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School Libraries are not value free or neutral, they cannot be assumed to be collecting information sources free from gender stereotyping. They are characterized by clear set goals, values and mission statements. Knowledge is a social construct and therefore reflects dominant social, economic and social order. In the new millennium social, educational and economic institutions have pledged to remove all forms of prejudice based on gender.

The paper seeks to explore the role of school libraries in challenging gender stereotyping concepts. The purpose of the paper is to identify issues and suggest how school libraries can shift the paradigm. It also shows how and why the library and information systems are silent on gender issues.

Introduction

The school library is not just a place for reading but it also contains ideas that can empower the students or disempower them. It has a capacity to influence the minds of the students and as well as shaping their world outlook. Recently gender issues have become imperative not side issues as it was in the past. Therefore, as our societies increasingly become gender inclusive every learning institute has to mainstream gender issues. Gender here is construed as referring to relations between males and females and how the relationship is socially constructed. These relations change from society to society as it may be determined by changes in historical, cultural, social, economic as well as political environment. Gender ideology may affect information provision and distribution. Social science and Feminist research and scholarship has broadened the discourse on the relationship between gender and information and knowledge (Harding, 1991; Freira, 1970; Lloyd, 1989; Tanesini, 1999). In addition as information is increasingly playing a major role in human development, there is a need as well to move towards more gendered approaches to understanding gender and information.

Why gender and information? School Libraries are not value free or neutral, as such they cannot be assumed to be stocking information sources free from gender stereotyping. Because they are characterized by existence of clear set goals, values and a mission statement. School Libraries are sources of information and knowledge to the students. Knowledge and information carried in libraries is a social construct and therefore reflect the dominant social, economic and social order. In the new millennium the social, educational and economic institutions have pledged to remove all forms of prejudice based on gender or sex in development programme and all activities that promote gender equality, and these included social and educational institutions.

The traditional approach to librarianship and related research has been andocentric in focus, where by the male and male world-outlook/view is considered the norm, and the female becomes the aberration with the associated physically based deficiencies. School libraries are also integral to the school curriculum and as such they are at the heart of changing the student perspective and perceptions about gender issues and relations.

The Context: Information, Knowledge and Gender

In order to comprehend the relations between libraries as information transmitters and the influence it exerts on the students, we must then begin by considering the contribution of men and women in relation to knowledge construction, processing and dissemination. Historically the knowledge production has always reflected the dominant class. In addition knowledge is the outcome of societies gendered practices. Therefore knowledge construction is a gendered practice (Code, 1989). Consequently knowledge is a social construction. Historically men have dominated the production, development and the exploitation of knowledge and information. Knowledge is power and this is not just a cliché but also a reality. Best & Keller (1991) in their critical examination of post modernism argue that power operates as a factor of hegemony of norms and at the same time greatly shapes the construction of knowledge. Similarly in *The End of Innocence* Jane Flux concludes “ at its best, postmodernism invites us to engage in a continual process of disillusionment with the grandiose fantasies that have brought us to the brink of annihilation” (Flax, 1992, p.460). By extension she recognises that traditionally gendered identities and life courses do influence knowledge production. Gender stereotypes have indeed led to the annihilation of alternatives.

However, probing gender issues in school libraries, one is met by norms that have been dictated by sources of knowledge. Sources of knowledge and information are therefore not neutral; rather they reflect certain ideologies and practices. Certain sources of information in libraries are bound to reflect certain values over others. Information sources and resources have a purpose to fulfil and expectations to satisfy. To demonstrate this let us focus on positivist thinkers like Plato, Socrates and Aristotle (Aristotle, 1941) to mention a few. Such philosophers' construction of knowledge shows some bias that later also shaped world reality about men and women. Such knowledge has been passed from one generation to the next. Consequently, information and knowledge cannot be understood in isolation from the social context in which it emerges. This paradigm has defined gender and knowledge. Libraries have accepted such a paradigm over time without questioning it, hence losing the focus. The ideological framework of information provision in school libraries is erected upon a fallacy that there are “good sources” of information for students. Who judges that it is not good? The judgement is taken by adults who themselves are not neutral in their judgements. Cross (1991) commenting on juvenile literature asserts that adults write books found in libraries. Hence their information and knowledge they contain also contains the opinions, influence and beliefs. The adult world is characterised by gender identities either intended or accidental.

Acquisition/ Collection Models and Gender Issues

Central to the process of selection and acquisition within librarianship is the idea of a “balanced collection” and largely supported and fed by theories of acquisition and selection. By and large the process of selection is fed by the notion of objectivity. This framework and discourse had over years become the privileged. In a school set-up information and knowledge that are characterised as “good and suitable” get privileged over others. Weissbord and Mc Greal (1990) observed that the selection policy can create a biased literary selection in a library through the systematic addition of books containing a particular ideological perspective. Consider for instance the situated knowledge. Librarians have been trained in the management of information as well as principles of selection. Additionally this paper sees the role of librarians as inherently political. Nevertheless, librarians operating under the notion of objectivity and professionalism have uncritically rejected the political nature of their work. In these times of increased value of information, information overload and information superhighway, librarians have sought to play leading roles in the information and open society. In order to do so, they have uncritically accepted the ideals of professionalisation and have embraced the principles of objectivity and neutrality (Iverson, 1999). This paper, in examining the issue of objectivity closely, senses a danger of uncritically adopting the stance of objectivity as leading to the notion that knowledge and information are value free. Blake warns that “librarianship's reluctance to define its values in political terms and to cultivate a sense of social responsibility may allow it to drift into uncritical accommodation with society's dominant and political and economic powers” (Blake, 1989, p.39). Paradoxically, librarians while expected to be objective are also tasked with making decisions regarding the so-called “good” and “bad” materials. Librarians are looked at as experts in determining literature and other information resources and sources that students need.

Therefore, I submit that by not questioning the models of acquisition and selection, librarians are entrenching stereotypes and encouraging illusions. Any writer writes from an ideological and contextual standpoint. Knowledge and Information as documented in whatever format are a reflection of the ideas and theories of human beings that are by nature inventions. Therefore, stories and theories are built with human minds. It goes without saying that such inventions depend on human thinking, decision-making as well as reasoning. Put another way, constructed knowledge conveys some information about the cognitive and moral experiences of the creator of the knowledge (Code, 1989). Consequently to emphasise much on balanced and objective selection over other alternatives leads to illusion. In practice, Harvey (1988) argues that in emphasising a balanced and objective approach, the selection process is silencing the situated knowledge. While advocating for balanced selection of materials, librarians have continually remained silent about situated knowledge and alternative selection models in school libraries.

Adding to the notion of balanced collection is the school curriculum, that to some extent influences what the students learn and the pedagogy of learning. By and large the school curriculum is the basis for what the student deems as fit to be learned within a school framework. The curriculum promotes the myth of objectivity. This paper sees the school curriculum as an extension of hierarchical and positivist orderings of what can count as knowledge. By determining what goes into school library collection and what does not go in, librarians serve these same hierarchical and positivist orders. This paper argues instead that the conventional understanding of what is considered as objective need to be replaced by an alternative understanding of objectivity. The doctrine of objectivity must embrace and accommodate paradoxical, critical and concrete knowledge. We can see from one perspective all of individuals, each communities and our own particular views that are by and large shaped by our own identities, cultures, ideologies and socio-economic environment.

In organising materials in libraries, librarians use specified standards of cataloguing and classification as outlined in the Dewey Decimal Classification System. The Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) system by nature spreads the material all over by assigning them different notation (s). So the subject may be assigned different notions. This in practice creates difficulty in students. DDC misplaces some materials and impacts on easy access, especially for the young who does not have adequate and sufficient information literacy skills. The catalogue is rarely consulted; instead students approach the library with common sense of what they know it to be.

Research shows that students have different abilities in searching for information. We may find gender issues in access to resources placed in development economics or poverty, rather than under the general subject of gender. If we take the concept of access to information and knowledge as essential, then we must be concerned with scattering subjects all over the classification scheme. The school is an extension of the informal institution such as the home and has social embeddings that influence student's gender perceptions. It is important to note that students learn in different ways. It is therefore, quite necessary to group gender materials under one consolidated subject rather to scatter them in accordance with a classification scheme. The concern is not merely a question of how would a "women topic" be handled, but also whether the whole approach is likely to exclude, devalue, misconstrue and fragment certain kinds of knowledge and of users (Pritchard, 1994). The expectations that the students bring to contact with information resources and sources are also to some extent conditioned by the wider social situations which they are imbibed social knowledge web. Ostensibly, school library systems are built and established on the basic belief of access to information. Should we argue then that the establishment of school libraries was not connected to the idea of providing all types of information as well as supporting an open and equal society, rather it was established to provide "good knowledge"? It appears that many school establishments do not want to revert to alternatives of information provision. Additionally librarians need to think about the materials they receive in school libraries. Nevertheless, we need to ask the question what can school libraries do?

How can school libraries contribute to the gender equality struggle?

Over years of development of school libraries so much has been achieved i.e. standards, collections and acquisitions policies, staffing and financing as well as making libraries part of school curriculum, etc. However, by and large gender issues have remained an "optional innovation". The dilemma is that there are so many questions to be explored. Given that there are no nationally driven efforts to infuse gender issues in collection and acquisition policies, how does gender go into school libraries? Who will lead the initiative and how will such issues be advocated? Under what

circumstances are gender issues marginalized in School libraries? Finally, what sustains absence of gender issues in school libraries despite the fact that gender nowadays is part of every public and intellectual discourse?

Gender issues, overtly or covertly, affect much of our existence. In respect to school libraries, one advantage that school libraries stand to benefit from is that today the emphasis is very much on learning rather than on teaching. This means students have to discover knowledge and information for themselves. There is a shift from teaching students to memorise facts to being taught how to learn. School libraries should make available sufficient and adequate gender information in all formats. The school library also needs to change its role. The school library can no longer play a neutral role in the instructional programme. In addition the conventional paradigm that a school library is simply a source of information must be replaced. The school library today should be seen as a place that can influence either positively or negatively student's perception, mind-sets, and world outlook. It is a place where especially in the contemporary societies where social changes occur and other ideas are developed. Hall (1986) argues that a school library must resemble a laboratory where students are linked with learning and resources for learning by focusing on the processes and content oriented to learning how to learn, and provides opportunities for students to become self directed and develop a commitment to lifelong learning. The emphasis is now on problem solving rather than on rote learning. In addition school libraries must teach students basic information literacy skills to enable them to access, analyse, select and communicate information. Changes in learning and the curriculum have brought new roles for school libraries. If libraries are to contribute towards building open societies, a new paradigm to offer information to students must be sought.

Gender is a particularly complex issue for school libraries to deal with because it has never been part of the librarianship lexicon, especially in developing countries. It disturbs the conventional library practitioners and individual schoolteachers by requiring them to examine their own professional and private practices, ideologies and cultures. Librarians have to acknowledge that they are part of the problem rather than the solution. They have continuously taken part in the recreation of gender differences over time. Skelton and Hanson (1989) observed that to address equality issues is not to deal with external exercises restricted to the realms of the professional or the academic; rather it involves a challenge on a personnel level. Confronting equality involves the individual in self-examination. This would require the school librarians and the entire professionals to change their assumptions and mind sets about the gender roles and as well as the changing roles of school libraries in the contemporary societies.

There is a need to change from the current DDC arrangement that essentially scatters aspects on one subject in to different locations e.g. aid has two major aspects such as social and health and of late gender. Under DDC all these aspects will be located in different notations. Making it difficult for some students to locate and even know such existence. Male students will always want information that will reflect their male outlook of the world and this makes gender issues even more invisible. The socially sanctioned gender role makes it difficult for students to identify gender issues that define the day-to-day relations. If gender equality had to move from rhetoric to practice then we need to re-think the way materials are organised in the library and the role of school libraries in the development of individual learners.

School media centres can play a role in bridging the gender gaps in knowledge and understanding of diversity. School media centres can launch library programmes for students which emphasise gender issues. For instance, inclusion of works in different formats about women's experiences can to some extent alleviate the problem. It should be realised that the problem lies with sidelining works that specifically express female experiences. This can be done in the form of a library project that introduces the students to gender issues in education. Then it can collect as much as possible materials on gender specifically collected by students themselves. The idea here is to avoid "a process of silencing other meanings" in which other ideologies and experiences are "buried, camouflaged and discredited" (Fine, 1987; 157). Fine reminds us that we also need to pay attention to those ways of knowing that have been historically and ideologically marginalised. Such an approach will offer students a critical and analytical thinking in relation to gender and gender discourse. Gender issues in this case would not be just another subject, but rather it would be a challenging issue to the students. A conducive environment should deliberately be created where students can analyse the intentions and ideas contained in the different sources of information, instead of such ideas being just planted in their minds. This could go a long way to challenge issues of language, sexism in writing as well as use of gender-biased language. The assimilated language creates images that inform the world outlook of young ones. Such a project shall be quite practical.

Language is one of the cultural tools used to communicate and make sense of experiences. Language also creates norms such as “socially accepted ways of portraying reality of thinking and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of society or a network” (Fine, 1987; 170). The author here suggests to us that we should be looking out for factors that make issues of gender invisible in the documented knowledge.

Information in what ever format it may be collected, should reflect the worlds of both men and women, should reflect the ways in which both men and women think and ways of knowing of both social groups. It is the thinking of this paper that conservative and traditional philosophers thought they were engaged in objective knowledge construction. But increasingly public and intellectual discourse in both education and feminism reveals that there have been tendencies to polarise knowledge on the basis of gender. Reasoning through which information and knowledge was created led to the gendered practices that led to gender stereotypes. Now its time to deconstruct such images and replace them with situated knowledge.

The andocentric approach presumes that female and male students share homogeneous experiences of world of ideas. One consequences of this arrangement is that historically a gender issue has never been part of library education.

Conclusions

Given the different histories of different schools, the socio-historical context of each school, ideologies of individual teachers, management and the funder, it is not surprising that school libraries are at very different stages in handling of gender issues. There are still large numbers of schools where there is still very little understanding of issues involved hence missing the paradigm. The so-called objectivity and professionalism as well as subject teacher approach is underpinned by a number of assumptions about gender relations. School library theoreticians and practising librarians have tended to focus on their bit of the specified duties, and on those aspects of information provision which have been highlighted as a result of various research efforts; such as selection, acquisitions, balanced collections and “good collections”. It has been quite difficult for school librarians to critically understand various ways in which gender issues in schools library collections underwrite patterns of domination, submissions in interpersonal relations. Seen from one angle it should be easy to influence the whole school library selection and acquisition policy in that the evidence of gender inequality is so abundant. However, the difficulty is that librarians and teacher librarians are so passively accustomed to the conventional gender differentiations and inequality that they are treated as natural; what happens appears to have the sanction of natural law and can not be questioned any more or resisted than the law of gravity.

School libraries should be pro-active and not passive as they are now. Learning can be too personalised and individualised hence there is a need to make deliberate effort to initiate discussions of practical issues. In as much as the education is shifting from the teacher-centred to student centred approaches of learning – school libraries can also take the same approach. More so that gender issues-that self-image and perception of students are patterned around one's gender. Consequently, male students have more positive images about themselves than females. Explicit presence of gender issues in school libraries can result in basic gender awareness, empowerment and social inclusion.

In every day life curriculum is prescriptive. There is substantial literature on acquisition theory in librarianship, which has not to date, been linked theoretically or through research for purposes of unravelling the complex web of relations that underpin questions about gender issues in school.

This paper further concludes that it is an illusion to think that the process of information dissemination is neutral and value free. Therefore, there is a need for librarians to move away from the traditional and conventional concept of a school library as a mere knowledge storehouse. This would enable the librarians to be more creative and use idea of a media centre to counter the reactionary curriculum. In addition, the school environment plays a role in gender stratification. Historical and current social attitudes continue to identify our world through a gender lens. It is here that once again we ask the question: has the paradigm been lost or found?

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Biographical Note

Peter Tshukudu is a practicing Librarian with a Masters degree in Library and Information Studies. A Graduate of University of Botswana, Peter's interests are in Information Management, Political Economy of Information, Community Information, Human Rights and Democracy as well gender Information and Women's Information. Currently Peter works for Emang Basadi Women's Association Documentation, Information Resources Centre in Gaborone, Botswana. The Documentation, Information Resources Centre services members of the general public, researchers, academics, students etc. He also previously worked in school libraries. He is a member of Botswana Library Association (BLA). In addition, he has attended many professional seminars, conferences and workshops. In all these workshops he has made at attempt to present some papers. Peter's mission is to start publishing in professional journals.

Notes

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