

All Together Now?: New Hopes for the Transformation of South African Schooling from the National Policy for Library and Information Services (NPLIS)

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Abstract

The paper explores the meaning of the recently drafted National Policy for Library and Information Services (NPLIS) for school librarianship in South Africa. It argues that, after years of failed advocacy, a convergence of thinking across the LIS ecosystem enabled the policy project and gives new hope for the transformation of the school library sector. The investigations throughout 2017 sought to find out from a wide range of role-players what and whose behaviour they believed should be changed. The paper describes our evidence-gathering across the country and how the data were analysed into broad themes around which the policy was built. The paper pulls out the threads on school LIS policy but also highlights the principles that tie them to the overarching policy. Thus, the insistence on an ecosystems approach calls for innovative strategies to counter long-established silo-thinking.

Introduction

The paper explores the meaning of the recently drafted National Policy for Library and Information Services (NPLIS) for school librarianship in South Africa and offers insights for school LIS development across the world. Towards the end of 2016, the National Council for Library and Information Services (NCLIS), the statutory body for LIS, commissioned a task-team (comprising the two authors and Professor Muxe Nkondo) to draw up a “comprehensive and integrated” national policy for South African LIS, to be based on extensive participatory research. After two years of nationwide consultations, the outcome is a 132 page document, which, after being approved by NCLIS, is now being considered by the government ministries responsible for LIS. Given the years of failed advocacy for school LIS and the several inconclusive attempts at national school LIS policy from 1997 (see Hart & Zinn, 2007), the question might well arise: *How does this document differ from these earlier attempts?* As implied in our

title, we argue that the major difference is that its contents come from a convergence of thinking across all LIS sectors. The threads of *school* LIS policy are woven into the larger document – the assumption being that, if the Policy is to empower the LIS sector to fulfil its social mission in South Africa’s developmental state, then it cannot exclude schools. The Policy, we argue, gives new hope for the expansion of the school library sector and, thus, for the transformation of the broader school system.

South Africa’s Schooling Challenges

In his input to the Minister of Finance’s Economic Forum in January 2019, the education economist Nic Spaull highlights the links between race, poverty and education, saying, “Two decades after apartheid it is still the case that the life chances of the average South African child are determined not by their ability or the result of hard-work and determination, but instead by the colour of their skin, the province of their birth, and the wealth of their parents” (2019, p. 4). South Africa’s National Development Plan envisages a “quality school education with globally competitive literacy and numeracy standards” and a “higher education sector ... that can contribute... to the knowledge-intensive economy” (National Planning Commission, 2012, p.17). Yet, most would agree with Jonathan Jansen’s description of South African schooling as “dysfunctional” “stumbling along” in a “state of stable crisis” (2013, p. 53). Pupils regularly score poorly in standardised literacy and numeracy tests, such as the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, and the Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS). Citing the statistics in the 2016 PIRLS, Spaull labels 45% of our primary schools as “cognitive wastelands” where no child “can read and make inferences”(2019, p. 3).

Under apartheid education, the schools designated for black children were purposefully under-resourced and their schooling is perhaps where the heritage of apartheid is most evident. They are still disadvantaged, as evidenced in the disparities in pass and drop-out rates between the historically “white” schools, mostly situated in middle class suburbs, and the historically “black” rural and township schools. The post-apartheid educational and curricular reforms intended to counter the disparities across all sectors have in fact added to the challenges. As the educationist Bloch remarks, the new learner-centred approaches were challenging even in well-resourced schools but were impossible in schools where “pedagogies were already poor and resources limited” (2009, p. 114).

Some School Library Background

The weak position of school libraries in South Africa and the efforts to remedy it have been described elsewhere (for example Hart & Zinn, 2007; 2015). The most recent report from government’s National Education Infrastructure Management System (NEIMS) shows that 71.31% of the 23, 471 schools covered still have no functional library (Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2018). This paper makes no attempt to summarise the widespread research evidence of the contribution of libraries to quality education; but it has to be said that, on the whole, South Africa’s school LIS are to be found in the minority of schools that the educationist Bloch labels “jewels of excellence” (2009, p. 128), the so-called Section 21 schools in the historically advantaged sector of public schooling. Their governing bodies are able to raise funds from their relatively affluent parent bodies in order to supplement their government subsidies. They have continued to support their libraries without the government funding for libraries they received in the apartheid era, presumably because of their conviction that their libraries are significant contributors to their superior academic performance.

In 2015 against the backdrop of growing recognition of the failure of the ambitious curricular reforms in under-resourced schools, Hart and Zinn identified the following challenges facing school librarianship:

- the failure of the five attempts by role-players in school librarianship between 1997 and 2005 to induce the education authorities to pass binding policy to address the shortages of libraries. While acknowledging the Department of Basic Education's publication of the National Guidelines for School LIS in 2012, Hart and Zinn argued that, as mere "guidelines", they lacked the clout of enforceable policy and had had little impact
- the abdication of the national Department from a leadership role, as evidenced in its closing in 2002 of its specialist library planning unit
- in the absence of official public school librarian posts, the virtual demise of school library training at our universities both within LIS schools and education faculties
- again in the absence of funded posts, the loss of school librarians in historically disadvantaged schools which cannot call on the governing body funds that more advantaged schools use for "extra" staff members
- the struggles of the under-resourced provincial school library support services to make inroads into the huge backlogs. (2015: p. 23)

Importantly, Hart and Zinn suggest that a fundamental lack of understanding among teachers and education officials of the role of libraries in teaching and learning underlies the problems. In support of their claim, they quote studies that reveal teachers' views of libraries as storehouses of "stuff" which they do not really need in their day-to-day teaching. Hart and Zinn go on to examine the promise of two concurrent and intersecting phenomena: the LIS Transformation Charter (2014), the outcome of a four year investigation of the status-quo of South African LIS with a strong focus on the plight of schools; and the NGO Equal Education's campaign for school libraries, which gained unprecedented public attention and culminated in a widely publicised court case against the Department of Basic Education in 2012 (Equal Education n.d.). The Department eventually settled the case out of court and published regulations that every school must have "a library or media centre" (DBE, 2013). This was a moral victory for Equal Education; but the reality is that thousands of schools have library *rooms* that cannot function as libraries as they lack the other crucial ingredients of a library – reading and information resources and librarians.

The National Policy for LIS (NPLIS)

As already mentioned, late in 2016 NCLIS commissioned a team to draw up a "comprehensive and integrated" national policy for the country's LIS. South Africa's three-tier government system allocates policy formulation to central government, which then hands responsibility for its implementation to the nine provinces. And indeed from the beginning, the policy initiative was supported by the national Department of Arts and Culture (DAC). There is general agreement that, while the post-apartheid government has drawn up many excellent policies to address the country's socio-economic challenges, it struggles to implement them effectively – often because policies are seen as top-down pronouncements out of touch with experience on the ground (see Tebele, 2016, pp. 12-15). Recognising the risk, the NPLIS team set out to consult with as many role-players as possible, in order to produce more than official rhetoric. The purpose was to bolster the LIS sector's own capacity to address problems on the ground; but it also wished to enhance the public interest value of LIS as well as to advance national priorities such as those identified in the National Development Plan.

The Policy has its roots in NCLIS's earlier initiative that was mentioned above, the LIS Transformation Charter (2014). It influenced the team's approaches in two key ways for school librarianship. First, it highlighted South African children's urgent need for equal access to reading and information resources, citing the constitutional imperative for redress of past inequalities; and, second, it adopted what it called

an “ecosystems” approach to transformation. Early on in its explanation of the application of the concept of ecosystem to South African LIS, the Transformation Charter refers to school libraries:

The ecological approach encourages us to think of South African LIS in such a way that where the flows of resources diminish, for example to school libraries, we will recognise that because of our interdependence, the weakness of one component has the potential to weaken other components. It discourages thinking about borders and so is more hospitable to the aims of eliminating barriers and achieving integration in a sector where the uneven and unequal provision of the past is reflected in disparities and fragmentation, two attributes often cited as hampering the sector reaching its potential.” (2014, p. 37)

The interdependence within the LIS ecosystem was indeed to be made clear in the course of the NPLIS investigations that followed in 2017. We heard from university librarians, for example, of their struggles to support first year students who are ill-prepared for their academic assignments; and hard-pressed public librarians described the pressures on them to step into the gaps. And publishers and booksellers talked of the impact of frequently haphazard procurement procedures on the provision of books to schools.

The following sections outline some of the principles of research for policy formulation and then describe our evidence-gathering methodology and how the data were analysed into broad themes around which the policy was built. As mentioned earlier, our brief was to produce an “integrated and comprehensive” policy to cover all LIS sub-sectors. For this paper we pull the threads specific to school libraries out from the broader tapestry.

Research Methodology

Our research approach, while employing the standard methods of social science, was underpinned by two distinctive features related to public policy and its nature, viz. policy is designed to influence or change behaviour, and is an outcome that it is prompted by a need (Pillay, 2006, p. 444). Accordingly we needed in the first instance to establish the need/s (problems) in the LIS sector, prioritise them, and finally formulate policy options to meet the needs. Our terms of reference stipulated a participatory process, an essential aspect of policy analysis which relies on the early involvement of stakeholders in order to strengthen the chances of adoption and uptake (Lomas, 2000, p. 141).

The neglect of school LIS and its impact on our schooling preoccupied us from the outset. We were aware that, although DAC was sponsoring the project, the support of another government department, the national Department of Basic Education, would be crucial. As mentioned above, government had not approved the five school library policy drafts between 1997 and 2005; perhaps because it was nervous of the cost of implementing them and/or doubted the power of libraries to improve our schooling. It had, however, in reaction to Equal Education’s court challenge in 2012, promulgated official regulations promising libraries in schools in the following 10 years (DBE, 2013) and so, we hoped, might be more open to the new initiative. With this in mind, we embarked on several engagements with Department of Basic Education officials. Thus early in 2017 we took part in the gathering of heads of the provincial education LIS (responsible for school library support services), hosted every quarter by the Department of Basic Education, and were encouraged by the support from the provincial directors, many of whom pleaded for the national department to take a stronger lead. Some months later we met with senior officials in the Department of Basic Education – armed with the evidence we had been collecting across the country on the impact of the absence of libraries. A breakthrough came a few weeks after this meeting when the same officials declared their “full support” for NPLIS at a meeting with officials from National Treasury when we presented some implementation scenarios. This meeting concluded with Treasury

requesting a more detailed costing analysis. We then approached the consultants at Cornerstone Economic Research, authors of a report on the costing of the Public LIS Bill in 2013 (DAC, 2013), to draft some costing scenarios with a specific focus on school LIS. We then invited Cornerstone to convene a workshop with the Department of Basic Education, DAC, provincial education LIS managers, and some public LIS managers to test school LIS policy options and explore the comparative costs of different implementation plans. The resulting costing scenarios were handed to Treasury in December 2017 and are included in the final document as an appendix.

We had a wide array of important stakeholders: viz. librarians in the different LIS sub-sectors, our principals (NCLIS and the Department of Arts and Culture, whose mandate is to develop LIS policy), the Council of Higher Education, the Department of Higher Education and Training, National Treasury (responsible for allocation of government budget), LIS users including special interest groups such as school-children and people with disabilities, civil society, and the book trade. The process of engagement with multiple stakeholders with differing interests created tensions which had to be managed in a research process that generated an abundance of data which included empirical information and opinions and views laden with ideological perspectives. We had to devise methods to analyse the data in a manner that yielded authoritative evidence to support policy options acceptable to our principals and LIS professionals who would implement policy and sufficiently persuasive so that the government would release funds in order to strengthen and transform a system that they believe is (or is capable of) delivering outcomes in keeping with the national agenda.

Table 1 summarises the methods we used and includes those that would be used once the policy document has been approved and adopted by Parliament (Pillay, 2006; Ritchie & Spencer 2002).

Policy Stage	NPLIS Methods
Problem identification; Diagnosis of factors underlying the phenomena surfaced	Literature review, including a study of relevant policy and legislation; Stakeholder conference to launch the project and identify key issues of concern in the LIS sector; Individual meetings with key informants such as the directors of provincial LIS and managers of the South African Local Government Association; Open consultative forums (indabas) in all nine provinces with librarians, LIS managers, literacy NGOs, and library users; Interviews and focus group discussions with specialised groups such as the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA), and other professional associations, the School Libraries and Youth Services Interest Group, the Council for Higher Education, the Committee of Higher Education Libraries of South Africa (CHELSA), students and educators in our LIS schools, the Publishers' Association of South Africa, the South African Booksellers Association, the South African Book Development Council and the South African Local Government Association; Observations - visits to selected libraries in each province; Email questionnaires sent to the heads of the provincial school library support services and to school librarians via the Infolink listserv
Formulation of policy options	Gap analysis – to what extent do services meet their objectives? Analysis of data to derive themes/challenges; Mapping themes to candidate policy options; Constructing strategic direction emerging from policy options; Workshops to test strategic framework and prioritise policy options, for example with role-players from the school LIS world; Costing of major policy options; Presentation of policy options at a national conference to test reception by professional constituency and other stakeholders
Monitoring and evaluation of policy implementation ¹	Risk assessment based on case studies of similar interventions; Design methodology once policy has been accepted to test how and whether policy is implemented according to policy intentions; Modify policy where required; Design impact study to test differences observed and intentions linked to policy interventions

Table 1: Policy research methodology

¹ Hopefully, by the IASL conference in October, we will be able to report on this phase

Our data collection methods surfaced problems in the sector that tended to cohere around common themes such as governance, resources and professional education thus foreshadowing possible solutions that public policy is tasked with providing. It also revealed how users experienced the library thus offering an important perspective on barriers, but also providing evidence of the value of the library and examples of good practice. Our data collecting and tentative analyses might be described as “iterative”, with one step informing the next. We adopted Wolcott’s useful approach to transforming qualitative data collected “from unruly experience ... into an authoritative account” by following his steps of description, analysis and interpretation (1994, p. 10). Before submission of the policy to our principals we tested our interpretations and the final outcomes of the process at a series of representative workshops which helped us build consensus and refine the document.

Data Analysis

As it set out on its investigations, the task team recognised what researchers in policy call its “normative” power. Policy thus fundamentally seeks “to change behaviour through the distribution of scarce resources and in so doing change values” (Blackmore & Lauder, 2011, p. 190). As we met with informants across the country throughout 2017, our opening question was accordingly always: “*Whose and what behaviour do you want the policy to change?*”

Four distinct themes ran through the scores of responses – as follows.

- Interestingly, the first answer from the floor was often “we must change ourselves” - with many speakers calling for more motivated and “professional” staff. The use of the word “professional” would at times denote the need for professionally qualified staff and, at others, the need for more effective and serious customer service. Some participants cited the inadequate services to children in schools where libraries are under the charge of untrained people, appointed by schools in ad-hoc ways and paid a pittance;
- Managers on the ground often referred to “outside interference”. We heard of provincial and local government officials overriding the plans of LIS management to pursue their own agendas. In one case, a provincial government head of department outside LIS apparently overrode the plans of a provincial school LIS support service to insist that the money allocated to provision 10 new school libraries should rather go to his choice of schools, even though they had no library;
- Everywhere a lack of appreciation of the value of LIS among the general South African population was brought up. Libraries, it was often argued, are seen as places for students and for the educated elite. Several participants suggested that the destruction of municipal libraries in so-called service delivery protests might well be attributed to this indifference. (For the latest incident on 12 July 2019, see *IOL News. Look: State-of-the-art community library torched in Ottosdal protest.* <https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/north-west/look-state-of-the-art-community-library-torched-in-ottosdal-protest-29107159>);
- The fourth widespread comment was that teachers and education decision-makers do not understand the role of libraries in quality teaching and learning. Public librarians, for example, described their often fruitless efforts to sustain their relationships with the schools in their communities; and academic librarians told of their struggles in accepting invitations to set up libraries in schools, but which soon flounder as principals and teachers do not see the need for a librarian to manage them. The behaviour of the national Department of Education featured strongly with strong criticism of their lack of leadership.

As we gathered and analysed the data that were to feed into the policy, these four themes served as a yardstick by which to assess whether the final policy document reflected the attitudinal and behavioural changes desired by role-players on the ground, who, after all, will be charged with implementing the policy.

We make no attempt here to provide a detailed description and analysis of our data. Table 2 provides a glimpse of our analysis of data related to schools.

Issue	Selected Comments from the Ground
Perceptions of school LIS	“It is not: a storeroom, a room of Readers Digest books” ”A library without a librarian is not a library!” “Teachers’ top-down teaching styles can mean that they don’t see the value of LIS so even if a school has a library room, the room will end up being used for other things” “Once the school grows, the library is often sacrificed for a classroom”
Staffing	“They [teacher-librarians] are de-motivated as they can't do both jobs. They were the better teachers so principals were reluctant to free them of teaching” (Teacher whose full-time librarian post was abolished) “We try to focus on one school each year. But it is not sustainable—as schools do not have a staff member to look after the library” (University librarian) “School leavers employed as library assistants cannot replace qualified school librarians. It is not fair to ask school leavers to run school libraries alone. Teachers lack respect for someone straight from school” (School librarian)
Weakened provincial school LIS support services	“In EduLIS, four years ago there were four librarians and four assistants. Today there is one librarian and one assistant” (Provincial Education LIS official.)
Silo thinking	“Cooperation between departments is a constitutional imperative but it seems as if departments tend to operate on their own. Separate budgets and responsibilities & reporting channels make it difficult to bring about cooperation in meaningful way for example in operating dual use LIS.” (Provincial Education LIS official)

Dual use school/community LIS: promise & challenges	<p>“We are trying for shared libraries - KZN has 5800 schools, will take 20 years to build LIS in all schools” (Provincial Education LIS official)</p> <p>“We need operating plans of dual use LIS that meet the challenges like: security, salaries, roles & responsibilities, ‘who pays for what conflicts’, electricity bills ... ” (Municipal librarian)</p>
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Table 2: Some of the school LIS issues as reported to NPLIS team

Policy Formulation

After each engagement we analysed the resulting mounds of data, cross-checking our categorisation of themes with each other. Within a few months we had identified seven mutually exclusive categories which scaffolded the policy statements in Chapter 6: governance and leadership; funding; access to LIS; infrastructure; collections and resources; human resources; and education and training. Below, we pull out some of the threads of policy which relate to school LIS.

Governance and Leadership

NCLIS will oversee the implementation of the policy. The barriers between sub-sectors will be broken down. Provinces will establish LIS councils to mirror NCLIS, in order to facilitate cooperation between, for example, education and LIS departments. The Department of Basic Education will reopen its school LIS unit and appoint qualified professionals to take the lead in phasing in the policy, in collaboration with NCLIS and the provinces’ education LIS. The Education LIS in the provincial Departments of Education should be at directorate level so that they are capacitated to take the lead in developing school LIS in their provinces.

Funding

National Treasury will provide a ring-fenced conditional grant for the building and renewal of school LIS in the next eight years. The grant will prioritise Quintiles 1 to 3, the poorer sections of our schooling. The funding for provincial education LIS who manage the school LIS support services will be reliable and equitable. Consistent annual budgets from the provincial education departments and/or schools’ governing bodies will sustain the libraries once established.

Access

Every school child must have access to LIS; however the huge backlogs mean that compromises will be made as to the model of service. Secondary schools in Quintiles 1 to 3 and all special needs schools will be provided with centralised LIS from the Treasury grant; while primary schools will be provided with dynamic classroom libraries to be regularly replenished by schools’ learning and teaching support materials allocations and local public libraries. Dual-use school/community LIS will be set up in remote rural areas, and will be open in the afternoons, weekends and school holidays. Child-friendly retrieval and discovery systems will be in place across school and public LIS.

Infrastructure

Planning for new buildings and infrastructure must be a cooperative process, for example: between education departments’ infrastructure planners and school LIS support services; between public LIS and school LIS authorities. School libraries must be appropriately equipped to play their rightful role in achieving the national integrated ICT system envisaged in the National Development Plan.

Collections and Resources

Collections will be multi-modal, allowing for all the communication modes of the 21st century. In primary schools they will prioritise children's mother-tongues – with at least 5 books per child. Procurement of materials will be in the hands of registered LIS suppliers with experience of the book trade.

Human Resources

The principle that South African LIS must be professionalised applies to school LIS; teachers and learners deserve high-quality services. The Department of Basic Education must re-establish dedicated librarian posts which put school librarians on an equal footing with other teaching staff. Given the daunting backlogs, innovative strategies are called for to fill the gaps in the short to medium term. For example, a cluster of schools might be supported by a qualified teacher-librarian, who works with teachers on the schools' reading and information literacy programmes while the day-to-day administration is carried out by library assistants.

Education and Training

Universities must reinstate their education programmes in school LIS. Initial teacher education programmes must include information literacy education, which will raise awareness of the role of LIS in quality learning and teaching.

In concluding Chapter 6, we return to the LIS Transformation Charter's vision of a malleable LIS ecosystem, where the emphasis is on the needs and interests of LIS users rather than organisational divisions and operational functions. We remind readers that the different threads of policy must be woven together to build services that cut across divisions. Thus, in considering services for children, who are arguably the group most neglected, LIS must reach them wherever they are - in clinics, nursery schools, clubs, special needs schools, ordinary schools, and public LIS.

The final two chapters present implementation and monitoring frameworks. Given the common failure of public policy in South Africa that was referred to in an earlier section, such delineation of timeframes and responsibilities is crucial to the future of NPLIS; and these chapters received close scrutiny at the national feedback conference in March 2018. After some adjustments, we then handed the final document to NCLIS for its vetting and approval.

Political Realities and NPLIS Impact

However, we have to acknowledge that, despite its statutory status, NCLIS is merely an "advisory" body, lacking political clout in its present form. Moreover, its members' term of office expired at the end of 2018 and its new members have not yet been announced. Much now will depend on the capability of DAC officials to shepherd NPLIS through the political, government and legislative processes. Unfortunately, the country began a year of combative electioneering just as we completed the document and the aftermath of the election in May this year has brought a reconfiguration of the DAC, which is now merging with the Department of Sports. These developments might well have hindered officials' efforts to gain the attention of their political heads. As our colleague Muxe Nkondo constantly warns, public policy-making is inherently political – dependent "on the interplay of politics and economics and the ideological complexities of government" (Nkondo, 2017). South Africa's fraught politics and flagging economy certainly provide an uncertain climate for a new policy that will draw on state funding.

Nonetheless, even before receiving the official stamp of approval, NPLIS has had some positive outcomes. Perhaps the most important for school librarianship is the convergence in thinking of the two

key government departments. There is agreement that the needs of school children have to be prioritised and barriers are being broken down – at national and provincial level. LIASA’s spotlight on NPLIS at recent conferences has been pivotal; and, as evidenced in the comments we fielded at our conference sessions, its endorsement has encouraged its members to embrace its recommendations. Thus, the behavioural changes that lie at the heart of policy-making might already be in motion.

Two other developments will have widespread impact: the amendment of the NCLIS Act to bolster its powers and the Council of Higher Education’s intervention in librarian education. DAC has already begun the revision of the NCLIS legislation as recommended in the policy. And in response to our meeting with the Council of Higher Education, late in 2017 it convened a reference group to develop a standard for professional library and information science programmes which is about to be circulated for public comment.

In conclusion, we must thank Andrew Matlotle and his team at the National Library of South Africa for their logistical support. We must admit that the scope of this paper does not allow us to do justice to our experiences and adventures as we criss-crossed the country. Both of us, seasoned librarian educators, were often moved by the evidence of the commitment and idealism of librarians on the ground.

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