

**The Role Of Mobile Libraries In
Developing A Culture Of Reading:
An Experience In South Africa**

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South Africa is faced with tremendous library service development and delivery challenges in the face of a rapidly increasing and geographically dispersed population. Learners often come from a background where books and reading are not part of their lives and literacy levels need to be significantly raised. A mobile library service provided to remote schools by one provincial department of education is a successful initiative to improve library service as well as literacy levels and a reading culture. An overview of the role of the mobile library service and other related programmes is the focus of this paper.

Introduction

South Africa has a fast growing population and the country is faced with tremendous development and service delivery challenges. The challenge addressed in this paper is that of finding ways to combat illiteracy and establish a culture of reading.

The 2001 census showed that 17.9% of the population over the age of 20 had had no schooling and that 16% had had only some primary education. The illiteracy rate for adults is 33.9%, illiteracy being defined as those with less than 7 years of schooling (Forgey, 2000). An evaluation done in 2001-2 by the Department of Education in the foundation phase of schooling (Grade 3) showed that the average achievement for reading and writing was only 39% of the expected grade-level achievement (National Department of Education, 2003).

The education department is the major role-player in addressing this through providing compulsory education between the ages of 7 and 15 (South African Schools Act, 1996) and the first levels of Adult Basic Education and Training.

Education in South Africa is the responsibility of the National Department of Education, which establishes policy, and a provincial department of education for each of the nine provinces, which is responsible for education delivery. The Tirisano Programme

constitutes the strategies of the department to develop education in the country and deal with the challenges faced. One of the nine strategic priorities of the Tirisano Programme of the Department of Education is *"Breaking the back of illiteracy among adults and youth"* (National Department of Education, 2000).

Learners in Grade 1 often come from a background where books and reading are not part of their lives. A recent survey conducted by the Department of Education indicated that only 30% of learners have access to adequate reading materials at home (National Department of Education, 2003). 53% of parents indicated that they had fewer than 10 books at home. The absence of school libraries and posts for librarians in the majority of schools does nothing to change the situation.

The provincial Gauteng Department of Education is doing its part to improve literacy and reading for development and life-long learning. The Mobile Library Service of the Library and Information Service Unit is one major strategy employed by the Department. This, as well as other literacy and reading programmes in which the unit is involved, is the focus of this paper.

Literacy, curriculum, and a culture of reading in South Africa

The learning programmes in the Foundation Phase are numeracy, literacy and life skills. Literacy has two components – listening comprehension and reading/writing. These are essential skills if the above-mentioned literacy and reading situation in South Africa is to be addressed.

Eight learning programmes cover the rest of the phases of compulsory education. Literacy and reading are not explicitly mentioned, but are inherent to all the learning outcomes of these programmes.

The department realises the importance of literacy and reading, as is shown by the curriculum and other programmes, but they do not link these with the role that libraries can play. There is no official, unit or directorate at the national offices responsible for school libraries, and there is no national school library policy. Predictably, in view of this attitude, there is no staffing provision at schools for a position with responsibility for the management and use of a school library. Little research has been done in South Africa on the literacy levels of learners and none to establish reading patterns, to predict whether there is a reading culture (Human Science Research Council, 2004).

Literacy, reading and school libraries in the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE)

The primary responsibility for the teaching of reading and the development of literacy lies with the Directorate Curriculum Development – General Education and Training. This falls within the Division Curriculum and Professional Development and Support.

The Library and Information Service Unit is not involved in the teaching of reading per se, but has a very important role to play in the development and support of a culture of reading and in the maintenance and improvement of literacy. Unfortunately, it falls within a completely different directorate, i.e. e-learning and Multi-Media. This complicates co-operation efforts.

The library and information service unit is called the Multi-Media Shared Services Centre. It provides an extensive library service to the educators and officials of the GDE, and is also responsible for co-ordinating school library development in the province.

The Gauteng Provincial Department of Education has twelve district offices. Each district office is responsible for the schools in its area, and has a district library facilitator responsible for school libraries in the district, as well as a district library staffed by a librarian and library assistant. The district library serves as a delivery and collection depot for the main education library and has a number of educational resources for the immediate needs of the district officials and educators. These libraries are at present in various stages of development.

The Mobile Library Service

Background

An evaluation done by the Department of Education revealed that only 27% of primary schools in the country have libraries, and the frequency of library visits per learner per annum in Grade 3 is 5.1 (National Department of Education, 2003). Primary schools built for black learners during apartheid did not have libraries, and they have not been provided with libraries since. All new schools built in Gauteng since 1998 are built with library facilities, but library resources are not provided.

The outcomes-based curriculum, instituted in South African schools by the democratic government, encourages learners to use resources other than those in the classroom, and learners should have access to an adequate variety of suitable resources.

A Japanese NGO, together with Asia and Africa Association (TAAA,) donated three used mobile library vehicles to the GDE. The original purpose of the donation was to provide reading books to thousands of learners in Gauteng.

The library and information service unit of the GDE decided to develop the donation of library buses into a fully-fledged library service to as many of the most disadvantaged primary schools as possible. The non-availability of libraries and books and even the under-utilisation of resources, if available, had a great impact on this decision.

Gauteng has 935,146 primary school learners, 25,232 primary school educators and 188 farm schools (Both, 2003). The most disadvantaged schools are those on farms and in informal settlements, where people from deep rural areas, who are streaming to Gauteng in search of work, set up shacks. A decision was taken in 1998 to start using the mobile library to visit farm schools near the education library. The service has since been extended to schools further away.

Objectives of the Mobile Library Service

The objectives of the Mobile Library Service were determined in the light of the Revised National Curriculum referred to earlier. They are also in line with the remark by the Minister of Education that provincial departments should play a vital role in promoting a culture of reading in schools (Asmal, 2003)

The objectives are:

- to support curriculum delivery;
- to promote a culture of reading amongst learners and educators;
- to improve the literacy levels of learners and indirectly promote a love for reading non-fiction books;
- to promote the use of libraries as a life-long source of information;
- to orientate learners and educators in the use of a library;
- to make a variety of relevant resources available for classroom use by educators and learners;
- to develop information skills.

The service also has a stated vision, developed as a result of a survey carried out in 2002 “The Mobile Library Service will make a difference!”

Criteria for selection of schools for the Mobile Library Service

In 2002 Gauteng had 188 farm schools. The library had to develop criteria for deciding which schools to include in the Mobile Library Service. It is quite impossible to include all the needy schools given the resources of the library, which are two vehicles each carrying about 800 books, and limited staffing resources. One vehicle can take about 800 books.

The criteria for including a school in the service are:

- Farm schools
- Schools in informal settlements
- Primary schools
- Maximum of 15 educators at the school
- Schools with no libraries.

The District Library Facilitator recommends the school to be included and the final decision is taken in co-operation with the education library.

Information skills training

The previously mentioned research indicates that libraries and resources are poorly used even if they are available. To ensure that the Mobile Library Service is effective and worthwhile at schools, it was decided to train educators in the use of the library and of resources. Training was done at all the schools visited by the bus. The reason for doing the training at the school itself is to include all the educators at the school, as well as the principal. Educators are trained before the bus starts visiting a school.

The training consists of three parts, the second and third of these being carried out in a practical manner by using the resources on the bus.

Part 1: Orientation towards the Mobile Library Service

- Where the mobile library fits into the GDE and the origin of the bus is explained.
- Resources in the library that can be borrowed are described.
- The objectives of the Mobile Library Service and exact procedures are explained
- The school is asked for a commitment. If they agree to commit themselves to the service, the principal completes an Agreement Form, as well as a School Profile Form with all the details of the school and the educators.

Part 2: How to find information in a book

- The point for this part of the training emphasises not to judging a book by its cover.
- The use of the list of contents, index, glossary and blurb are explained.

Part 3: How to find a range of information in a single resource

- Books and posters are used to show how information of different learning areas can be found in one resource, e.g. a book on science can include mathematics, geography, health, vocabulary, spelling, etc.
- The use of books of fiction on a topic is also shown, e.g. a story about my family, myself or my feelings.

The functioning of the mobile library service

Schools: The Mobile Library Service would like to serve all the farm schools in the province, but this is unfortunately not feasible due to the distance between the library and some of the schools. An alternative way had to be found to reach the schools that are too far from the library. It was decided to decentralise the service to districts that are willing to undertake the task and that have the necessary infrastructure. For this purpose districts need to have a committed library facilitator, a driver, a librarian and a district library.

The service is at present decentralised to one district. The education library continues to manage the service and the mobile library vehicle is on loan to the district. The education library remains responsible for the running costs of the vehicle and buys resources for the district to use with the bus.

A total of thirty-three schools are at present included in the service. Twenty-seven are visited from the main library and six from the district office. The main education library and the district library each has a bus.

The schools are visited once per quarter as soon as the schools re-open after the break. Educators may keep the resources for the whole quarter. The resources are collected at the end of the quarter, using an LDV and not the bus. Schools are reminded of the date of the next visit when the resources are collected.

Resources on the mobile library vehicle. The education library stocks the following types of resources: books for educators and learners, audio-visual software, posters, maps, reference works and periodicals. These resources focus on all aspects of education

including management, curriculum delivery, human resources development, financial management, etc.

The Mobile Library Service is a specialised service in comparison with similar services rendered by public libraries. What is meant by a specialised service?

- A contact person at each school is phoned a week before the bus visits to obtain specific requests from every educator in the school. This means that the educators have to plan ahead and request resources that are in line with their classroom activities.
- The professional person going to that specific school then selects the resources as requested.
- The bus usually visits two or three schools per day. The resources for the first school to be visited are placed on the shelves of the bus the previous day. The other resources are kept in a plastic container for each of the other schools to be visited. This ensures that the schools receive the resources as requested, **but** it is not a parcel delivery service. The resources are unpacked on the shelves at the school, together with additional resources to make a wider selection possible.
- The shelves of the bus are divided into the eight learning areas plus educators' books, fiction, audio-visual and periodicals.
- A custom-made poster stand has been made to clamp the pictures for easy browsing.

Service to educators.

- The professional staff members who selected the resources for the school assist the educators. They give guidance on the selection and use of the resources.
- The district library facilitator accompanies the bus, assists educators and motivates schools to use the service if they seem to be reluctant.
- There is a photocopier on the bus for educators to photocopy periodical articles.

Procedure: A driver, a staff member from the issue desk, and two library and educational professionals specialising in curriculum support accompany the bus to the schools.

Educators come to the bus, select resources, and register as members of the main library. Timeframes are tight as the bus makes visits to a number of schools on the same day.

Resources are issued manually. Educators are encouraged to take out many resources and to keep them as a classroom collection for learners to use as well. There is no restriction on the number of resources they may borrow, and there are no charges whatsoever. Learners may borrow books on an educator's name, especially storybooks.

The library is investigating how a laptop can be linked to its database so that it will be possible to issue the resources electronically.

Evaluation of the Mobile Library Service

Questionnaire: A questionnaire was distributed to the users of the Mobile Library Service in November 2002 for an evaluation of the service. The library planned to use findings of the questionnaire to improve the service rendered and to plan for the future.

The questionnaire was distributed to the seventeen schools that the Mobile Library Service had visited during 2002. 136 were distributed and 98 returned, with the probable reason for the high (78%) rate of return being that the questionnaires were delivered and collected at every school. A return rate of 70% of questionnaires is regarded as excellent (De Vos, 2002).

The questions covered the usefulness of the Mobile Library Service, the resources on the bus, the expectations of educators, weaknesses of the service and recommendations for the future. The majority of the questions were open-ended.

General results.

- All the respondents indicated that the Mobile Library Service was needed. 97% had used the service.
- The resources were mainly used by educators for lesson preparation and by learners for assignments.
- Unfortunately several respondents did not complete all the questions where explanations were requested.
- Table 1 below summarises the level of agreement seen in respondents' comments.
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Table 1: Percentage of respondents agreeing on a variety of themes

More resources needed on the bus	55%
OBE resources according to different phases	40%
Bus does not visit the school often enough	23%
More books for learners to select from	22%
Bus is too small	19%
Need more specific resources as requested	18%
Stay longer at a school	16%
More reading books	13%
Staff to give guidance on school library administration and train learners how to use a library	11%
More updated resources	7%
More language books	4%
More books on special needs	4%
More foundation phase books	3%

Recommendations based on the responses

Resources on the bus

- More general resources
- More recent OBE resources
- More resources according to requests. Formats should include videos, audio cassettes, books for educators and maps.
- Buy a portable photocopier and generator to be able to include periodicals.

Stock building

- Focus on:
- Needs expressed by users, e.g. OBE resources
- OBE resources for all the phases
- Posters
- Storybooks in African languages and simple English
- Language teaching books
- Buy multiple copies of resources in high demand.

Service

- Learners at all the schools should be allowed to borrow books on an educator's name. Start with the Senior Phase.
- Leave the education library no later than 07:45am to be able to spend more time at schools.
- Librarians to play a much more active role at the schools. For this they would need more knowledge of OBE and a thorough knowledge of the resources in the library.
- Unfortunately schools cannot be visited more frequently at this stage.

Implementation of the recommendations.

Resources for acquisition are now selected according to the above recommendations. The process of acquiring resources according to the recommendations, and buying multiple copies of heavily used resources, is ongoing. Learners are now allowed to borrow on an educator's name, and the bus leaves the library early, spending more time at each school. It is not possible to implement the recommendation that the bus visits schools more often, as there are too few professional staff members to allow the service to be extended.

The next step: another questionnaire will be distributed in November 2004

Literacy and reading programmes linked to the Mobile Library Service

Africa's 100 best books

To mark the beginning of the 21st century, the Zimbabwe International Book Fair initiated a project to collect and select the 100 best books of Africa of the 20th century. One of the aims was to encourage reading for fun and reading for information in Africa.

A highly respected jury of sixteen academics and authors from around the world, headed by Prof. Njabulo Ndebele of the University of Cape Town, selected the final list.

The list features a large number of books by South African authors, including:

- *Down Second Avenue* by E'skia Mpalele
- *Long walk to freedom* by Nelson Mandela
- *Burger's daughter* by Nadine Gordimer
- *Native life in South Africa* by Sol Plaatje
- *Third world express* by Mongane Willy Serote
- *The seed is mine* by Charles van Onselen
- *Country of my skull* by Antjie Krog.

A competition was held by the National Department of Education and two NGOs in which reading teams from secondary schools had to select ten of the books on the list and answer questions on five of the books they had selected. Their creative ideas and interpretations were incorporated into essays on the books they had read. The winning teams were rewarded with participation in a residential creative writing workshop.

The GDE became involved in the project and encouraged its learners to participate. The Mobile Library Service plans to take the project further. As many of the 100 best books as possible have been acquired by the Education Library. They will be exhibited on the mobile library vehicle and taken to rural secondary schools to expose learners in those schools to the wealth of history and literature of Africa, and to enhance a culture of reading. This will be done through dramatising stories, storytelling and recitals.

Year of the Reader book-writing project

The only library books ever seen by learners in remote farm schools are those in the mobile library when it visits their schools.

2001 was declared the Year of the Reader in South Africa. In this year a competition was held for the learners in schools on the mobile library route in two districts, at that time twelve schools, to write their own books. When the mobile library visited in the second term, the schools were told about the competition and the rules were explained to the educators and learners. A demonstration of how to make a book was given.

Learners were divided into categories based on their school grade. Winners in each category were awarded books and a certificate, while their school also received a selection of fiction and non-fiction books.

Each participant could present his or her story in any form. They could also make their own books.

Learners were very excited by the competition. An independent library facilitator and two libraries evaluated the entries. There were many excellent entries and the panel had a hard time deciding on the winners. Due to the remoteness of the schools and their distances from each other, it was not possible to have a joint prize-giving function, but the schools arranged their own, with some even inviting the press.

Starting school libraries with mobile shelving units

The Mobile Library Service decided to expand the resources available to the schools it served by donating a lockable mobile library shelving unit filled with information resources and storybooks.

The Rural Education Development Project of the GDE was so enthusiastic about this, that it was decided that these units will be provided to all rural primary schools from the budget of the library unit. This is a high profile project aimed at upgrading the schools, facilities, resources and education in these most disadvantaged areas.

The rural primary schools in three of the four districts with the largest number of rural schools have been provided with the units. The schools in the fourth district with many rural schools will be provided in the 2004-5 financial year, and the small number of rural primary schools remaining in the other districts in the following year.

These mobile shelving units are a viable solution for smallish schools without libraries and with restricted space, and other projects, such as a literacy project by the City of Johannesburg, have donated them to other disadvantaged schools too. The library service has co-ordinated these projects as well.

Starting a school library with a written-off library bus

A minibus library vehicle that can no longer be repaired came to the library unit, having first been used by an NGO. It was decided to donate it to a remote rural school as stationary library accommodation. This school will also receive resources with which to start its library.

Other literacy projects of the Library Unit

Creative writing

A service provider was appointed who gave workshops to educators on the development of creative writing skills. Possibilities for subjects were suggested, but writers were free to write about anything they wished. Young people were invited to submit their

work for inclusion in a published compilation of poems, stories, essays and other pieces by young people. District officials encouraged schools to let their learners participate.

Wonderful work was received which dealt with all aspects of the reality of life for young South Africans. A panel of selectors from the Library Unit selected work for inclusion in the publication. The work was edited by the service provider and a publication of high quality content and appearance was produced.

The book was supplied to all secondary schools in the province. It should provide absorbing reading and serve as inspiration to other aspiring writers. The unit plans to repeat the project.

Involvement of the library unit in the GDE literacy strategy

In view of the poor reading and writing skills described above, the GDE is developing an intensive, holistic literacy strategy that will be implemented over five years. Officials of the library unit have been involved in the development of the strategy, and the district library facilitators, with curriculum facilitators, will be used to train school managers and educators.

Co-operation of the library service with national initiatives

Masifunde Sonke: This is a national initiative by the Department of Education to promote reading at all levels. It works closely with the provincial departments of education to ensure that reading is promoted in schools. The education library unit has been involved in all the activities of the project in Gauteng.

Readathon: A readathon is organised yearly by READ, an NGO that started in the apartheid years and has been consistent in encouraging learners to read, teaching reading skills and supplying appropriate books. It has developed into a publisher, bookseller and consultancy. The GDE encourages its schools to take part in the Readathon, which is a competition involving the number of books read by learners. Participation is promoted by the district library facilitators.

The way forward

The struggle to improve literacy rates and establish a culture of reading is far from over in South Africa. Unless utilised regularly and properly literacy skills will be lost, together with interest in reading (Asmal, 2003). There is no doubt in our minds about the crucial role that the Mobile Library service is playing. What started as a project in 1999 is now a fully-fledged service that is expanding. Two further mobile library vehicles are now ready to be brought into use.

Options that are being investigated at present:

- Decentralising one of the vehicles to a remote district that has the necessary infrastructure and will to run the service.

- Adapt one of the vehicles to become an e-learning facility with PCs and books. This can be an important learning source since educators at rural schools, in particular, have had little exposure to ICT.
- Select previously disadvantaged secondary schools to visit, in which case the resources on the bus could focus learning areas and aspects of learning which have been neglected and are now receiving serious attention, such as science, technology, fiction, entrepreneurship, etc. This will not be such an intensive, specialised service as the present one as the resources will not be selected on request.

The mobile library story definitely goes on...

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