obviously have more need of a library.

Towards the end of the 1980s the position of school libraries began to improve in other sectors of South African schooling. The House of Representative and House of Delegates Departments - those that ran the so-called coloured and Indian schools - settled on centralised school library policies that allowed schools to appoint school librarians and to have library materials budgets. School library support services offered dynamic programmes to educate teachers on how to use library resources, how to run school libraries and how to teach library and information skills. My own university at this time opened our Diploma in School Librarianship – designed to educate teachers in librarianship and information literacy. However in about 1993 these positive developments froze as the budgets of these departments were drastically reduced (Stopart, 1994). The reality was that the government could no longer allow the huge disparities in spending between these departments and the Department of Education & Training – responsible for the African school sector.

So since the early 1990s school librarians have become an endangered species as schools have simply abolished their posts. The government from 1996 onwards enforced national pupil/teacher ratios – in the interests of equity - and so a fresh wave of retrenchments of school librarian posts took place. Those that remain are usually paid for by school governing body funds – funds raised from school fees. My own survey in 1998 of a circuit of 17 primary schools in Cape Town showed that only the three historically white schools had teacher librarians – all funded by school fees (Hart, 2000b). Only these three schools had bought library materials in the past year – again

from governing body funds. The 14 ex-House of Representative (HOR) schools in the circuit did have what one principal called “book stores” – the standard HOR layout of a storeroom of books leading off a classroom. But none had left even a part-time librarian to manage these stores or to teach information skills. The “library” had become the responsibility of a full time classroom teacher – expected to look after it in a few “free” periods a week. The end-result is that most of the so-called “libraries” in these schools are locked up and their collections scattered. The historically African school in my study had never had a library. Last year it did allocate a classroom for the library and stocked it with a few hundred books - but it is locked all day as the “librarian” is in fact the full-time Grade Four teacher.

A reason for optimism among school librarians was that in 1998 government formulated a policy for *redress* funding. The *National Norms and Standards for School Funding* attempts to provide more funds for learning support materials to so-called ‘poor’ schools but leaves it up to each province to design its own redistribution mechanisms. However provinces have found this redress funding to be inadequate especially since such a huge slice of their budget allocations from government is spent on personnel (Wildeman, 2000). There has moreover been comment that the methods of targeting the “needy” should be revisited as existing methods have not yet noticeably improved the quality of education in most provinces.

Thus you can, I hope, see why I remarked earlier that the present situation reflects our apartheid past. The schools that have well-stocked libraries, professionally staffed, are, on the whole, the historically white suburban schools – who maintain them by using their own funds. Of course these schools are now multicultural and can no longer be described as “white” but they have long-established infrastructure and charge fees of some hundreds of rands a term. The picture I draw here has been confirmed by two audit type surveys – in 1997 and in 1999.

### ***School libraries in South Africa today – two surveys***

In 1997 the Department of Education conducted a national audit of school facilities and found that less than 30% of schools had libraries (Department of Education, 1997). It catalogued the huge lack of basic facilities such as classrooms and sanitation. Last year the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) was commissioned by the Department to take a closer look at school libraries. The HSRC researcher, responsible for the survey, reported on it at our recent LIASA conference in Durban - although the survey has not yet been officially sanctioned by the Minister apparently. At our conference we were told that overall about 30% of South African schools have what is called “on-site libraries”. But there are huge provincial disparities. My own province, the Western Cape, for example, was found to have more than 50% of its schools with a library. However at our conference the HSRC researcher did admit to problems with its questionnaire – which might explain what many of us feel is its too “rosey” picture of the situation in the Western Cape. And indeed an examination of the questionnaire does reveal gaps. Thus, the bookstores I referred to earlier were probably ticked off as a “library” by principals. The finding that throws most doubt on the survey is its claim that that there are over 400 full-time school librarians in the Western Cape. Anyone who works in the field in the Western Cape knows that there are no more than a handful!

### ***Educational change & legislation: impact on school libraries***

Our first democratic election in 1994 ushered in a period of intense change in education. Indeed many have commented that perhaps too much was attempted too quickly –

causing strain and stresses in our schools. Teachers have had to cope with a new curriculum at the same time as new governance, discipline and management policies. In the Western Cape they have also had to cope with harsh staff cutbacks.

School libraries in South Africa are the responsibility of three layers of government – national, provincial and school. Two pieces of legislation are relevant - *the National Education Policy Act* of 1996 and the *SA Schools Act* of 1996: The *National Education Policy Act* spells out the responsibilities of the various layers. Thus central government – for our purposes the Department of Education's Directorate for Educational Technology and Distance Education – builds policy – though in consultation with the provinces and other stakeholders such as teacher unions, NGOs, and so on. The nine provincial education departments implement policy. The provinces have, by the way, teachers' libraries and school library support services, which should spearhead the implementation of policy. We are lucky in the Western Cape to have the dynamic EDULIS – which is, however, hampered by its lack of resources. At present its six school library and information skills advisors have to spread themselves among about 1800 schools. The *SA Schools Act* aims at bringing democratic management down to school level. It grants meaningful power to schools' governing bodies who can appoint their own staff and who - significantly for libraries - administer their school budgets.

Ironically it is this move to site-based management that has been bad news for libraries. Without unambiguous policy and direction from central government, schools are not choosing to spend their limited resources on libraries. Less than 25% of our teachers have direct experience of libraries in their own education and training (Olen, 1996) and so perhaps can be forgiven for not understanding the role of a school library.

### ***Curriculum 2005 – an opportunity for school libraries?***

The picture I have just painted is especially disappointing as our new outcomes-based curriculum should have brought a better climate for libraries. Its ethos and its approaches to learning and teaching imply the sort of education in which libraries thrive. It stresses lifelong learning, learner-centred approaches, independent and critical thinking. Teachers are expected to move away from *chalk & talk* and reliance on textbooks towards *resource-based learning*.

Most importantly, information-handling skills have been listed as a key cross-field outcome – and accordingly an Information Skills Learning Programme has been developed as part of the learning area, Language, Literacy & Communication. This programme has its roots in the old library and media skills programmes but acknowledges that the library is not the only source of information and also that information skills have to be taught in all areas of the curriculum. Thus in theory at least school librarianship - whose particular mission it is to develop information literacy – at last has a place at the centre of the curriculum.

Another ingredient in our new curriculum that is significant for school librarianship is its emphasis on continuous assessment rather than examinations. There has been a huge increase in project work – as any public librarian in Cape Town will confirm (Hart, 2000a).

In better circumstances the increase in project work might have led to clamour for and increased provision of school libraries. However my own research within disadvantaged schools in which I set out to investigate how disadvantaged schools cope with the new

stress on project work concluded that teachers might well end up by paying only lip-service to the concept of project work (Hart, 1999). The reality is that, in the absence of enough learning support materials, their teaching methods are little different from the old textbook centred ones. There is an increased use perhaps of worksheets in which learners are expected in groups to work through a series of questions. But in my experience these are, in any case, based on the existing textbook!

The optimism that many of us felt as educational change was ushered in has been diluted over the past few years as we have witnessed this kind of gap between curriculum policy rhetoric and the reality within our classrooms. For example I found that only three of the 17 schools in my study were making any attempt to teach the new theoretically compulsory subject Information Skills.

After much ferment and growing research evidence that teachers were struggling to implement the new approaches, government did step in last year and appointed an independent committee to review C2005. Their report was published a few months ago. Predictably the Review Committee attributed the problems to the fact that the dramatic changes in approach expected by C2005 had not been accompanied by any meaningful increase in resources. The Review Committee found that teachers just have not been provided with the support they need to move to resource-based learning (Review Committee on Curriculum 2005, 2000). While contending with large classes, they are also expected to design their own learning materials – often after only limited workshop “cascade” type training. The Committee also had much to say on the reading problems within our schools – warning that schools seem to be spending budget allocations on stationery rather than on learning support materials and reading books.

### **The National Policy Framework for School Library Standards**

In 1997 the Department of Education’s Directorate for Educational Technology and Distance Education began a process of drawing up a national policy statement for school libraries. After wide consultation, the result is the document the *National Policy Framework for School Library Standards* (1998) which I hear is due to be presented for approval to the committee of provincial directors of education (HEDCOM) and the committee of provincial ministers of education (CEM) this week. A four-year implementation plan has also been drawn up.

The document is unusual by traditional world standards. It makes no attempt to give quantitative standards but only “generic qualitative standards”. Its strengths are its explaining simply the crucial role of a school library in our new curriculum and its placing of the school library programme within the legislative framework. However perhaps it does not spell out strongly enough the role of the librarian as an educator in his/her own right – as a teacher of information literacy. Acknowledging current shortages of money, the *National Policy Framework* offers a range of models of service – classroom boxes, libraries for clusters of schools, school/community libraries, regional resource centres and the ultimate virtual library of “one learner one library”. The emphasis is on providing “access to library-based resources” to every school and the document suggests an “incremental” approach.

Its very flexibility and pragmatism, I fear, might be its downfall. Much will be left to the discretion of individual schools. There is talk of incentives and target-setting but international experience, especially in developing countries where school libraries have to fight for a position, shows the need for less ambiguous firmer statements of policy.

The wording is just too vague. I fear that statements such as "every model has different human resource requirements" and the use of weak words such as "should" and "may" will make it all too easy to ignore.

I should point out that my position here has been very much shaped by my attending the workshop on school library standards at IFLA this year. I heard several comments from delegates from developing countries that basic quantitative norms and standards are needed. They expressed concern at the moves towards more qualitative guidelines among developed countries, contending that the old quantitative statements are more useful and understandable to school management structures in third world contexts. A glance at our past in South Africa, as I indicated earlier, might support these claims. School libraries were strong in those sectors that had clear quantitative standards to guide schools.

*Conclusion: the way forward?*

It would be interesting to meet again in say two years time and report to you the progress of the policy statement. Of course I hope that my fears will have proved groundless. To ensure this I suggest the following strategies and here I perhaps outline an agenda for the LIASA School Libraries & Youth Services Interest Group, of which I am national co-ordinator.

First of all, we have to be far more convincing in our statements on the *necessity* for school libraries. If we really believe that educational reform will fail without school libraries then we have to speak with a far louder voice – to a wide range of people. We have to move beyond those nice-sounding (to us) statements about the library being "the heart of the school" and talk the language of educators.

This implies a concerted effort to educate teachers in information literacy – starting where they are and with their own beliefs about learning and getting them to understand the value of the new approaches. In the librarian conferences I attend I hear many papers on information skills teaching and often wonder whether the presenters are also talking to teachers.

I believe that our professional associations like LIASA need to take on board the issue of school libraries and lobby for far stronger government intervention. Once the South African *National Policy Framework* is passed this week by the Department of Education and presented to the public, there will be opportunity for us to react again.

The LIASA School Libraries & Youth Services Interest Group has drawn up a document to present later this week to the Curriculum Review Committee that I mentioned earlier. We plan to point out to the Chairperson the gaps in their report so far and why they need to pay more explicit attention to school libraries. Similarly we need to grab the opportunity the current concern over literacy levels among school learners offers and use the *Year of the Reader* as our platform.

In the short term, we need ring-fenced budgeting explicitly for *library* materials. Until teachers and principals gain insight themselves into why they need a library then we have to rely on such strategies.

We need to exploit the faith of government in ICT to bridge the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged schools. I have not had time to discuss the many projects that are beginning. The Western Cape Education Department for example plans to have every school in the province linked to the Internet by the end of 2001. However there is a growing awareness apparent that providing one PC with Internet access is not going to make any real impact on the school. What is needed is ongoing information literacy development. In the Western Cape there are encouraging signs that ICT staff are getting together with the information and library skills specialists at EDULIS (the school library support service of the Western Cape).

Another encouraging sign within our own field is the appointment of a high-level government committee to investigate the problems caused by the different governance structures of school and public library systems – each of which falls under a different ministry. The committee has completed its investigation and its report will be made public very soon.

Of course it has been difficult to squeeze in an adequate survey of the situation of school libraries in South Africa in such a short space but I hope that the outline gives you at least a coherent picture of where we are and where our path might lead. Much hard work lies ahead and much creative and innovative thinking will be needed.