Teacher-librarians leading change: Some stories from the margins

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This article comes out of a panel discussion of five teacher-librarians, all working in disadvantaged circumstances, which was broadcast to schools across the Western Cape Province, South Africa, with the purpose of motivating schools to set up libraries. Four of the panelists are students in the University of the Western Cape’s school librarian education programme. The request for the broadcast came from two managers of the QIDS-Up school improvement project in the Western Cape Education Department, which has sent collections of books to over 400 historically disadvantaged schools across the Western Cape. The project’s aim was to improve the prevailing low literacy levels with injections of attractive reading material. But the two managers were concerned that the donations of books had had little impact. The article focuses on participants’ anecdotes about their fledgling libraries and their impact on their schools. The discussion provides inspiring and convincing evidence of how dynamic creative individuals can find ways to overcome challenges to make a difference in their schools. In the process of taking on leadership roles, the participants have constructed new identities as school librarians.

Introduction

This article reports on a panel discussion of five teacher-librarians, which was chaired by the author and broadcast in June 2011 to 400 schools across the Western Cape Province, South Africa, as part of the Telematics school improvement project of the Western Cape Education Department. Four of the panelists are recent graduates of the school librarian programme of the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and the fifth is a retired teacher, now volunteering as a school librarian.

The author saw the broadcast less as “school improvement” and more as an opportunity to explore some of the questions that have preoccupied her as a researcher in South African schools and public libraries for some years. The chief of these is simply: Why do teachers take on responsibility for school libraries given the prevailing unconducive climate? By recounting and analysing the participants’ stories, the purpose of this article is to explore the realities experienced by librarians in disadvantaged schools across South Africa. Their anecdotes in the course of the panel discussion offer insights into their beliefs and their motivations in taking on the challenge of joining UWC’s programme and establishing their libraries. The article might be of interest to a diverse readership in literacy education, school leadership, school change, and librarian education.

Curriculum reform in South Africa in the late 1990s brought hope of a more conducive climate for libraries (Hart, 2002, 2007; Hart & Zinn, 2007; Zinn, 1999). It was believed that fairer provisioning might redress the unequal distribution of school libraries across advantaged and disadvantaged sectors, which was the inheritance of apartheid education. The ethos and pedagogies espoused in the new curriculum implied a need for access to a wide array of reading and learning resources. And the insistence on the need for lifelong learners seemed to indicate recognition of the need for information literacy education and therefore of libraries. Yet, it soon became apparent that there was little recognition of these connections in circles outside librarianship. The recent growing concern over the high numbers of dysfunctional schools and shockingly low literacy scores has still not persuaded government of the contribution of libraries to school quality. Thus, we still lack a national school library policy and strategy.
The request for the Telematics broadcast came from the two managers of the Quality Improvement, Development, Support and Upliftment Programme for Public Schools project (QIDS UP) in the provincial education department, which has sent collections of books to over 400 historically disadvantaged schools across the Western Cape (Western Cape Government, 2009). The aim of the project is to improve the prevailing low literacy levels with donations of attractive reading materials in the three primary languages of the Western Cape, Afrikaans, English, and Xhosa. The donations attempt to match the language profiles of the schools. But the two managers were concerned that the donations of books had had little impact in many schools and they hoped that the broadcast might encourage schools to use the QIDS-Up resources to set up sustainable libraries. In planning the 90 minute broadcast, 12 questions were identified for the five participants to consider, such as:

- How did your library begin and how did you come to be charge of it?
- Do you feel your school needs a library? Why? How have you persuaded your colleagues at school to share this belief?
- What do you like best about your library work?
- What are the challenges?
- Tell us about the literacy levels at your school. Have the QIDS-Up books been useful?
- How are they used?
- What is your role in encouraging the use of ICTs in teaching and learning?
- What differences has your school librarian training made to you?

It was hoped that these might provoke discussion among the viewers in the schools across the province, who were invited to send in comments and questions for the follow-up broadcast two days later.

But underlying the broadcast questions was the question which has preoccupied the author as a school librarian educator in the last few years: How do our fledgling teacher-librarians in typically disadvantaged schools cope with their daunting challenges? Most are in fact full-time teachers – with maybe a few hours a week for the library.

As suggested in the title, all five participants are working on the margins of school librarianship. Their libraries are rudimentary and they have no official status as librarians. Yet, the theme that emerges in reading the transcription of the broadcast is leadership. The reference here is not to school management structures or to the participants’ formal position or status, but rather to the struggle of the panelists to find gaps to share their visions and to lead. Although none has power from a formal position of authority, their accounts hint at the possibility of the other sources of power that leadership theory refers to, such as that coming from personal attributes, special knowledge and relationships inside and outside their schools (Blanchard, 2010, p. 97). The broadcast provides inspiring evidence of how it is indeed possible to bring change to a school via a library project, even if the fundamental requirements assumed in the international literature of school librarianship are missing.

Background

To understand the flow of conversation in the panel discussion it is necessary to provide some background and context – relating to school libraries in South Africa and to its schools.

School libraries in South Africa

The most comprehensive overview of South African school librarianship is to be found in Chapter 5 of the LIS Transformation Charter, commissioned by the National Council of Library and Information Services (2009). The chapter argues that libraries are vital in the improvement of schooling and the redress of historical inequalities. It points out that, in 1994, at the demise of apartheid education, the per capita expenditure by central government varied between R5, 403 in “white” schools and R1, 053 in “black” schools in the rural Bantustan “homelands”. Many of today’s daunting backlogs in school infrastructure and provisioning emanate from these discriminatory spending patterns. The Charter then identifies the key challenges for school libraries as follows:
School libraries hardly exist: fewer than 10% of schools have functioning libraries. These few are the historically advantaged, suburban schools, which are able to supplement their government budgets by levying fees from their largely middle-class parent bodies. The lack of a unit in the central education department in the capital Pretoria that might take the lead in the planning for a school library system.

There is no national school library policy. Since the publication of the Charter, the national Department of Basic Education has issued a new document, National Guidelines for School Library and Information Services (2012). However, the value of mere “guidelines” is questionable. The lack of capacity in the provincial education departments’ school library support services. Evidence in support of this comment is to be found in the author’s recent study in a province north of the Western Cape where a school library support official had over 200 schools under her wing and where shortages of staff meant books were piled ceiling-high waiting to be processed and distributed.

**South African education challenges**

As the South African political scientist Butler points out, the education system can have a direct impact on alleviating past inequalities (2004, p. 81). However, there is consensus that, although six percent of our GDP is spent on education each year and the education funding pie is more than 49% larger than in 1994, the outcomes are disappointing. Indeed, it has been estimated that 60 to 80% of our schools are dysfunctional (Bloch, 2009, p. 17). Probably the crispest way to convey the state of South African schools is to point to the Annual National Assessment scores for 2011. At Grade 3 the national average for literacy in children’s home languages was 35% and for numeracy 28%; at Grade 6 it was 28% for languages and 38% for mathematics (Department of Basic Education, 2011, p. 20). Although it is no longer possible to talk of “white” schools, the disparities between the historically white sector of schooling and the historically black sector in South Africa are evident. The dice is still loaded against black children in what Bloch calls the schools of the “second economy” (2009, p. 59), as shown in the statistic that in 2007 two percent of white school leavers failed their school-leaving examinations compared with 39% of blacks.

There is consensus that reading ability is crucial to academic success; moreover, the links between literacy levels and socio-economic class are clear (for example Hernandez, 2011). South African children came last in the Progress in Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) in 2006, which tested primary school learners’ reading in their home languages in 40 countries (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, & Foy, 2007). The PIRLS survey might suggest that the lack of access to libraries in South Africa might partly explain this poor performance. Internationally, 89% of the higher-scoring respondents in the PIRLS survey attended schools with libraries and 69% had access to classroom reading collections. Half were taking books home from their classroom collection every day and half visited the central school library at least once a week.

In the past few years, the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) has initiated three projects to improve school literacy: the daily reading half-hour; the 100 Books per classroom; and the QIDS-Up school library project. The 100 Books project was designed to provide resources to support the daily half-hour silent reading programme. Its evaluation report (Further Education and Training Institute, 2006) offers support for the contention that the ineffectiveness of the various book projects of the past few years might at least partly be explained by the non-existence of libraries. Scattered through the report are comments on the need to train teachers to manage the resources, to use the books more effectively and to integrate them into classroom work across the curriculum. These recommendations sound like a job description for a school librarian.

From 2009 to 2011, the QIDS-Up project, with funds from central government, had two components: it sent what were designed to be core library collections, two items per learner, to the poorer school quintiles – in languages appropriate to each school; and it paid for the training of over 100 teachers in UWC’s school librarian programme (Western Cape Government, 2009). Four of the Telematics broadcast panelists are students in this programme.

**Panel discussion analysis**

The approach in this article is to pull out the threads of meaning that run through the discussion rather than report methodically on the questions in the order in which they were posed. Thus,
following qualitative data analysis techniques, rather than just cover the “ready-made” categories predetermined by the author in chairing the panel and choosing the questions, the aim is to take a “bottom-up” approach to deduce themes across questions (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006, p. 323).

However as qualitative research methodology recommends, although themes should arise from the data, at the same time they should be relevant to the research question or problem (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006, p. 323). In this case, the underlying question in the author’s mind relates to the vulnerable position of the participants as recently graduated teacher-librarians working in typically disadvantaged circumstances. As suggested earlier, one of the challenges confronting the Advanced Certificate of Education ACE school librarian programme at UWC is the ambiguous status of school librarianship in the education system. The conundrum is that, while students’ ACE studies have been funded by the provincial education department, there is no promise of a librarian post at the end. The allocation of government school posts is the mandate of national government and, as yet, no provision has been made for school librarians. Only the schools serving middle class communities, which levy fees to supplement their income from government, can afford librarians. So most of the students on the school librarian programme at UWC will remain full time subject and class teachers, somehow expected to run their libraries at the same time. Questions that arise include: Are the teachers being trained just to be set up for failure? What are their expectations? How do they cope with the huge gaps between their own realities and the international norms of school librarianship? In agreeing to chair the broadcast panel discussion, it was curiosity around these questions that motivated the author, although she also hoped that the broadcast would provide the kind of stimulus in the 400 watching schools that the QIDS-Up managers hoped for. As far as the author knows, there has been no follow-up systematic inquiry into the impact of the broadcast on the 400 schools.

**Panel participants**

As mentioned already, the panel discussion broadcast was the result of concern among QIDS-Up managers that the project was underachieving. Students from the ACE (School librarianship) classes were selected who, it was thought, would have stories to tell of value to the audience of teachers and principals across the province. All five work in so-called township schools: four in Khayelitsha, the sprawling township on the outskirts of Cape Town, and one in a rural farming community outside the city. Their schools serve communities with high levels of the social problems associated with poverty and unemployment; and their “libraries” fall far short of international norms. Four participants are full time teachers, juggling their classroom work with their library responsibilities. The fifth is a retired teacher now working as a volunteer.

Muriel Moses is a Grade 4 teacher in the rural school just mentioned, which she says serves many farm workers’ children who are bussed in from the farms in the region. Her library is well-laid out and spacious; but it is only open at intervals and for an hour after school as she cannot leave her Grade 4 class. Muriel has a team of student library assistants, who help her each day wheel out trolleys of books to the classrooms – according to whatever projects or assignments are being undertaken. Next door to the library is a computer room with about 30 workstations where each class has two half-hour sessions each week under the supervision of their class teachers.

Samukelo Nombembe is a high school English teacher in Khayelitsha. She has a spacious library which had in recent years deteriorated into what she calls a “dump site”. With the help of a team of student volunteers, she and the non-governmental organization (NGO), Equal Education, have transformed it into an attractive library. However, like Muriel, she has no time in her working day allocated to her library work. But what distinguishes her situation is the intervention of Equal Education. It had donated her books and had helped organise the library. But then, according to Samukelo Nombembe, members of the NGO were “shocked” to find it empty and locked up a few weeks after its ceremonial opening. It led the NGO to find a volunteer library assistant who now spends five mornings a week in the library and runs it in Samukelo’s absence. They make a good team and Samukelo is grateful to Equal Education. But the flaws in the arrangement were made clear on a visit to the school when the author was told that the assistant would be coming “any minute”, yet at 10.30 she had still not arrived. The assistant revealed to me in a later interview that she loves working in the school library but is looking for a paid job.

Zukiswa (Lovey) Mdleleni is a classroom teacher and deputy principal in a primary school in an impoverished informal settlement in Khayelitsha. We invited her to participate because she has a shipping container library – converted and donated by the NGO Biblionef. She had written a
proposal in a bid for the container in competition with 12 other schools. The container was equipped with shelves and furniture and some books. The Qids-Up books make up the rest of the collection. Zukiswa has decorated the container with children’s art work and with flowers – and it makes a dynamic library. The excitement of the children when it is their turn to queue up at the container for their library time is infectious.

Like Zukiswa, Faith Bikitsha works in an informal settlement in Khayelitsha but in a high school. Her library is a rather impressive double storey room which had been allowed to run down in the last few years. Faith has only a few “free” periods for her library work but with the help of a team of student volunteers and a foreign NGO she has made her library into a vibrant space. She often comes in on Saturday mornings to finish her library administrative work and to look for materials for project work.

The fifth participant, Helen George, differs from the others as, to the casual observer, she is the only full-time librarian. In fact she is a volunteer, having retired from English teaching. She spends five days a week in her school and somehow manages at the same time to run an NGO working in other schools in Khayelitsha. Her school is also different from the others as it is a centre of excellence for science and technology education. It is a public school but clearly receives much funding from private benefactors. Her brand-new library, however, is surprisingly small with inadequate space to seat a class. As a special science and technology school it is well-equipped with Internet connectivity and she has a walk-in safe off the library for 12 laptops which students can sign up for. Another surprise is the well-stocked fiction shelves – crucial, Helen says, to the success of the school.

Panel themes

As will be shown in this section, what emerges from the recording is the participants’ new-found passion for and belief in their fledgling libraries. Their stories centre on changes in themselves and their teaching - and on how they have brought about change in their schools. One participant for example reports that her school has just been awarded a prize for the most improved literacy in her district – going from a general score of 30% to over 60%.

Mitigating the effects of poverty: the raison d’être of the school library?

A sample of the replies to my first question on why participants had joined the UWC programme and taken responsibility for their libraries reveals their belief that the school library can “make a difference” by compensating for the poverty and restrictions of the surrounding communities. Helen, for example, claims that her library reading programmes “transport students out of the township world.” The others highlight the library’s role in broadening horizons and opening up opportunities in comments like:

“…And then I decided to take up the chance. I went [to a workshop at UWC] and, that workshop, you know, it got me thinking that maybe I could come and make a difference in our school because our school has a very low literacy level so from then on the whole thing just began …” (Samukelo)

“Because my school is situated in a squatter camp, which is a disadvantaged area. There are few libraries around”. (Faith) …

The theme continues on being asked why their school needs a library. Muriel points out that her school’s farm worker families have no other access to reading materials and that, now with an active library, the children keep asking,

“When are we going to the library?”

“A library at our school is absolutely a necessity, because we’ve got three quarters of our learners come from the surrounding farming areas, and of course they don’t have any reading material or resource material or anything like that …And the one thing I saw in our children, they …love books, they just enjoy books, they want books, they ask for books”. (Muriel).

Helen’s reply is significant, given that her school is designed to nurture science and technology. She says that higher English marks as a result of her fiction collection have led to higher scores in other subjects and to preparing students for tertiary education:
“And also for the very first time our kids who were very bright suddenly started succeeding at the academic universities like UCT, which they hadn’t done before however bright they were, because their worlds were so narrow. And I reckon that the library and reading has played an immense role in that.”

Helen’s point on the benefits of reading fiction for her students’ future university studies is suggestive of the research in the social and cultural aspects of literacy (for example Dunsmore & Fisher, 2010). Later on, she returns to the point to emphasise that, although her school’s highly intelligent students were gaining entry into good university programmes, the drop-out rate was too high. She attributes this to the barrenness of their township environments which leaves them out of their depth at university. She claims that, once she took over the library, her fiction campaigns around such teen bestsellers as Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight series have helped prepare her students to take their places more confidently. Perhaps they build frames of references and allusions, useful in their lecture room and social interactions with their middle-class peers and lecturers (who might well seem as alien to them as Meyer’s vampires and were-wolves!).

Faith echoes Helen in her comment on the joy of seeing how her work in the library allows “location” (township) children opportunities to gain access to university: “And it has been a highlight in my teaching experience being involved in managing the library because I am proud to say I am changing learners’ lives who are from rural [areas], who are from the location. But now because of the library they are able to improve their results and get Bachelor [university entrance pass] and be accepted at university and the universities of technology.”

† Impact of the library on literacy. †

Much of the discussion revolves around the impact of the library on their schools’ literacy levels. Faith begins the conversation on this topic with an admission of the low literacy rates at her schools:

“It is quite low. I mean, it’s a high school, but it’s very low. I think we’re looking at 50% to 60… Our learners you will wonder really. You teach a Grade 12 learner. You give them an assignment. They don’t understand really. They don’t understand some of the questions that I ask them, because our literacy levels are really very, very low.”

Her frustration is that she has a good collection now and a spacious room but it is open for general use only before school and in intervals. Her strategy has been to stock the language teachers’ classroom collections. She always has a car boot full of newspapers which people queue up for each day. The author’s photos around the school at interval of groups of students reading and poring over books show that she is making inroads.

Before Zukiswa took charge of her school’s reading programme, her primary school’s literacy scores were below 30%. Her great achievement is her successful bid for the Biblionef container library and then using it, together with the daily reading hour, to turn around the reading culture in the school. The scores are now 76% in Grades 3 and 6 - and for the past few years her school has led the district in both literacy and numeracy. She is proud that that the district manager sends other schools to her to learn:

“Yes they send me people to come and check, Why, how have you done it? And I always tell them, reading, reading. And at my school we really respect the 30 minutes reading.”

She provokes laughter in her description of an unexpected side-effect of the school’s strict adherence to the reading period:

“We respect it. Even if you come 8.10 am at my school, we will give you a book or a newspaper to read until 8.40 am then we’ll talk to you after that. Because we really want children to know that reading is important. And so now, I want you to laugh at this one. The parents now don’t come because they know they will be given a book or a newspaper to read. [laughter] So in a way we manage to keep them away in that 30 minute reading period.” [laughter]

Chair: “So the book becomes like a weapon to keep problem parents away?” [laughter]

Muriel then interjects with a comment on the success of what she calls her school’s reciprocal reading programme. She agrees with Faith that the problem is that children just do not understand the meaning of a text, even if they might be able to read it word by word or sentence by sentence. Her school has moved away a little from the insistence on silent reading. She now sends out books to classroom teachers for the literacy hour, who read with their children and discuss the books with them. Her school as a result has recently improved its literacy scores to between 60% and 70%.
Helen’s prestigious science and technology school does not have the literacy period; she claims it is not needed as the school has a strong reading culture, evidenced in the heavy use of her library. But she refers to her NGO’s work in other schools in Khayelitsha in commenting on the benefits of the reading period and pointing out how crucial the support of the principal is:

“We don’t have it [reading period] at our school, but our organisation [her NGO] put libraries into two other schools in Khayelitsha, two combined schools. And the one was a highly functioning school who observed almost reverently the reading period and so we were able to introduce all sorts of programmes and strategies to use the reading periods to the maximum benefit. The other school because the principal wasn’t there very much, the teachers were working on their own in vacuums. And the reading period was absolutely ignored and no reading interventions worked at the school because there was no reading period because there wasn’t a strategy in the school, a buying in of the staff. The minute you have the staff buying in and everybody realising the value, then the world is your oyster.”

**Leading others with evidence.**

One of the surprises in the discussion is the thread of praise for their principals and teaching colleagues. This is of interest as the weak position of school librarianship in South Africa is so often attributed to lack of understanding and support among educationists. However, it is soon clear that the support the participants experience in their schools comes from their activism and leadership. They set up programmes and then provide evidence of the benefits. The outcome is, as Helen points out, she no longer has to “persuade” as the teachers come to her “all the time”:

“I think very soon all of the staff saw such dramatic improvements in performance that they had to concede that it was very, very beneficial. I mean our English matric average went up to over 70%, and we had a major improvement in mathematics and life sciences.”

Faith’s teaching colleagues tell her that their students “know everything” because of her quiet work in the library. Students think they are “playing” but in reality they are being empowered:

“At my school I have a corner for teenagers where they can learn when they think they are playing. Like teenagers, how to keep yourself healthy, learn about sexuality, teenage pregnancy and so on. And then when they go to class and their teacher gives them project relevant to what they have been thinking they’re playing about. You see so now they know everything about it because they learn it from the library.” (Faith)

The improvement in the quality of assignments has led her colleagues to come to her as they plan their projects.

Lovey’s colleagues were slow to come on board, she says, as they had “their own itineraries”. They saw the library solely in terms of leisure reading and saw no connections to learning. But their attitudes changed when she set up a committee and it saw how the library was being used for assignments and projects. Her strategy was to assume nothing and to show her colleagues the information literacy skills she was teaching:

“If you know the IT – before they just copied and pasted, copied and pasted – and I showed them [teachers] ‘It’s not about that’. And even the chairperson who didn’t want to buy books said, ‘No man, let’s give her a chance.’”

Now she has support from school management and an annual budget.

**Personal change.**

Personal growth is a strong thread running through the discussion. Faith has a flash of insight in the middle of describing how student behaviour has changed with the establishment of the library. She suddenly sees that she herself has changed:

“And I am part of the change…. It has made me to be more curious about everything, about media, what’s going on in the paper. Whenever I go out I always make sure that I look around if there are any brochures around that will help me in the library because I have to make sure that I have enough resources. Long ago, before I started the library, I was not current about anything. Now I’m the one who gives them information about what is on the paper, what is the bursaries out there for them. It is nice and it is fulfilling.”
It is hard to convey in an article the boisterousness of the panel discussion. Muriel causes laughter at one point when she dramatically calls the computer her "enemy". Her words below show how she befriended the enemy and now takes pride in helping her colleagues at school:

"Yes, let me just start by saying that this … the computer was actually my enemy. [laughs] Really, I must say that, but the first week of that information services [course] I went and go buy myself a laptop. And I’m telling you I’ve never been without it. And this course has given me such an immense amount of skills. And I grew up with books. And I love books. But the computer and all that information and all those services it wasn’t my cup of tea. But once I came there, … And, I even help my colleagues at school now. You know, two teachers are doing a computer course now, and they came last week to me to ask if I could assist them with some, with some information and some assignments and so on and there there I was, I could help them and it’s all because of this course."

Helen causes more loud laughter when she admits to being addicted to teen literature. It is interesting to hear how the library has changed her life. Despite having been an English teacher at the school, it is in her library work that she has turned around the reading culture:

“What I love most is seeing a kid who starts off as a non-reader, very sceptical, asking for a romance book, and then ending up just being a voracious reader. It’s a most wonderful thing to see kids transformed into readers. And it’s er.. I just love it. I love.. I found my whole life has changed because I’ve now started reading teen literature and I’m absolutely. I’m an addict.” [laughs]

Conclusions

Clearly, there has to be some caution in drawing conclusions on the impact of the school librarian education programme from a discussion among only five people. The five panelists were chosen in a rather haphazard fashion but are revealed to be exceptional people. Their commitment and hard work are admirable. Four are doing two full-time jobs; Helen works five days a week without pay. However, they are certainly not unique. Many of the ACE students at the University of the Western Cape face the same challenges and are equally committed. Another article is planned to report on the author’s questionnaire survey in 2010 of the 120 students then in the programme. This used a wider lens to gather more quantitative evidence of their impact on their schools.

Earlier, the doubts that occur from time to time while teaching on the ACE programme were alluded to. However, replaying the panel discussion and reading its transcription have assuaged them to some extent. Far from setting up our teacher-librarian students for failure in their challenging environments, it seems that the programme might have allowed them to grow personally and professionally - and to renew themselves as teachers and leaders. Samukelo sees her new role as a “privilege”:

“The mere fact that I’ve got the privilege of having not only kids but everybody coming asking me for information. It makes me feel like, ‘Hey, at least I’m making a change in this world.’”

Despite working on the “margins”, these teacher-librarians are making a difference in their schools. It is reassuring to see how the participants associate libraries with renewal and the future. The South African government has invested heavily in computers for schools – with, it has to be said, no clear evidence of their impact as yet. The panelists are unanimous in the satisfaction they take in the evidence of their impact, as shown in some of the above extracts. Both Muriel and Zukiswa can point to dramatically improved scores. Muriel’s pride in her results is evident on being asked what she likes about her library work:

“That is why I love being in the library. Love seeing the results that comes from just being there and helping others and helping the children., And the teachers of course. And our teachers if I may come back to that they realise the literacy problems that we have and also try to help me so that the children can get better in their reading abilities.”

Her plaintive appeal just after these positive words receives warm support from the others:

“And I just hope that one day I’ll be able to spend most of my time in the library. That would be really really lovely and it would benefit the whole school.”

The lack of time in the library is the key challenge they all face – except Helen. But, of course, the sustainability of Helen’s voluntary position has to be questioned.

Three themes relating to school change and leadership emerge from the broadcast:
Within two pages of the transcript, the participants have used the word “passion” three times. They agreed to take on the library out of a sense of curiosity and concern over literacy scores. All admit that they had little idea what they would be in for, but once involved in the work a sense of joy and passion came.

Closely linked to the passion and commitment is their vision. They have a clear sense of the role of the library in improving their schools. All are working hard at gaining the support of their colleagues inside their schools.

Pride in their achievements and their new skills is clear. They recognise that they are now different teachers and people. They take special pleasure in their newly-acquired ICT skills and being “information people”.

These are the attributes of leaders. The participants show what it is to lead – without formal power or status.

Whatever the future in terms of government policies, the newly graduated librarians offer positive news for the profession of school librarianship. They are excited at their new identity. On being asked about the value of the school librarian training at UWC, Zukiswa talks of the hard work and “sleepless nights” but says that the lecturers in the various modules “made you understand why”. In the following extract, at first she hesitates to take the title of “school librarian” - because she still has no official librarian post. But she then firmly corrects herself:

“Before I was a school librarian…(In fact I’m not a school librarian full time) the levels of literacy at my school were very low ….but I’m a school librarian [emphasis added].”

Faith’s pride in her achievement is clear:

“Yes, I’ve just found a new career. I’ve just graduated for school librarianship, and you know I am so proud. I never ever thought that I would be a school librarian today. But I am proud.”

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Author Note

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