Of Special Interest

Does International Aid Improve School Library Outputs? A Difficult Question to Answer

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The UNESCO-funded School Library Development in the South Pacific Project was designed to assist in the development of school libraries and in the training of teachers in the use of libraries in Asia and Oceania. The project, approved in 1978, primarily involved the development of training courses for teachers and librarians and the training of library educators to teach the courses. The courses, developed first in conjunction with the University of the South Pacific, have been offered by several teacher training institutions in the Pacific. The researchers report on their attempt to use output measures to evaluate the effectiveness of the project. The difficulties in using this evaluation approach in developing countries are identified and discussed.

Introduction

Funding authorities around the world are asking just what benefits have been gained from supporting education projects, either domestic projects or overseas aid projects.

The constantly rising costs and quality of inputs of schools appear to be unmatched by improvements in the performance of students. It appears from the aggregate data that there is at best an ambiguous relationship and at worst a negative relationship between student performance and the inputs supplied to schools. (Hanushek, 1986, p. 1198.)

Statements from economists, such as the one quoted above, have been reported widely in newspapers and have been used by politicians and others to call for a reduction in funding educational programs. It is important, therefore, to attempt to demonstrate to funding agencies that projects have led to improvements.

The UNESCO School Library Development in Oceania Project aimed to improve school library service in the region. The researchers were involved in evaluating the effectiveness of the UNESCO School Library Project after more than 10 years of project activity in the South West Pacific.
History of the Project
In November 1978, at the 20th General Conference of UNESCO, the School Library Development in the South Pacific Project was approved. The project was designed to assist in the development of school libraries and in the training of teachers in the use of libraries in Asia and Oceania. The inclusion of this project in the UNESCO program was proposed by the government of Australia, which wished UNESCO to follow up on the recommendations of the UNESCO Regional Seminar of School Libraries held in Perth, August 12-17, 1976. The subject of that seminar, which was organized by the Australian National Commission for UNESCO, was the planning of school library services, and the problems of school library development were looked at for the Asian region as a whole.

In October 1981, with the collaboration of the University of the South Pacific, a meeting was held in Suva for the purpose of assisting the University of the South Pacific in the planning of the certificate course in librarianship and planning such other courses as were necessary for school librarians, teachers, and teacher-librarians on the design, production, use, and organization of learning materials. This workshop recommended as a first priority that assistance be provided through the UNESCO School Library Development Project in the South Pacific for the further development of short courses for all teachers on the use of educational resources and for selected teachers on school librarianship and that this assistance include expertise in writing detailed course material and assignments for distance teaching. Participants also developed the aims and objectives of the proposed course and an outline of the topics to be included.

In November 1983, a UNESCO-funded meeting of librarians and educators from the Pacific region was held in Suva, Fiji. The purpose of this meeting was to examine the course material to see if it actually met the needs of the region. The UNESCO course was first given in 1984 at the Lautoka Teachers College in Fiji, and in that year 58 students completed the course. In order to ensure that each country in the region had qualified individuals to teach the course, UNESCO sponsored a workshop in Sydney, Australia, in July-August 1985. The course for national trainees had 16 participants, both librarians and teacher educators, from 10 Pacific nations. The participants were given detailed notes on teaching specific parts of the course; they experimented with a variety of teaching techniques and developed educational resources that could be used in teaching the course. Other teachers’ colleges in the region introduced the course in 1986, and it has also been used in Africa and in other areas outside the region.

Also, as part of the project, UNESCO consultants visited individual countries to survey school library needs and to conduct short courses in school librarianship. The last of these courses was conducted in Vanuatu in 1992.
Evaluation Challenges

A number of difficulties arose as we attempted to conduct a survey of school libraries in a number of developing countries spread across the Pacific. Ross (1984) found a number of problems that are commonly found in evaluation of projects in developing countries, some of which applied to our study.

Ross noted that the inaccessibility of some segments of the population make it difficult to get an accurate picture of an entire country. This was true in our study because in the Pacific Island states it is fairly easy to survey schools near the capital city, but it is difficult for schools on outlying islands or in isolated rural areas. These areas may not be reached except by a 1,000-km trip by boat or by a long trip on foot, and there is infrequent and unreliable mail service. This meant that most of our questionnaire data come from "urban" schools.

The selection of schools to be surveyed can also be difficult because in most developing countries there are no census-type data for schools that would allow comparison. So while one is trying to measure the result of a benefit, one cannot be sure if the benefit is really the cause of an effect. In other words we could not always be sure if the UNESCO project was the cause of improved outputs because, except for those schools we visited, we had to rely on someone in the country to distribute the questionnaires to schools they felt had school libraries, and that perception differs widely in the region.

In developed countries most people are familiar with survey instruments and can fill them out, whereas the opposite is true in developing countries. Many people have difficulty completing survey instruments or fear that the information can be used against them. We sent out survey instruments to a number of school library leaders in Oceania and asked them to comment on its suitability. The instrument was revised in light of these comments, but we still found that many respondents had difficulty in completing the survey or in doing the arithmetic required to express some of the results.

In order to measure outputs of library service, it is necessary for libraries to keep some basic statistics. In fact, the UNESCO project at all stages stressed the importance of keeping these statistics. However, most of the libraries surveyed did not keep statistics, and many were reluctant to do so for the research project. In developing countries many libraries of all kinds do not keep statistics. For example, in a survey of 14 tertiary education libraries in Namibia, only seven kept circulation statistics, which are the most basic library statistic (Totemeyer, 1993).

Ross (1984) says that it will always take two to three times as long to conduct an evaluation in a developing country as it would to do the same evaluation in North American or Europe. We found this to be the case in our survey and found the long delays in getting returns very frustrating.
Methodology

A standard means of evaluation of library service is to measure the outputs of the library service. We used a survey device that would measure the following aspects of outputs: circulation per capita; library visits per capita; turnover rate of materials; in-library use of material; program attendance per capita; and reference transactions per capita. We did not look at aspects of library service such as cataloging productivity or efficiency of book processing. Although the UNESCO School Library Project did aim to improve these areas also, it was assumed that if these areas improved they would lead to an improvement in the output of services.

We sent out the survey instrument to eight school library leaders and educators in the South Pacific and asked them for comments, suggestions, and/or modifications in the light of their experience. We then modified the survey instrument, taking these comments and suggestions into consideration. The final survey instrument was then amended accordingly.

The revised survey instrument was sent to five schools in four countries (20 surveys in all). All of these countries had had some contact with the UNESCO School Library Project. Vanuatu and Western Samoa had received extensive in-country training programs. The Cook Islands and Tonga did not have in-country training programs but had sent participants to the UNESCO School Library Training Programs being held elsewhere.

We visited Western Samoa and the Cook Islands to interview school library personnel who had been sent questionnaires. We assumed that we would get better response rates from personal contact, explaining the research project. This proved to be correct in the Cook Islands where four of the five surveys were returned, but not so in Western Samoa where only one was completed (however, another school did give the team orally the information sought in the questionnaire).

In the countries where we made no personal contacts, one survey was returned from Vanuatu and three surveys were returned from Tonga (unfortunately, one of the latter was not usable as it was sent from a nonschool government department library).

Findings

The low return rate (9 out of 20 surveys) precluded comparisons between school libraries in countries that had received extensive training from the UNESCO program and those in countries that had not.

It appears from the limited response that few of the individuals who received training in school librarianship under the Project are still involved in school libraries, and that although the UNESCO School Library Materials were widely distributed throughout the region in the 1980s, they have not been used by the individuals who now administer school library programs in the South Pacific.
Only two respondents said that they had heard of the UNESCO School Libraries in Oceania Training Program, neither of who came from a country where intensive training took place. A total of 60 people were trained in Vanuatu and Western Samoa, yet none of the persons in this study from these countries who completed a survey had heard of the project! One other person had attended a UNESCO School Library Project Course but had never heard of the actual project. Also, one person interviewed in Western Samoa had heard of the project and had attended a course, but this person did not complete a survey. One respondent who had heard of the Project had also attended one of the UNESCO Training Courses. No respondent indicated that he or she had ever used any of the materials developed for the UNESCO School Libraries in Oceania Project. One respondent had never used the material, but when alerted that such materials existed through the research questionnaire, was able to locate a copy of "The Course for all Teachers in the Use of Information Resources and Libraries" and now intends to use it.

We had hypothesized that school libraries that were staffed by personnel who had attended the UNESCO project training courses or used materials developed by the UNESCO team would perform better than those that were staffed by personnel who had not taken part in the project. It was impossible to test this hypothesis because of the low response rate from people who had heard of the project or been involved in the training programs.

There were other problems connected with collection of the data necessary for comparing output measures. Five of the respondents did not keep any records that could enable them to determine output measures, and they indicated that they would not want to keep the statistics that would enable them to utilize output measures. Four libraries kept circulation records and records of library visits, but only two of these kept records of the turnover rate in library use of materials and reference transactions. One of these also kept records of library program attendance. It would appear that the school libraries in the South Pacific Region that were surveyed do not keep statistics that might be used to convince funding authorities of the value and use of school libraries.

Personal interviews were undertaken with the librarians in the study in the Cook Islands and Western Samoa. In both of these countries the interviews were arranged by the national librarian who also escorted us there. In Western Samoa, we arrived only one year after a major cyclone and the National Librarian had difficulty arranging two visits as the schools’ libraries had been entirely destroyed. It was clear from the school libraries that we visited in the Cook Islands and Western Samoa that they had been set up by someone with a knowledge of school library organization, although in 1993 only one of the personnel in charge of a school library that was visited had formal library qualifications and had attended a UNESCO training course. In
all cases the person in charge of the library who was interviewed indicated that he or she would like to see more training courses offered, but was uncertain about exactly what was needed. Base level competency courses would seem to be indicated given the apparent high turnover of school library personnel.

The factor of high turnover in library personnel readily became apparent. Often those people who receive training and become qualified librarians move out of school libraries to higher level positions. For example, one such person in Vanuatu who had participated in the UNESCO School Library Program had gone on to receive a grant to qualify as a librarian at an Australian University. On returning to Vanuatu she became a school library consultant but now has a position with the British Council Library.

If aid programs, especially those with a large training component, are to be of lasting value, they need to be ongoing. Staff who attend library training programs often seem to move on from the library, and new staff members need to be trained. It was believed that if UNESCO trained-in-country educators to conduct inservice courses for school library staff, this would help solve the problem of the need for ongoing training. From our research this does not appear to be the case except in the Cook Islands where ongoing inservice courses have been conducted by the UNESCO-trained staff members.

Conclusion

Although output measures have been successfully used to evaluate library programs in countries like Australia and the United States, they appear to have limited value in evaluating school libraries in developing countries. Before output measures can be used for program evaluation, school librarians need to be convinced of the value of keeping data on library use and then trained to use these data to demonstrate that there is a value in having a school library service. The high turnover of school library workers in the South West Pacific Island nations makes it difficult to train school library staff members in the techniques of gathering and utilizing school library statistics. There is also widespread reluctance in school libraries to keep statistics, often because staff feel that they do not have the time to do it and that the statistics have little value.

If continuing international aid is contingent on providing evidence that school library development projects do improve library services to schools, then evaluation approaches other than outcome measures are needed.

References

