

The State and Conditions of School Libraries in Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT School libraries or media centres are an essential element of quality in education and learning for all the South African learners. The objective of this paper is to assess the state of library materials and resources obtained in school libraries. It is therefore important that schools should have a library or a media centre for the provision of materials for the purpose of conducive learning and reading for learners. This study investigated the state and conditions of school libraries in rural areas of Vhembe District in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The method used in this study is a qualitative research approach through face-to-face interviews with foundation phase literacy teachers and teacher librarians in eight schools, which were purposely selected for being known to have a school library or media centre buildings in their premises. The conclusion from the findings is that school libraries and media centres in these rural schools do not provide a suitable and conducive learning environment to learners.

INTRODUCTION

Since the transition to democracy in 1994, one of the goals of the South African government has been an attempt to address the challenges of providing quality education to all learners in the country (Paton-Ash and Wilmot 2015; Knoetze 2018). To achieve this goal, the then Department of Education of South Africa introduced the new educational system known as Outcomes-Based Education curriculum in 2005, which was later substituted by the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement. These educational systems, that is, the Outcomes-Based Education and the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement curricula, lay more emphasis on the relationship between the school curricular and the existence and use of school libraries or media centres in every school (Jansen 1998; Mnkeni and Nassimbeni 2008; Mogashoa 2013; Riet 2015). By implication, learners are obliged to make use of the school libraries to prepare for their schoolwork and other undertakings related to their learning. However, these education goals cannot be achieved if learners

do not have access to libraries and if they are not information literate (Mnkeni and Nassimbeni 2008). For the child to be able to learn and succeed academically, they must be exposed to a library. Cullinan (2000), Crouch and Hoadley (2018) posit that a school library environment plays an important role in learning and reading for learners. Therefore, it is precise to state that the introduction of Outcomes-Based Education and the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement in the South African education system eventually helped to uncover the problem of lack of school libraries and information services, especially for schools in the rural areas. The devastating state of school libraries in South Africa is further revealed by studies and surveys that followed before, during and after the introduction of these new curricula. In 1999 the surveys by the Department of Education and the Human Sciences Research Council revealed that only less than thirty percent of South African schools had functional libraries (Stilwell 2007).

South Africa, like all other African countries, has placed education at the centre of its social and

economic development. Therefore, school libraries or media centres are accepted as one of the core infrastructures that every school should have all over the world. To this end, the DBE outlined its plans during the parliamentary briefing session on the 20th of August 2013 to remedy the situation regarding the building of school libraries in the seven of the weakest and poorest provinces in South Africa, that is Eastern Cape, Free State, Kwazulu Natal, Mpumalanga, Northern Cape, Northwest and Limpopo Province included (Library and Information Services Transformation Charter 2014). The Department of Basic Education has responded to these plans by building new school libraries in some provinces. Furthermore, there has also been an upsurge in the donation of funds to schools to build new infrastructure, including libraries.

Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to explore the state and conditions of school libraries and media centres in the rural areas of Vhembe District, in Limpopo Province. More specifically, this study sought to:

- Assess the state of library materials and resources obtained in school libraries
- Highlight the physical state of library building in those schools
- Establish different formats of materials found in those libraries

Literature Review

Morris (2004) states that a school library is an information centre within a school where learners, staff and sometimes parents, and other members of the public, have access to different types of information resources. School libraries are the heart of any schooling system. Quality education cannot be delivered without access to a well-mangled collection of learning resources (Library and Information Services Transformation Charter 2014). According to the South African Department of Education, school libraries form an essential component of the education system, and as a result, an ideal school library should:

- be acquired and assessed as a fundamental element of the substantial resources of the school
- offer sufficient and suitable resources to guarantee the provision of excellent teaching and learning

- present curriculum support to all learners irrespective of their status
- sustaining both teacher advancement and learner performance
- concentrate on developing and enhancing the reading skills of learners (South Africa Department of Education 2001).

Therefore, elementary school libraries have a vital role to play in the early age of children's education by providing learners with books and other resources at their level of education. This is the reason in most of the developed countries elementary libraries specialise in illustrated children's storybooks, colouring books as well as audio-visual materials (Nicholas 2007). Most of the elementary school libraries also comprise reference materials. For example, encyclopaedias for learners, and fiction and non-fiction books, which are at the level of learners' understanding. In some elementary school libraries, there are computers equipped with children's scholastic programmes. Foundation Phase learners, especially from Grade R to Grade 3, are offered classes in which they are trained in basic skills for searching and retrieving information from the library collection. They master the skills on how to search a book making use of the library catalogue, locating a book on bookshelves as well as borrowing the book from the issuing desk. Foundation Phase learners can also utilise the school library collection to master elementary computer skills, or to listen to stories during the story hours (Halsey 2009; South Africa Department of Basic Education 2012).

These sentiments are also shared by Mojapelo and Fourie (2014) who maintain that for a school curriculum to be successfully implemented, adequate library facilities, collections, staff and funds are required to support it. School libraries are therefore responsible for catering the needs of learners in elementary schools (Foundation Phase), middle schools (Intermediate Phase), junior high schools and high schools (Senior Phase). The main aim of a school library is to back-up different educational programmes as well as to advance learners' skills to search, retrieve and use information. Learners use school library collections to do their schoolwork (Halsey 2009; Shandu et al. 2014). Therefore, a school library is crucial to develop reading literacy and for academic achievement and participation.

Studies have indicated that there are only seven percent of schools that have well equipped school libraries in South Africa. Millions of learners are disadvantaged in terms of access to reading and learning materials (National Education Infrastructure Management System 2007; Education Statistics in South Africa 2007). Lack of school libraries in South Africa is negatively affecting teachers, learners and public librarians. Learners rely on public libraries for information sources to do their schoolwork such as projects, presentations, assignments, etc.

Stadler (1991) asserts that before the democratic government came into power in 1994, whites, who are a minority group making about ten percent of the South African population, had functional libraries. On the other hand, blacks, who are in the majority, making about ninety percent of the population of South Africa, did not have libraries. Moreover, according to Stadler (1991), the imbalanced growth of school libraries was due to the apartheid philosophy that black people were intended to be “un-thinking cage in the market in which libraries are not necessary.” Even many years after the apartheid regime has come to an end, there is agreement that the apartheid inheritance remain. The money spent on improving the state of school libraries and education sectors is still not enough (Butler 2004). Bawa (1993:5) also holds the view that school library provision in South Africa is not equal for the various population groups in the country. Some schools are provided with the best library conveniences, and other schools have “nothing that can ambiguously be called a library”. Bawa (1993) further stresses that there is a lack of professional librarians who are trained to enable and assimilate the collection into the school curriculum successfully. The provision of school libraries is still compromised in most schools, especially in rural areas. This is proved by international and national tests results of literacy and numeracy skills that are very poor in South African learners’ performance (Hofmeyr 2006).

The South African Schools Act (Act No. 84 of 1996) was promulgated to mark the advent of the new education system in South Africa (South Africa 1996). However, Le Roux (2003) indicates that one of the shortcomings of this Act was that it does not make any provision for school libraries. Therefore, efforts and strides made by the non-governmental organisations also resulted in the amendment of the South African Schools Act

(Mojapelo 2016), through the Education Laws Amendment Act (Act 31 of 2007), which lists the availability of the library or media centre “as a minimum uniform norm and standard for school infrastructure” (Library and Information Science Transformation Charter 2014). Therefore, for schools which have established libraries, it is crucial to assess how far this legislation is being implemented. This study looks into the state and conditions of school libraries in Vhembe district.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Methodology

This study adopted or followed a qualitative research approach to obtain descriptive data about people’s own written or spoken words as well as observable behaviour.

Area of Study

This study was confined to primary schools in Vhembe District. Vhembe District is a very wide area, with the largest part being remote areas and it is one of the five districts that comprise the Limpopo province of South Africa. According to Massyn et al. (2015), the area is largely rural, and consists of four local municipalities of Musina, Mutale, Thulamela and Makhado. Massyn et al. (2015) further indicate that Vhembe district is one of South Africa’s poorer districts in that it falls within Quintile 2 of the socio-economic deprivation index.

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach through face-to-face interviews with foundation phase or grade 3 literacy teachers and teacher librarians of eight schools in the area.

Sampling Method and Population

Population

The targeted population for this study consists of subject teachers and teacher librarians of selected primary schools in Vhembe District, Limpopo Province. One grade three literacy teacher and one librarian or teacher librarian from each participating school were selected to participate in the study. The

targeted population was from eight circuits in the district. Therefore, the researchers chose the following eight circuits due to reasons of feasibility and practicability of study, namely, Dzindi, Dzondo, Luvuvhu, Mvudi, Mutshundudi, Vhuronga 1, Sibasa and Tshinane Circuits.

Sampling Method

In this study a purposive sampling technique was used to select the schools. Purposive sampling entailed selecting things or research objects that had identical or common attributes in order to accomplish a specific goal or purpose. In this study, only schools that met certain characteristics or features, that is, of having a functional library in their premises, were purposely selected for the study. One school that had a functional library from each circuit was selected to participate in the study. The following schools were selected, namely, Bergvlam school, Lurenzheni school, Makwarela school, Mvudi school, Nazareen school, Tshedza school, Tshiluvhi school and Tshitereke school. The sample for this study consisted of subject teachers (grade three literacy teachers) and teacher librarians from selected primary schools in Vhembe District. At each selected primary school, one grade three literacy teacher and one librarian or teacher librarian were selected to participate in the study. As a result, eight literacy teachers and eight teacher librarians formed part of the sample.

Data Collection Methods

Interviews

Interviews with teacher librarians and grade three literacy teachers (subject teachers) in each selected school were used to gather data.

Data Collection

Structured interviews were used as a data collection method for this study. The interview schedule for teacher librarians consisted of questions that focused attention on the state and conditions of school libraries, where information was sought concerning the status and conditions of the school library in each school. Subject teachers were asked questions about issues such as the physical state of

the school library, in terms of sufficient materials and facilities, if their school libraries support teaching and learning, their knowledge of the importance of school libraries and other challenges detrimental to the provision of school library services in the schools.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed immediately after the process of data collection. It began with the categorisation and coding of responses from interview schedules. For qualitative data, it was important to follow Richard Hycner's model of qualitative data analysis, which provides guideline steps on data analysis.

RESULTS

The results are presented in accordance with the themes that emerged from the participants' responses. The first question that was posed to the subject teachers and teacher librarians was about the state and conditions of library resources and materials in the selected school libraries.

Poor State of Library Materials and Resources

It emerged that the subject teachers who teach literacy were not satisfied with **the poor state and conditions of the library materials and resources**. Participant 1 said, *"When the state and conditions of the library resources are poor and above the level of learners, there is a need to update the collection with the library collection that will challenge the learners. Hence the library collection should be wide and up to date."* Participant 2 added and said, *"It [the library] is not fully fledged, but it is functional but not fully fledged because if you can see there are a lot of books missing especially the subject content. When we go to the library, we don't find them [books]."* These states and conditions included irrelevant library materials, subject teachers seemed to see libraries as lacking relevant information, stocked with outdated library material because teacher librarians are not assisting in selecting relevant and up-to-date resources to update the library collection, and insufficient information sources. This finding is also in line with the study by Chisholm (2011), which revealed that children do not have textbooks and other necessary library resources.

Smaller Physical Library Buildings

The respondents were also asked about the physical state of the library buildings. Therefore, a second finding was concerned about **the smaller physical library buildings**, where the teacher librarians and subject teachers were concerned about the availability of the reading space in the school libraries. For example, one teacher librarian commented this about the physical state of the physical building of the library, *"The sitting space is not enough at all. In our school we do not have a library per se. We use the classes. One class. The space is not enough for learners. I sometimes request learners to come group by group so that each learner must have a chance to access books in the library. The sitting space is not enough due to the size of the classroom."* One subject teacher added and said this about the same problem of the state of physical building of the library, *"The reading space is not that large because you will find that at times as an educator I will prefer to sit down with my learners. I read stories for them. I elaborate, tell them everything related to the story and try to put the story into real life. The space is not large enough for all the learners [in class]. Some of the classes have fifty three learners in each classroom and then the space is not enough for them in the library."* The teacher librarian and subject teachers lamented about insufficient space to fit in all learners without constraints. An important point that repeatedly emerged from the responses was the issue of overcrowding, which causes the library to be dysfunctional. This finding is not surprising because learners who need to hang around outside for a space become yet more discouraged, since occasionally they will have to go back without having accessed the library (Shandu et al. 2014).

Lack of Library Skills

Another question that was posed to the respondents was if their school libraries support learning. The third finding of the study was that the teacher librarians and subject teachers seemed to know the importance of the availability of library resources in supporting classroom reading instruction, but it emerged that teachers **also lack library skills**. For example, one teacher librarian said, *"The role that I play is that I regard myself as somebody who can assist in reading in the library. I play the role*

of being a librarian even though I am an educator in the government schools, as we do not have full time employed librarians. So educators who will be taking learners to the library are responsible for making sure that they change their roles into being librarians and from there they will go to the class and become an educator." The other teacher librarian stated this on the same issue of lack of library skills, *"I regard myself as a teacher librarian because I was given the responsibility of conducting the library competition (Masi-fundesonke library competition) so, from there anything concerning the library activities is directed to me. I did not train as a librarian; I just like it."* Various studies have found that there is a lack of library skills on the part of literacy teachers. The LIS Transformation Charter (2014) and IFLA (2015) also revealed that school libraries in South Africa, with the exception of the previously advantaged schools in cities, are being managed by individuals who are not qualified librarians.

No Formal System for Arrangement of Library Books

Out of the same question above, the other finding that was revealed was that **no formal library system was followed to arrange books** to facilitate ease of access to information sources. Both teacher-librarians and foundation phase literacy teachers complained about poor arrangement of library materials. This is confirmed by a teacher librarian who said, *"There is no formal arrangement followed in our library. Books are just packed on the shelves. The reading books are arranged on one side while the numeracy books are on the other side."* Another teacher librarian added and said on the challenge of poor arrangement of library collection, *"No proper arrangement, the books are just packed on the shelves. There is no arrangement, they are mixed up."* Sharma (1978), Kumar (1993), Gholamreza (2004) and South Baylo University (2012) attach great significance to the arrangement of books according to a system that facilitates their easier retrieval. From these responses it is apparent that library collections are mixed up, resulting in missing books.

Lack of Technology

The fifth and last finding was **lack of technology** in libraries, and hence lack of library materials

in electronic form. Electronic resources were not available in schools. This was clearly expressed by the teacher librarians during interviews. The following is a comment made by one of the teacher librarians, *"I can rate our school library resources and facilities as poor because we don't have enough books or reading material in different formats"*. This finding contradicted the studies that indicated that information in various formats is crucial in providing learners with texts at the learners' level (Celano and Neuman 2001; PIRLS 2006). Gordon (2009) emphasised that the use of technology such as the internet and web 2.0 tools in the library provides learners with the opportunity to interact for self-regulation and self-monitoring in the process of learning to read. It was evident that the library collection mainly took the form of print resources. Reading books were indeed in the print format only

DISCUSSION

The library is the backbone of the institution in which it exists to provide useful information to the community at large. Okogwu (2019) mentions that the library collection should be made available in a wide range of formats to accommodate all tastes and preferences of the users. Ig-Worlu (2021) believes that "library aesthetics and physical facilities" has everything to do with how the library collection will be effectively used by the users, as lack of sufficient library physical infrastructure and facilities can cripple library service delivery to library users. Moreover, Warwick (2017) and Ig-Worlu (2021) support the view that the physical appearance of a library plays an important role in influencing the users to develop the interest of accessing the library with the intention to use the information resources. On the contrary De Young (2016) stresses, "School libraries around the country are not properly used resources, leaving learners battling to do research for their schoolwork in their respective subjects". In the same vein Mojapelo and Dube (2014) also showed that few school libraries received core library materials from the Department of Basic Education and that most schools have old textbooks as library materials because there is no library budget allocated to procure new resources.

Shonhe (2019), Shonhe and Marambe (2019) and Frederic et al. (2020) found that libraries in developing countries encounter similar challenges

such as lack of funding, lack of technology, lack of library skills, poor library buildings and poor library staffing. This supports the view and opines that lack of technologies in the library are a threat. This is consistent with literature by Chingath (2020), Funmilayo and Ayo (2020), Lubanga and Mumba (2021) and Saibakumo (2021) that technology in the library is indispensable especially in the 21st century for resourceful library services. Halsey (2009) supports the view and states that contemporary libraries do not include only print materials like manuscripts, books, magazines as well as newspapers, but also include collections such as film, sound and video recordings, art reproductions, maps, photographs, microfiche, CD-ROMS, computer software, online databases, etc. Contemporary libraries also provide telecommunications connections that facilitate access to information in isolated areas to users. As a result, it is necessary that the library service be computerised so as to keep the records being accurate and up to date.

According to Omeluzor et al. (2018), the smooth operation of the library depends solely on the type of infrastructures and facilities available for effective use by its clients in that library. Furthermore, the enrolment in most foundation phase classrooms in Vhembe District are way above the stipulated teacher learner ratio in South Africa, that of 1:32 in a classroom which aggravates the challenges of lack of size of the physical library building to accommodate the class as a whole (DoE 2009-2010). It is understandable that Baird (2012) is of the opinion that if there is no space to install tables and chairs for learners due to the size of the library building, therefore, rugs and carpets can be utilised to sit on and learners may realise that it is relaxing.

Bawa (1993) stresses that there is a lack of professional librarians who are trained to enable and assimilate the collection into the school curriculum successfully. Considering the highlighted information of lack of professional staffing the libraries it is important that in the absence of official public school librarian posts in many schools, most universities offering library and information services profession have virtually halted offering training for school librarians (Hart and Zinn 2015). Lance et al. (2000) stress that 9 out of 10 schools with a full librarian performed at average or above levels on standardised tests, compared with 5 in 10 schools that had no librarian at all. However, it is logical that Mahwasane (2017a) emphasises that

it is of paramount importance that teacher librarians be trained to perform all library activities both as a teacher and a librarian so as to possess sufficient knowledge that will enable them to effectively provide the library services. In the same vein Mahwasane (2017b) supports this view and opines that a poorly arranged library collection is as good as having no library because books become inaccessible and also discourage library usage by users. Gholamreza (2004) emphasises that shelving and shelf rectification of reading material in different collections must be done preferably every day to ensure that shelf arrangement of books and other reading materials is in a recommended order.

CONCLUSION

The findings reported in this study have provided some insights into the state and conditions of the school libraries in the Vhembe District. The state and conditions of school libraries in Vhembe District need to be treated as a matter of urgency. The library buildings are small and unable to accommodate the class as a whole at a time. Library resources that are needed to support the school curriculum are also lacking. Therefore, school libraries and information services in this area are still faced with a lot of issues and challenges. South Africa, like all other African countries, has placed education at the centre of its social and economic development. Contrary to this fact, there is a striking lack of support from the government for the establishment of school libraries in South Africa especially in the previously disadvantaged schools. Decision makers are aware of how the shortage of libraries in South African schools hinders the education of children in this country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is therefore recommended that the Department of Basic Education should ensure that after the school libraries are established, they should be well equipped with adequate and relevant school library resources and materials if the dream of an inclusive and quality education is to be realised. This dream can also be realised if full-time qualified school librarians are employed to run these libraries, rather than using teachers as librarians. The education authorities should take responsibility for providing

schools with libraries or media centres, managed by qualified librarians, to be used as an instructional resource centre, reading centre, as well as information literacy centre. Reading materials for learners should be made available in a variety of formats. The school library collection should consist of both print and non-print materials, with books forming the larger part of the collection. Non-print materials should comprise of photographic sliders, audio tapes, film trips, motion films, video tapes, etc.

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