The provision of school library resources in a changing environment: a case study from Gauteng province, South Africa

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1. Education in transition

Before 1994 education in South Africa was divided along racial lines. There were separate departments of education for whites, coloureds (people of mixed decent), Indians (people of East Indian decent), and blacks (black Africans). Education for white children was much better funded than any of the others. The quality of the education that white children enjoyed was also much better as schools were better equipped, teachers were better qualified and classes were smaller. This inequality also applied to school library provision. All white schools had well-equipped libraries and full-time teacher-librarians. A start was made with libraries in the other departments, but , for example, only secondary schools for black learners had libraries. Black primary schools were just provided with classroom collections.

1994 saw the first democratic elections in South Africa. For the first time, a government representing the majority of the people of the country was in power. It was a heady time. Education was completely restructured with the aim of providing quality education for all. The slogan was "access, equity, quality, redress". A national department of education was created to develop policy and education departments integrating education for all learners were set up in the provinces to be responsible for implementation. At the same time a system of outcomes-based education was introduced, which was a radical departure in a country where almost all teachers and learners had taught and learnt by rote, with the exception of the white schools with their libraries where information skills were taught.

Those of us in the school library world hoped and expected that this was the opportunity to ensure that all learners would get access to library services, but unfortunately the opposite happened. The enthusiastic implementers of Outcomes-Based-Education did not realise the demands that it makes on access to resources. There was the mistaken belief, prevalent at the time, that the Internet would meet all information needs. In order to equalise the learner-teacher ratio across schools without drastically increasing expenditure on staff, the existing teacher-librarian posts were abolished. Many schools that had libraries closed the libraries. Library spaces were utilised for other purposes, often converted into computer laboratories. Education officials at the highest levels did not support the development of school libraries or even actively opposed them.

2. Schools and school libraries at present

After sixteen years of democracy, there are still wide differences between schools. Schools in previously white areas are able to charge high school fees. Although they receive less from government than schools in poor areas, they are still able to provide education of a higher quality. Quite a number of them have maintained their libraries with full-time teacher-librarians funded by the school. Black parents, who can afford to, send their children to these schools, with the result that schools in black areas are left with children from poor families only. A large number of the schools in disadvantaged areas have been declared no-fee schools and receive more money from the state, but not enough to enable them to meet all the demands of quality education, including libraries. There are schools in black areas that have set up libraries with part-time staffing by teachers. These are the shining exceptions that have done it without financial support from the government.

There are some encouraging signs that those in authority are beginning to realise the importance of access to reading and information resources in schools. This has, to a large extent, happened as a result of the shockingly

poor reading levels of South African learners. However, not all connect the need for resources with the need for libraries. The national Department of Basic Education seems extremely reluctant to commit to school libraries, apparently because of fear of the cost.

School library surveys in South Africa are notoriously unreliable, but a 2010 survey in Gauteng suggests that about 25% of schools in the province have functional libraries. The definition of functionality is very broad and basically means a library with resources that are borrowed by learners. By far the majority of these libraries are managed on a part-time basis. Only 1% of schools have full-time librarians, in some cases an administrative member of staff. 11% of schools in disadvantaged areas have libraries. This is far better than the estimated national average of schools with libraries, which is 7%.

3. The Gauteng Department of Education and school libraries
The Gauteng Department of Education has had a library and information unit (now called the Multimedia Unit) from the start. This unit manages an Education Library, inherited from the ex-department for whites in the then Transvaal province. It is also responsible for school libraries in Gauteng. For the first few years the unit did not even have a budget. There is a post for a Library Facilitator in each of the educational districts of Gauteng, but school libraries were such a low priority that only since about 2008 have most of these posts been filled.

For more than ten years school libraries were not funded. Schools that kept their libraries going relied on their own funds to acquire resources. Poorer schools that wanted libraries made use of donations of varying quality. On two occasions quite large sums were allocated for acquiring library resources for schools, but these were in the nature of ad hoc windfalls with tight time-frames for expenditure, so that resources were bought centrally. At least this meant that about a third of the schools, all in disadvantaged areas, received new sets of encyclopaedias, other reference works and a quite a large amount of fiction.

From 2006 schools were encouraged to use 10% of the budget allocated by the department for learning and teaching support material (LTSM) to acquire school library resources, but this was not formalised. It was done in some districts and schools, but not in most. Finally, in 2007, formal notice was given to schools to spend this money on school library resources. This resulted in a revitalisation of school libraries in the province. This, and the hard work of the district library facilitators in encouraging and motivating schools, probably accounts for the relatively favourable situation in Gauteng with regard to school libraries,

4. Developing school library catalogues
With a majority of schools not employing teacher-librarians, but having the teachers who do not have library qualifications or experience made responsible for the libraries, the Multimedia Unit realised that they needed support with the requisition of school library resources.

Most schools in Gauteng have been allocated the function of managing their own finances, but the finances of a number of poorly-performing schools are managed centrally. A service provider was appointed to buy and distribute the resources for the centrally managed schools according to their requisitions. Catalogues generated for learner and teacher support material are used to acquire classroom material. The same service provider has to be used to acquire library resources for these schools.

It was decided to publish yearly catalogues of suitable resources to assist schools in spending their school library allocations effectively.

A pilot project was undertaken in 2007. The Multimedia Unit called for submissions of library resources for the foundation phase (Grades 1 -3). The cataloguing system of the Education Library was used to catalogue and classify the resources and a resource guide was generated from the database. This would greatly assist the

schools as the majority of the library resources they acquire would already be classified and supplied with subject headings. The cataloguers of the library with educational and library qualifications evaluated the resources. They were able to evaluated resources in English and Afrikaans. Suitable employees at the library and head office were asked to check the language of resources in the other nine official languages of the country.

This process was very time-consuming and the catalogue was only completed in 2008. It was also not in a format usable by the service provider, and had to be converted to a spreadsheet catalogue.

In view of this experience, it was decided to generate spreadsheet catalogues only of library resources. In 2008 the unit called for submissions of library resources for all school phases. To pay the evaluators who would be doing the evaluation of the resources outside of working hours and in addition to their usual responsibilities, the suppliers were asked a small fee for each submission. An education development trust that manages sponsored projects for the education department administers these funds.

As it was the first time this was done in the province, a very large number of resources were received. Fortunately a number of previously vacant administrative posts at the library had been filled, and these members of staff could assist with the administration of the process. Although they were not called for, a number of very useful resources for teachers were received, and it was decided to also generate a short catalogue of resources suitable for the teachers' reference collection in school libraries.

One of the typists was given primary responsibility for administration of the submissions. She took receipt of the submissions, checked them against the delivery notes, checked that the fees had been paid, sent out acknowledgements, and recorded the titles according to supplier.

The head of the Multimedia Unit and the School Library Facilitator identified and appointed evaluators. A database of evaluators is being developed for future use. Evaluation criteria and evaluation forms were developed from previous documents and the school library literature. Evaluators were asked to give a short summary of the contents or suggested subject headings to assist the librarians who would catalogue the resources later (for the library, not for the lists).

A number of Saturdays were identified on which the evaluation would be done. The typists were available to capture the details of the recommended resources for each of the phases. They were also remunerated for working on Saturdays.

After the evaluation had been done and the data entered into the catalogues, the school library coordinator checked the work and edited the catalogues. Each supplier was sent the lists of its titles and asked to make any necessary corrections and to update the prices. The corrections were applied to the catalogues. Suppliers also received a list of titles that had not been recommended with brief reasons.

It had been agreed that the library catalogues would be produced and distributed by the Learner Teacher Support Material (LTSM) unit with their catalogues. A very tight due date of the end of February 2010 was set without consulting the Multimedia Unit, but the libraries catalogues were completed on time and then had to wait for the LTSM catalogues that were late. LTSM exhibitions were held in March and library exhibitions in April. The suppliers that had resources on the catalogues were invited to exhibit. A few other suppliers also requested to exhibit and this was allowed as schools are not strictly limited to the catalogues with regard to library resources. The teachers responsible for school libraries and/or for ordering school library resources were invited to the exhibitions to see the resources before ordering.

The schools had to place their requisitions during May. District library facilitators assisted them with the requisitions for library resources.

5. Challenges experienced and lessons learnt
The very large number of resources posed a challenge of accommodating and organising them. Lack of space made it difficult to organise the resources according to phase and supplier, as well as separating the evaluated resources from those that had not yet been evaluated. It was difficult to find a specific title if a supplier enquired about it. The worst of this problem will be alleviated with future catalogues as only new resources will be accepted. A more systematic method of organising the resources will be devised.

Gauteng is the economic hub of South Africa and all of the nine official languages plus many others from Africa and abroad are found in our schools. Only resources in the official languages were received, but it was still difficult to find suitable evaluators for one or two of the languages. The database of evaluators should make it easier in future, but a concerted effort must be made to find evaluators for some of the languages.

The tight time-frame did not allow sufficient time to train the evaluators adequately. Some of the evaluation reports were not very useful, for instance when giving a reason for not recommending the title. The judgement of the majority of the evaluators was sound, as they are experienced educators and/or librarians, but one or two seemed to be out of their depth. The task of the evaluators of languages for which a large number of resources were received was also easier as there were two or more of them and they were able to consult each other. A number of evaluators need more guidance and experience in judging the aesthetic quality of the resource. Time must be allowed and the evaluators given thorough training.

Insufficient books for reading for pleasure were submitted, especially in English. Suppliers will be made aware of the need for such books in the future calls for submissions. Books more suitable for tertiary students or for adult readers were also submitted. This will also be addressed when calling for submissions.

The library exhibitions had to be held before the schools received the catalogues. This is not ideal.

7. Conclusion
This experience illustrates how the struggle for the provision of school library resources unfolded in a rapidly changing environment, where there is little understanding of the role and importance of school libraries, and is achieving more success that was initially thought possible.

Although funding for school library resources in Gauteng has only been formalised for three years, most schools are acquiring library resources and many schools have been motivated to set up or revitalise libraries. Problems have been experienced with the types of resources that schools bought for libraries, but we are confident that the catalogues that were distributed this year will assist. The district library facilitators will help to guide teachers. We trust that 2010 will prove to be another milestone on the road of school library development in Gauteng.