The Politics of Making a New Space for School Libraries in South Africa

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Jenni Karlsson
Director
Education Policy Unit
University of Natal
South Africa

A revolution that does not produce a new space has not realised its full potential; ... A social transformation, to be truly revolutionary in character, must manifest a creative capacity in its effects on daily life, on language and on space...(Lefebvre, 1991p. :54).

Introduction[1]

This proposition from Henri Lefebvre, the French 20th century social theorist, challenges all of us in post-apartheid South Africa. It does this because we proudly assert that we are transforming our society, and we perceive the eye of the international community to be on us, looking for lessons for fractured societies everywhere in need of transformation.

South Africa is changing. But the increasing number of education policy reviews only a few years since their introduction, the discontent of many stakeholders that has given rise to new social movements (though still in their infancy) and vocal groups lobbying for education rights, the critique from the media and researchers, all point to the inadequacy of our policy changes in the immediate post-apartheid period and a growing realisation that they need at least to be refined and improved in the light of experience. If the school library sector in South Africa were to stand as a microcosm of that social change, then it is constructive to critically assess what we have achieved in the school library sector by considering the implications of Lefebvre's assertion. Are South African policy-makers producing a new space and new practice for school libraries that will respond to the imperatives of the post-apartheid era? Or is it only more of what we did in the apartheid era?

In this paper I consider the politics around the school library in South Africa and what is emerging during this post-apartheid period of social transformation, to assess the politics of the 'new space' being produced through that transformation. This requires me to look back, through memories and images, at what was inherited from the apartheid era – an approach often criticised by embarrassed white South Africans who wish to be blinkered, and move on, ignoring our painful history, our roots. Then I revisit the process of formulating national regulatory policy for school libraries in South Africa, and try to understand the obstacles to its progress. My conclusions will point to what we might need to look for in the emerging policy for a 'new practice' and 'new space' for school libraries.

The Importance Of Spatial Considerations

Why is it important for us to think about space and spatial practice when there are so many other pressing issues, such as persisting inequalities of provision, infrastructure backlogs, HIV/AIDS and orphans who can't attend school because school principals and teachers are illegally demanding school fees from them? As Lefebvre has argued, it is because space is simultaneously a social *product* and a *process* that shapes social interactions (Lefebvre, 1991). Although spatial considerations are under-researched in education, they are significant in schools for two important reasons. In the first place, the configuration of school sites, the allocation of classrooms, and how teachers use their

space (i.e. their spatial practice) and how learners experience it - all these contribute to the constitution of school social relations. It is our school spatial practice that leads us to perpetuate or renegotiate relationships, for example gendered roles, among teachers, learners, principals or head teachers, and school governing bodies (McGregor, 2000).

Secondly, schools are social formations that have a reproductive role (Teese, 1997), through the time-space paths of the timetabled curriculum and social practices, in nurturing dominant social values learnt during rituals such as assemblies and equipping the young with the skills and knowledge for adulthood, the working world and a lifelong meaningful engagement in society.[2] There is a circularity about the process: we shape our world as it shapes us. Thus, how we clean our schools, how we manage them, how we create exclusive places within the school site for teachers, prefects and senior grades, and how we signpost and advertise the school: all these shape the thinking of future generations of leaders, professionals, workers and parents.

For South Africa, spatial considerations are especially relevant because of the essentially spatial character of apartheid politics whereby learners were segregated from each other to attend differentiated race-based schools funded by a discriminatingly racist state.[3] Those policies from the past remain as traces in present school space and the more deeply etched the more profound may be the effect on learners. Nelson Mandela has also written with conviction about the dialectics between space and social relations and its lasting effect:

> ...history is rooted in our hearts and our minds, but it is also ever-present in our environment – and not only in obviously man-made things, such as buildings and objects of art. ... The traces of history do not disappear. (Foreword to van der Merwe and Faber, 2003, p. 4)

Notwithstanding the embeddedness of the past in the present, Lefebvre's thesis proposes that spaces of the old order are inadequate for activities of the new order. Social change manifests itself in the production of a new space through new objects and practices or their configuration. You can see an example of this a few blocks from Durban's International Convention Centre, in a building where black workers had to obtain permits to reside in Durban's white areas during the apartheid era.[4] That practice of managing a black person's access to the 'white' city was known as influx control. Since 1994 the site has been transformed into the KwaMuhle Museum to showcase educational exhibits about local black history, and the courtyard where aspirant workers waited is now a popular space for open-air book launches. Obviously such recycling and re-invigoration of old spaces for new ways of living and working does not happen overnight. But can we say that South Africa's schools and school libraries are truly undergoing social transformation from apartheid to democracy and equity if the objects and spatial practices that structured and meant unjust discrimination remain mostly unchanged? Let's review the situation regarding school libraries during the apartheid era.

The Apartheid Inheritance

Studies conducted by the National Education Policy Investigation's Library and Information Services Research Group (NEPI) (National Education Policy Investigation 1992), the Education Policy Unit (EPU) (Stadler 1993) and the government-commissioned School Register of Needs (SRN) (Department of Education & Human Sciences Research Council, 1997) found that extremes characterised the school library landscape during apartheid. In 1996 of 26,734 schools, only 4,502 (16.8%) had libraries (Department of Education, 2001, p. 39). While these libraries were not only (but predominantly) in schools for whites, white learners were affirmed and advantaged to a superior extent over learners of other racial groups. But the majority, being black learners, were subordinated and oppressed with negligible or no provision, and coloured and Indian learners were less advantaged than white learners but more advantaged than their black peers. Thus, the post-apartheid education system inherited a situation in which eighty percent of all South African schools had no libraries and insufficient learning materials for learners to access the curriculum (Bot, Dove et al., 2000). Although this percentage is not disaggregated to reveal racial difference, without doubt the overwhelming majority of these schools would have been for black learners.

Since 1998 I have been researching the discursive arena of school space and spatial practices by examining memory accounts about attending apartheid-era schools and photographs of schools.[5] On the whole the memory accounts were inconclusive in confirming the extremes noted in the EPU, NEPI and SRN reports, since the sample was

too small to be demographically representative and the focus was not specifically on school libraries. Nevertheless, five of the adults mentioned school libraries in passing and we can glean some insights from their reminiscences, not only about school libraries, but also as the representative voices of countless other South Africans. Nelson Mandela referred to this value in his foreword to a book about the lives of ordinary South Africans:

> [f]or years, historians distorted South Africa's history, some deliberately, others perhaps unknowingly. The story of the powerful and wealthy was told in great detail, while the story of the majority remained largely unheard. Much of the history of ordinary persons has been lost and is still in danger of disappearing (van der Merwe and Faber, 2003, p. 4)

Let us, therefore, turn to the memories of some 'ordinary persons'.

In his account, Bheki, a black adult who had attended government township schools only, was silent about any school or public library, suggesting his paucity of such institutional experiences. However, Lindiwe, a black female informant, held a privileged position compared to most other black learners. She had attended a prestigious secondary school started by American missionaries. This accounted for her recollection of a school library practice that compared favourably with those of white learners:

> *We used to have the school library. … [Our library was] just for the school. And we used to have periods to go and attend to the library and during breaks it was open for us to take and go to the library.*

Conditions in Indian schools were neither as adverse as township schools, nor were they as privileged and well resourced as schools for whites. Laila, a female Indian informant, recalled how compromises were made at her primary school building in order to ensure that it provided the education desired by that community:

> *There was no extra resource provision, specialist rooms or anything like that. So classrooms were turned into a music room or a gym, a library, periodically….*

The primary schools that Vishnu, another Indian informant, attended also had no library, so he relied on a public library in the city:

> *…in those days in the Indian community the Victoria Street library was one of those few areas where you could get books and things, so it became an attraction and because people used to go there often, on a Saturday normally, to go and borrow books, or do some research, or get some reference, you automatically fell into that pull towards that library.*

It was only at secondary schools that Indian learners like Vishnu had access to a full library service within their schools:

> *…It was the high school that had the library when I went in there from Std 7 onwards and I did a lot of reading…. The library was, I think if I can recall, pretty well stocked because I used to borrow books widely from it.*

For Lucy, one of the white women, the library was a place for emotional retreat and might echo the experiences of many other middle class white school girls attending a well-resourced school that shielded her from the woes of South Africa's troubled society:

> *…I used to like to go and sit in the library at break and read poems and I was a typical teenager all starry eyed.*

Jay also mentioned the library of her secondary school for white girls. However, her reference to it was couched within her observation of a racialised division of labour:

> *…books in the library would have been shelved by black clerical assistants. There was quite a strong reinforcement [at the school] of the hierarchy of race in the society…*

Jay's critique would seem to be her adult post-apartheid interpretation of the past. In all likelihood, she would not have had the critical tools at the time of being a learner to understand the politics of race in what she saw and articulate it as white supremacy constructed as a natural order. But the fact that she remembered that library practice supports the argument that schooling, including school management practices, has a reproductive function even through the informal, hidden curriculum.

Five years into the post-apartheid era, in 1999/2000, I conducted further research, which confirmed that little had changed. Photographs of the schools I studied clearly reveal the continuity based on those old racial cleavages. In 2000 the SRN Survey was repeated and it was found that since 1996 3% more schools nationally had libraries.

The lack of significant improvements since 1994 in the exemplar of library-based collections, suggests that our social transformation has not reached its full potential yet and there is still much transformative work to be done. The evidence of continuity in the apartheid conditions within the school environment is disturbing for it points to the difficulty of changing 'old spaces' and redressing apartheid inequalities and injustices. In the euphoric period following the 1990 release of political prisoners and unbanning of organisations and the subsequent 1994 national elections, many within the education sector invested their energies in developing policy options and drafting policy frameworks that would drive the post-apartheid social transformation to change 'old spaces' like the inequalities in school libraries. How that process of policy development unfolded in the school library sector may also give us insight about the 'new space' being shaped for school libraries.

In the next section I move from the experienced, tangible space of the school library to the abstract, discursive space of school library policy.

The Incomplete Policy Process

Before the flood of post-apartheid policies, in November 1995 the Education Policy Unit at the University of Natal hosted a national conference on *School Learners and Libraries* (Karlsson, 1996). The aim was to examine library models, already tested internationally, and discuss their suitability, strengths and weaknesses, for wide-scale implementation in post-apartheid South Africa. The models were options for alternatives to those commonly found in developed English-speaking countries and South Africa's apartheid-era schools for white learners i.e. the single school library that provides a centralised professional service.

Without being diverted into a debate about the merits of each model, I briefly outline them here:

- The shared or joint-use community-school library found in countries like Sweden that have many scattered pockets of communities with expectations of a high quality library service and information access;
- The regional library, found in some Australian states, that coordinates, services and augments local school collections and provides a professional and technical support structure;
- The mobile library bus or boat, used in some parts of rural Brazil, for a professional librarian and collection to regularly visit teachers and learners at schools without libraries;
- The virtual library of the Internet, an information and communication technologies (ICT) model widely used in developed countries and touted as a quick, efficient and inexpensive way of accessing information from a varied array of local and global sources.

In addition, the conference considered the classroom box library enthusiastically promoted in many South African rural schools by a non-governmental organisation, and Namibia's integrated curriculum approach for developing information literacy.

In retrospect the conference was significant at several levels. It brought together a range of key national and provincial stakeholders, including those previously excluded from such policy debates, to think beyond the critique of apartheid and begin to consider alternative responses that might be appropriate for local conditions. The publication of conference papers was important for continuity of the debate and, perhaps most important of all, a conference resolution

was sent to the national Ministry calling on the Department of Education to develop policy that would address inequities in the school library landscape. The Department's response was positive: within a year a working group was established and after a process of consultation and deliberation, in 1998 the *National Policy Framework for School Library Standards* (Department of Education 1998) was completed.[6] A national audit of libraries and collections in schools (Barth, Paterson et al., 1999) was conducted to provide a base of detailed information to guide further planning and development. Given the productivity of those first few years, it was disappointing when the policy process began to drag. The reliability of the audit was questioned (Hart, 2002), and the national Ministry has yet to finalise post-apartheid school library policy, norms and standards (pers. comm. Mandla Maseko, April 2003).

Sadly, in the absence of clear direction that should have come through policy and a regulatory framework, conditions in many of the existing school libraries have been allowed to deteriorate. In an outstanding article published in the booklet *To Set The Ball Rolling* (Wettmark, 2002) about the Library Practice for Young Learners project, Genevieve Hart (2002) broached the way in which the popularly elected post-apartheid national government has neglected school library development opportunities, allowing librarian posts and collections to wither away and, in some cases, whole libraries to be dismantled. The lack of national government commitment to policy, attended by a lacklustre fiscal provision for school libraries, has yielded a situation where, as Hart asserted, almost all functioning school libraries now survive through school governing body funds levied as learner fees, and there is a 'greying' of the profession as universities reduce their offerings for school library courses. Are these omens of the 'new practice' and 'new space' for school libraries in post-apartheid South Africa?

Such developments in a post-apartheid era are puzzling because the government's outcomes-based education (OBE) curriculum espouses a learner-centred pedagogy contingent on resource bases such as those associated with school libraries. It seems contradictory that the national Ministry has taken so long to gather momentum for school library policy although the rationale for library collections of learning resources was already implicit in curriculum policy in 1997 (Department of Education 1997a; Department of Education 1997b; Department of Education 1997c).[7] In the meantime many provinces have proceeded to develop their own policies, in terms of their constitutional competence, but opening themselves to the danger of disjuncture when the national regulatory policy is finalised. What dynamics and obstacles inhibited the national policy process?

One of the obfuscating dynamics was that the two Departmental groups tasked with developing curriculum and school library policies in 1996-7 worked separately rather than collaboratively, and the lobby within the school library sector was not sufficiently strong at that stage to insert the school library into the curriculum discourse. This limited the opportunity for each group to benefit from the other's expertise and understanding, and the overall effect was the marginalisation of school library matters within the Ministry's policy agenda. Thus, while the *National Policy Framework for School Library Standards* included a chapter on the implications of the OBE curriculum, the parallel curriculum policy documents were silent about school libraries and demonstrated scant appreciation of the meaningful linkages between curriculum and resources in library collections.[8] This silence bled into the Curriculum Review Report (Department of Education 2000) and subsequent curriculum revisions as well:

> ...[The] School Libraries and Youth Services Interest Group made two representations to the Review Committee to advocate a more explicit recognition of the role of libraries in the revision of C2005. But it is frustrating to report that, despite assurances that the revision would "please" us, in fact there is still no mention of libraries in the two Revised National Curriculum Statements of 2001 and 2002 (Hart, 2002, p. 9)

The meaningful connection between the requirements of the curriculum and the potential of school libraries to serve those needs was not sufficiently established in the consciousness of curriculum developers. The dislocation is unfortunate because one assumption of the OBE curriculum is that teachers and learners can access a rich variety of resources that enable critical thinking and problem solving, and promote values that build social cohesion as well as tolerance. Such a resource base would need to be more than a textbook and a few worksheets and photocopies. It must include diverse forms of learning support materials and offer multiple ideological positions and interpretations of events.[9]

Genevieve Hart (2002) iterated the claim made by the late Sandra Olën in 1996, that may explain why curriculum policy makers have failed to make explicit the connection between curriculum and library-based resources, and why senior managers have tended to marginalise school library policy development. Olën's point was that only about one quarter of employed teachers in South Africa had experienced libraries in their childhood. To understand the scale of this problem we need only look to this province of KwaZulu-Natal where at least 70,000 teachers are employed, over 50,000 of whom would have attended schools with conditions like the township school I photographed – probably worse! If Olën's claim applies to teachers, would it not equally apply to post-apartheid policy makers? Could it be that the vacuum in the experience of those senior education managers who knew only disadvantaged, under-resourced and deteriorating school environments, has shaped a perspective that sees school libraries and librarians as unrelated to curriculum access and hence as expendable luxuries? Is this why government can commit funds to its *Masifunde Sonke* reading project, yet not finalise the school library policy that should underpin and drive that project?

Other factors within the structures and operations of the Department and in the interface with the school library sector may also account for the dismal progress in finalising school library policy.

- The Working Group's tentative formulation of norms and standards in what was called the *Policy Framework*, signalled their inexperience in government processes and naivety about the politics of policy formulation, leading to the diminished status of the document.
- The start-up of the Library Practice for Young Learners project in 1997, though intended to pilot aspects of the *Policy Framework*, might have diverted the attention and energies of the national Department's officers dealing with school library matters at a lower level as well as lobbyists within the sector.[10]
- It also came to light recently that although it had been reported to the sector that the *Policy Framework* was presented to the Heads of Education Departments Committee (HEDCOM) and approved, this was never recorded in their minutes (pers. comm. Lyn Metcalfe, 25 April 2003) – an omission with profound implications for the *Policy Framework's* status.
- Institutional memory has been jeopardised by staff turnover and restructuring of the bureaucracy, and led to lost electronic versions of policy drafts.
- Lastly, in restructuring the national Department of Education, school libraries, though a crosscutting matter, were retained under the scope of the senior manager of the Further Education and Training branch, which deals with grades 10-12, rather than the General Education and Training branch for grades R-9 where the bulk of school learners are enrolled. Although the decision appears to have been intended to provide continuity and not endanger institutional memory loss, it is doubtful that that logic will be sufficient on its own for championing school library policy development that must apply to all school grades.

The vacuum of previous experiences in school libraries and the Departmental and sector factors are perhaps the main obstacles that have cost several years in policy adoption and implementation. They point to the weak areas of the post-apartheid transformation and the inadequacies in the politics between policy makers and the sector for producing the 'new space' and 'new practice'. They point to the need for school library managers and practitioners to resist the security of a comfort zone among their own colleagues, and integrate their concerns in the more profound project of education transformation by articulating access to a library-based collection and librarian within an education rights framework.

Despite the robust consensus reached within the sector around the *Policy Framework*, the delay has also presented the opportunity for aspects of the *Policy Framework* to be re-drawn for a policy that may have a narrower vision of post-apartheid school library provision – a vision that sets aside the many alternatives to the expensive centralised library and professional librarian in each school. However many models are eventually recognised, policy needs to provide a mandate that recognises our history and our diverse schools and enables provincial departments to implement equity while responding appropriately to their local conditions. A blind approach based on 'one size fits all' may be based on equality, but it runs counter to equity that seeks to redress historical imbalances now and not in some idealised future where each of South Africa's approximately 27,000 public schools has a centralised library and librarian. How many years will it take for all South Africa's schools to have libraries if the 3% rate of additional school libraries achieved between the 1996 and 2000 SRN Surveys is maintained?

Conclusion

Policies that must transform South Africa's school library landscape and produce new collections and new ways of thinking about and practicing ownership and delivery of learning resources and new ways of being a librarian, must be as much about our vision of the future as our determination to resist repetition of the past with sharp divisions – no longer on the basis of race, but social class. Post-apartheid policies will inevitably contain a reaction to apartheid experiences and conditions. But we must harness those memories to creativity and hope for formulating a transformative school library policy that will withstand any elitism and serve the weakest and most vulnerable of our learners: the orphans and those affected and infected by HIV, and the rural and urban poor.

Jonathan Jansen (2001) has identified a tendency for some education policies to become symbolic in that they represent government's espousal to transform education and create new spaces and practices but change fails to materialise. Senior managers, school librarians and lobbyists need to watch and find ways to guard against this happening with school library policy. As drafts of school library policy emerge the sector will need to ask questions about the transformative strength of the new library practices and spaces, the strength of the political will to implement policy locally, the commitment of sufficient resources for sustained implementation, and the extent to which equity will be realised for the masses of learners in township and rural schools and caring for their loved ones and their siblings at home.

Although I have been critical in this paper about the lapse of years since the *Policy Framework* was issued in 1998 and the danger of now narrowing the vision articulated in that document, we must recognise the imperative to re-conceptualise the school library service and the role of the school librarian for the era of HIV/AIDS. This is an era that will increasingly be characterised by classes of teachers and learners who might not be there as regularly as we have come to expect in our traditional notion of the school site. This is an era in which we have to consider new modes for teaching and learning, for delivering lessons to learners in another space, new ways of marking their assignments and new ways of giving them feedback to continue their learning. Maybe school managers and governing bodies will begin to run their schools, the timetable and formal lessons differently. School library policy should be in the vanguard of redefining the school library contact zone and developing new spatial practices for the devastating social transformation that the HIV/AIDS crisis will surely bring. The policy hiatus has therefore offered us the chance to put the lens again to what we can learn from other countries further along in responding to the pandemic, and harness the minds of lateral thinkers and civil society, to conceptualise norms and standards for a school library space and practice that penetrate and burst the barriers of this era.

Notes

[1] I received comments from my Education Policy Consortium colleagues, Michele Berger and John Pampallis, to an earlier draft. The opinions expressed here are, however, my own.

[2] Elsewhere I have looked at how school cleaning practices perpetuate gender stereotypes (Karlsson, J. (2000). School cleaning and the hidden curriculum. The Teacher. Johannesburg. http://www.teacher.co.za/200102/cleaning.html.

[3] The spatial and embedded constitution of apartheid discourse in schools and the implications for the post-apartheid era are the subject of my larger study, some portions of which are published elsewhere.

[4] The racial designations that I use are classifications imposed by the apartheid regime and still in use as a way of tracking equity and racial integration. The designations refer to those of European settler origin (white), settlers from the Indian subcontinent (Indian), those of indigenous African origin (black), and those from earlier mixed parentage (coloured).

[5] The memory accounts were from a sample of adults comprising three white women, two Indian men and one Indian woman, one black man and one black woman. The selected institutions comprised two schools formerly for white learners, two formerly for Indian learners, one for black learners in a township, and the sixth school being a post-apartheid school i.e. built and opened after 1994 in a European Union funded redevelopment area serving the urban poor.

[6] Limited copies of an abridged 1999 version were distributed to senior managers of the school library sector.

[7] Outcomes for information literacy and related skills were integrated into learning areas (subjects).

[8] Having been a member of the Working Group that developed the *Policy Framework for School Library Standards*, I can attest to the several attempts made by the Officer coordinating our Group to assist her curriculum counterparts to build the conceptual linkages in their policy framework.

[9] The new conceptualisation of learning resources also incorporated oral history, and indigenous knowledge and skills imparted through local people.

[10] For more about the project, see another session/paper at this conference.

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Biographical Note

Jenni Karlsson has been involved in education policy formulation and analysis since 1991 and is currently director of the Education Policy Unit at the University of Natal. She was a member of the Department of Education's school library research group in 1996-7, which developed the Policy Framework for School Library Standards, and also played a key role throughout the Sweden-South Africa collaboration on the Library Practice for Young Learners project. She has written and published papers on libraries and related issues at various national and international forums, and will shortly complete her doctoral study on apartheid and post-apartheid discourses in school space. Karlsson@nu.ac.za