Advocacy for school library development: lessons learnt from the Matenda School Library Project in Zimbabwe

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Abstract
The paper focuses on describing the importance and value for development of Rural School Libraries in Africa in order to overcome the increasing gap between the information rich and the information poor that currently threatens educational achievement in remote and inaccessible rural schools. It further discusses that main challenges faced when establishing and developing a rural school library to ensure that the socially excluded rural children have access to reading material. The question is - What are the materials and human resources needed to overcome these challenges. In conclusion, the paper offers recommendations that urge the government to establish School Library Service and to enact legislation to address the needs of rural schools in terms of infrastructure, equipment, material resources, appropriate manpower and the introduction of ICTs in rural schools to foster vital knowledge necessary to address local needs.

Keywords: Advocacy, Matenda School, Reading Material, School Libraries, Zimbabwe.

Introduction

This paper was inspired by an urge to make a difference as a librarian. I must say I personally believe that for one to deserve great confidence and deep appreciation from the community one serves, one has to be honest, straightforward and have that inborn passion to do render service to the community. Professionalism is anchored is offering free professional expertise towards establishing and developing a school library in a rural setting, where the economically and socially deprived rural people live. It has been observed the world over, including Sub-Sahara Africa that it is the primary school that helps to offer the first opportunity to acquire literacy skills, no wonder I feel that the primary school library should be the starting point for a dedicated librarian to offer free service. The School Library opens the doors of knowledge to the children starting on the journey of their education and

libraries in general as agents of social change help to build and mold these young minds into responsible citizens ready to contribute the economic development of the country.

School libraries provide the students "a plethora of reading material, information and ideas", a place of solace to sit and gather their thoughts; a place to broaden their horizons as well as a place for enjoyment and camaderie". They provide "research, entertainment, inspiration, imagination ... and when you start reading, a whole new world to explore"

The School Library broadens children's minds and satisfies their curiosity. "In their early learning stage, the library provides answers to their many questions". It "provides students with a broad viewpoint and allows children to better understand the ever-changing world they grow up in .... and learn about life".

The School library also offers academic support. "Books and libraries are where children begin to develop and enrich knowledge". "Information is knowledge. Knowledge on any subject will assist a child to read study or research at their own pace". It gives them the initiative to learn at their own pace". It gives them the initiative to learn and read better." "It opens the door to discovery and teaches how to research/find answers as well as teaches what questions to ask next."(Heinford, Carol: 2007).

In African communities today there are changes in demographics, the economy and size. As the world is developing fast into a technological landscape rural communities are experiencing major cultural and societal changes. Modernization has transformed the communities in most rural areas, and the rural-urban migration has left most communities poorer. Whereas the urban communities develop because of access to good roads, telecommunication and institutions that provide access to ready information, the rural areas remain backwards, thus there is increasing gap between the rich and poor. These factors present some challenges towards the establishment and development of school libraries. Today most African publishing houses are no longer vibrant and they cannot supply the once popular reading materials that are relevant to their indigenous communities. Such economic difficulties also affect the development of well resourced libraries.

Lack of adequate reading materials whilst it is a great challenge to school library development is just but an isolated case. This paper also seeks to discuss the human and material resources and poor environment for learning in rural schools. In Africa with rapid population growth schools can no longer handle increasing numbers of children. Schools continue to enroll more children in order to increase school attendance numbers due to the universal education under the MDGs ([21] UNESCO, 2004, p.22). Pupil to teacher ratios is typically very high and the few government textbooks that they have been provided to schools commonly have to be shared between six or more pupils at the same time ([9] Makotsi, 2004, p.6).

This paper will conclude by looking at those areas where government can assist in the promotion of school library development. The government can come up with the necessary blueprint to establish a School Library Service Board that can come up with guidelines on how an ideal School Library can establish and the necessary infrastructure, manpower the man a school library, the relevant equipment and material resources and the appropriate ICTs and school library software to incorporate into the school curriculum.

Background to Matenda School Library Project

Throughout the world remote rural communities where schools and other social institutions are located their inhabitants will remain illiterate if no advocacy is undertaken. In such communities that lack of reading material will impact strongly on socially and economically

excluded school going children whose parents are poor peasants who cannot afford to buy books and other learning materials. As a result the children will find it hard to read and write and late alone acquire comprehension skills. There are so many communities today in Africa suffering this fate, and Zimbabwe as a country is no exception.

Schools in Zimbabwe felt the impact of the socio-economic fundamentals of period from year 2000 to 2010, where the educational standards suffered to near collapse as a result of the brain drain. In better equipped schools libraries were manned by grounds men whilst in the rural schools because of the non-availability of per capita grants there were no properly constructed school libraries. Matenda School was a case in point, with near collapsing buildings and lack of reading material.

Matenda School is a distance of 80km from Gweru and is located in rural Zvishavane. From the information gathered from the School Head this school was first established as early as 1927 close to the Chionekano range of mountains through which the Lundi River passes. Way back most schools were run by missionaries and Matenda was run by the Methodist Church, but at present it is a council school that falls under local government and administered by the Runde Rural District Council. Today Matenda School is a cluster resource center. Six schools converge at this to discuss academic and sporting issues, and at local level the traditional and community leaders meet to resolve community and development strategies. The school enrolment is more than 500 pupils whose age range is from seven to thirteen years. For all these years the school has operated without a library, serve for a store room with tattered books and old textbooks, soccer balls, netball kits and marimba instruments.

Figure 1. Books, marimba instruments and football & netball uniforms housed in the storeroom (June 2007)

School Library Advocacy – Justification

Why advocacy for school library development? Canadian Association of Public Libraries: 2001 notes that "Advocacy is a planned, deliberate effort to raise awareness of an issue. It is an ongoing process in which support and understanding are built incrementally over an extended period of time and using a wide variety of marketing and public relations tool." Scholars in Africa present literature on the state of libraries and reading material in Africa. According to Ikoja-Odongo (2004), there are close to 7 million students in schools in Uganda, but very few of these schools have libraries. Ikoja-Odongo suggests that a "reading culture" be cultivated, and that schools play a major role in this type of development. Beilke (1980) states that school libraries are especially important in developing countries because of the ratio of children to adults, and the reality that it is the children who are active learners. Bristow (1996) indicates that the school library if often the first and only place that the rural

child has access to reading material. In her 1971 article De Perez proposes that providing school libraries might be one of the most efficient ways to revitalize education in developing countries. Based on her research on modernizing education, De Perez (1971) suggests that school libraries influence teachers, students and the community in a lasting manner, school libraries are appropriate for all levels of education; they have been successful in other countries, they distribute educational materials more efficiently to large groups of readers; and they encounter less resistance from teachers and administrators.

Zondi (1982) raises another important point about school library, stating that school libraries can make up for the inadequacies in the classroom such as lack of textbooks and other reading aids. Dumes (2001) implies that access to reading materials, such as that provided through libraries encourages students to read and re-read books, which improves reading skills. Each of contributions raised by these scholars has relevance for Matenda School. As the author studied the community of Matenda way back in 2007, he observed that the community would like their children to have access to reading material for their school work in order to develop them. The author also noted that the community members were very receptive and listened to readings carried out at the school when invited to witness book donations. Therefore school libraries hold great potential to serve the non-literate community members without any other means to access information. In rural areas community members want information about better farming methods and helping them to increase their productivity and supporting their own rural community. Kagan(1982) suggests that the rural school has three functions; provision of information to those individuals responsible for rural development, supporting rural education programs and rural schools and serving as centers for community education and culture.

In Zimbabwe, if the truth be told, library advocacy is largely no longer a matter of choice, but a matter of pro-activeness. There is an urgent need for School library advocacy to bring school libraries to that level whereby they operate to overcome serious literacy and comprehension challenges. "Literacy rate is very low in rural communities since there is a dire lack of school libraries that can provide appropriate reading materials." Sturges and Neill (1998, p. 154) are right to say that there is compelling argument for greater library involvement within Africa's educational system. School libraries aid in uplifting student inquiry, comprehensive and thinking skills. The role of the school library is further elaborated by the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto which states that a school library offers learning services, books and resources that enable all members of the community to become critical thinkers and effective users of information in all formats and media.

Rural schools need access to libraries. For a very long time the lack of access to reading materials has been attributed to high failure rate in rural schools in Africa. Hence there is need for advocacy. School libraries provide access to supplementary materials that complement and enhance the learning provided by prescribed textbooks. However, a UNESCO/ADEA survey for 2000 Education for All assessment revealed that "As the decade come to a close, school libraries were said to have the lowest priorities in educational spending. The majority of schools possessed no school library. Where a semblance of a school library did exist, it was often no more than a few shelves of outdated and worn-out material, inadequately staffed" (Montages, 2001: p.27).

The above observation holds the truth about the state of School Libraries in Zimbabwe. The state of school libraries is not good, yet school libraries are the beckon of national development. But given the state of schools in Zimbabwe where there is no physical structure the school system cannot have firm foundation for independent and resource based

learning necessary to extend the imagination and curiosity of children beyond the classroom instruction, this restricts rural children's access to books thereby marginalizing them.

Many factors contribute to deteriorating library services and potential development of rural school libraries. Poor state of roads, rural-urban migration, poor remuneration of teachers, inadequate teaching and learning material and low priority accorded to libraries by the Education Ministry. However, it is observed that the school library is an essential function in the primary educational process. School libraries play a crucial role in shaping the economy, culture and development. In Zimbabwe Librarians' voices are hardly audible. An ALA report on the future of libraries in the digital age reads that "despite years of promoting library advocacy the profession has failed to convince or even communicate to the significant number of Americans the idea that librarians are highly skilled professionals needed for and capable of leading them anywhere …. The competency of librarians and services they can do and perform are among the best secrets of society."

Methodology

To reach Matenda School information, name of the substantive School Head, route and name of the rural bus that plies to Matenda was obtained from the Staffing Officer for the Midlands Region from the local Provincial Education Regional Offices. The author crafted simple open-ended questions on name of the School, number of teachers, total enrolment, and number of boys, number of girls and the number of subjects taught.

Constant visits were made to the school to gather information on age range, literacy rate, and numeracy rate including access to the class register to see children's school attendance. The author also through face to face interaction with the Deputy Head obtained data on activities in the surrounding community and day-to-day life and names of the local chief and headmen.

Implementation of Matenda School Project

The Stages:

Stage 1 – Formation of the School Library Committee

The author first toured the old storeroom, makeshift library. Early December 2007 after a meeting held with Deputy School Head, School Development Committee, four School Teachers, a School Library Committee comprising Chairperson, Secretary, Treasurer, Deputy Head, four Committee Members, two from the School Development Committee and the author being School Library Advisor was established.

Stage 2 – Announcement of the Matenda School Library Project

The author accepted the Guest of Honour invite to Matenda School Prize-Giving Day and took the opportunity to articulate the value and importance of having a School Library. For a school to attain good results it would need to be equipped with books in all subjects, ranging from fictional, non-fiction, like short story books, atlases, dictionaries to enrich textbooks and other teaching materials. It is true that when librarians and teachers work together, pupils achieve higher levels of literacy, learning, problem-solving. The author emphasized that the school library and the services would be provided to all members of the school community, regardless of age, gender, language and race. Being in a rural setting this occasion helped to sensitize other local stakeholders, like the chief, councilor, headmen, parents and the School Development Association about this Project, thus it helped to manage individual perceptions

where this Project might have been misconstrued as a hidden political agenda since political campaigns were going on in rural areas.

Matenda School Library Project whose stakeholders included:

*the Deputy Head to mobilize the teachers

*the author (Hosea Tokwe) to provide library establishment expertise

*a former pupil of the School based in New Zealand to mobilize library book donations

*the Traditional Chief and Headmen to encourage community support

Figure 2. Mr. Hosea Tokwe explaining to stakeholders about Matenda School Project Plan (July 2007)

Stage 3 – Deciding on the Library Set-Up
The Library Committee

To implement this Project we decided on the following:

- Who would manage the School Library
- Would there be any need for training
- What materials and equipment would be required
- What type of resources would be acquired
- What criteria would be used to buy books
- Who would buy the books

The Library Committee members provided expert help in choice of library material, taking special consideration to age, level, relevancy and literacy as well as language. They also gave input on the local availability of skilled workers for the construction of the library bookshelves. Also developing and sustaining in children the habit and enjoyment of reading and learning and the use of libraries throughout their life. Most rural schools do not have libraries, so none would volunteer to be given the custodianship of books, and the question of training came up.

Stage 4 - Book Donation Presentations – Local and International

The author from personal experience has over the years noted that attempts to develop or cushion and augment library services in Zimbabwe has been either through donations of books by institutions or prominent personalities teaming up to fund for construction of libraries. On the international scene, my colleague and former pupil of Matenda went on an appeal for library books in New Zealand. This all was aided by reports and photos about Matenda sent to convince potential donors. The author convinced a friend working for Africa Book Collectives in the UK about the Project and need for local relevant books to meet local needs. She offered a credit line worth US$200 for purchase of books from Weaver Press. On 23rd of November 2007 the author purchased 50 books mostly by Zimbabwe local authors, and the Publisher of Weaver Press gave a donation of 50 more books. Apart from these

donors, other donors included Darien Book Aid Plan all the way from United States. All this was happening at a time when the country was experiencing one of the harshest economic hardships in living memory, with soaring inflation that stalled the development of any activity in schools. Early in March, the author received great news that a consignment of 18 boxes of books from New Zealand and sourced by Nanetta Meadows of Wainciomata Intermediate School that would arrive in March 2008.

Figure 3: Children enjoy a feel of books after Book Donation Presentation (February 2008)

Stage 5: Library Setup

With books now available next stage was setting up the Library. A budget was worked out for construction of shelves in Room 14, a classroom that had been set aside for Remedial Lessons. Local material was used in the construction phase. A Library Setup Committee decided on the different sections of the library, Reference Section, Textbook Section, HIV/AIDS Section, Fiction Section, Non-Fiction Section and Adult Readers' Section. The School was privileged to receive posters, promotional and informational materials from a School Librarian based in the UK, as well as Non-governmental organizations such as SAfAIDS and local Book Publishers.
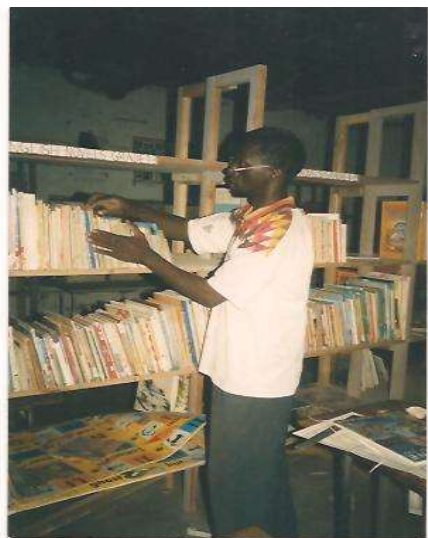

Figure 4: Library Setup: A Teacher arranges books in the Library (October 2009)

Stage 6: Matenda School Library Launch

The Matenda School Library finally launched on 16 July 2010 to coincide with the Prize Giving Ceremony. The prelude to the launch saw meetings were held with the Library Committee, including the School Development Committee, the Councillor, the Headman, and Chief Matenda who gave his blessings to invite other Chiefs to grace the occasion in his area of jurisdiction. Purely, the essence of the launch would provide flavor of the local community to come and celebrate an achievement never seen before. On the honored day a lot of activities were lined up, a Speech by the Local Chief, Local Councillor, School Head, former pupil as Guest of Honour, the author as facilitator of the Project and a Vote of Thanks from a neighboring School Head. Also lined were songs, poems by pupils, drama and entertainment was provided by the School Marimba Group. The former pupil of the school acknowledged the hard work done by the author in mobilizing, the school authorities and convincing them to accept the noble cause. He also deeply appreciated my understanding of respect for the local community, the parents and the elderly, especially seeking their approval of the local chief in every step throughout the Project phases.

Figure 5: Mr. H Tokwe giving speech at Matenda (July 2010)

Figure 6: School pupils entertain Guests (July 2010)

Figure 7: Guest of Honour cuts ribbon to officially open the School Library July 2010

Figure 6: Parents line-up to enter the School Library. (July 2010)

Figure 7: Two local Chiefs share a moment in the School Library. (July 2010)

Figure 8: School Heads smiling as they tour School Library (July 2010).

Lessons learnt

Looking back, it may seem like the final gathering and presence of all stakeholders to witness the event was all that counted, but there are lots of lessons learnt. The Matenda School Library Project revealed the importance of working with the community:-

- Political and cultural barriers were overcome
- various stakeholders, the local businesspeople, traditional leaders and parents all felt honored
- the school, that is, both administration, staff and children embraced their ownership to success of this project
- the poems, drama and plays performed by children magnified to the audience the generation of new knowledge necessitated by the establishment of Matenda School Library
- availing books to children brought about marked improvement in comprehensive skills
- availability of variety of reading materials contributed to increase in the pass rate
- availability of the library facility gave children who stay several kilometers from the school ample opportunity to stay behind study and complete homework.
- the author discovered that to be truly proactive in school library development one has lead by putting values up front, as well as spreading the good word, the myth and the story of change of the mindset whilst remaining truly professional.
- the author learnt that in Africa's rural setting when is an outsider one is accepted and accommodated hence derives the opportunity to accommodate views of different stakeholders.

Recommendations

The success of rural school library development can come to if and when there is government involvement and a blueprint to re-establish the School Library Service in the relevant Ministry. In the process standards will have to be looked at to ensure that school libraries are established throughout rural Zimbabwe. Also, basic requirements in every school library in terms of infrastructure, material resources, and appropriate manpower will need to be spelt out.

It is recommended that the Zimbabwe Government should:-

- strengthen cooperation between teachers and librarians

- increase the competence in the field of information literacy by making it mandatory for information literacy to be included in the school curriculum
- support school heads in their responsibility for school development and the role of school library in school development
- ensure that teachers and librarians equip children and young adults for life-long learning in terms of literacies, including digital literacy
- introduce ICTs for rural schools so as to promote e-learning, thus introducing children to scientific subjects as well as their environment in a practical way.
- call for an All-Stakeholders Workshop, to include the National Library and Documentation Service, Zimbabwe Library Association, Zimbabwe School Libraries Consortium, and the Ministry of Education Sports and Culture to convene and come up with a School Library Service that will among other things set up guidelines for School Library operations by looking at manpower, the parameters for the physical structure of the building, the equipment to include in the School Media Centre, and the role and qualification of the School Librarian.
- The National Library and Documentation as a statutory body enacted by Parliament to spearhead the development of libraries in Zimbabwe should continue to lobby the government using the relevant legal route to voice for more school library development in rural areas
- training of human resources to keep up to date in ICTs skills as well as ICTs and information literacy and ICTs in the education content as ICTs are vital tools for rural development. So the central government should play leading roles in facilitating the implementation of ICTs in schools
- national and provincial policy that brings on board ICTs and ensures that ICTs cut across the curriculum at all levels of primary and secondary education should be developed.

Conclusion

For Matenda School it is envisaged that a well-stocked School Library will be put in place to support the teaching and learning process. The School looks forward to mobilize for provision of relevant locally produced books to address the needs of their local community and to encourage a culture of reading among pupils and teachers to help nurture reading skills to children. Thus in conclusion futurist Thomas Frey reminds us that "The future is where our children live" How can this future be shaped if our children live an grow up in a deprived environment, if they grow up illiterate or unsatisfactorily literate, or if they are digitally immersed but unable to use digital tools and information in a critical and creative way? How can a society of peace and mutual understanding can be built up if there are no or little education, scarce learning and cultural opportunities, underdeveloped library and information services.

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Biographical note

The author Mr. Hosea Tokwe is a Chief Library Assistant in the Special Collections Department, Midlands State University Library, and Gweru, Zimbabwe. He has worked as Assistant Librarian and College Librarian at Mkoba Teachers College from 1991 to 2005. Mr. Hosea Tokwe has been a member of American Library Association, Academic College and Research Libraries, and Library Administration and Management Association from 2002 to 2007.At present he is an Associate Member of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals and the current National Treasurer of the Zimbabwe Library Association. He is pro-activeness in School Libraries, particularly the role he played helping in the establishment and successfully launching of the Matenda School Library Project in rural Zimbabwe won him the 2012 ILIG International Award. This year he was included in the Library Journal top 50 "Movers and Shakers" for voluntary library work and contribution to the Matenda community.