
Searching for New Library Models: Two South African Case Studies of Services to Youth

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Abstract South Africa is a youthful society with 54% younger than 24 years. South African young people face disproportionately high rates of unemployment, HIV-AIDS infection, and violent crime. Even in post-apartheid South Africa, the disparities between the historically white and black sectors of schooling are still evident. The implications of the “youth bulge” for South African librarianship are clear. However, public and school libraries face daunting challenges. Fewer than 10% of schools have functioning school libraries and millions of South Africans do not have access to public libraries. Clearly innovative models of service must be found to reach more than the current tiny minority of library users. The paper reports on two case studies of community library services: one a group of dual-use libraries set up in six remote schools as public library “outreach”, and the second a so-called “satellite” library in a township on the outskirts of Cape Town. Their environments and operations are very different; but what they have in common is a willingness to break down conventional barriers and to move into fresh ground. The paper argues that they point to new models of service which, by moving beyond the concept of “outreach”, offer solutions to developing new kinds of library services in South Africa and perhaps in other countries with similar challenges. The sites might well fall short of rigorous international standards but both are imaginative attempts to meet the needs of young South Africans.

Introduction

The paper reports on two case studies of community library services: one a group of dual-use libraries set up in six remote schools as public library “outreach”, and the second a so-called “satellite” library on the outskirts of Cape Town. It argues that, if the information needs of young South Africans are to be met, then new models of library and information service are needed that cut across the traditional barriers between public and school librarianship. The argument rests on widespread evidence that the existing public and school library services are far from meeting the reading and information needs of young South Africans in their school and everyday lives. The gaps in provision have widespread implications for the social and economic future of the country.

This article provides an opportunity for contextual and background information. The oral presentation at the meeting in Joensuu will focus on the two case study sites –

relying on photographs and extracts from interviews to allow the audience a more direct insight into the realities on the ground.

Background discussion

The information needs of South African children and youth

In a discussion of South African society the lingering effects of apartheid have to be acknowledged. Income is as unevenly distributed as ever with class replacing race as a marker of disparity (Bray et al 2010: 23). Since the advent of democracy in 1994 the South African government has adopted what it calls a “social agenda”, aiming to set up interventions in support of “vulnerable” groups. Children, defined as those younger than 18 years, are identified as one of these groups and about 52% now benefit from social grants (Statistics South Africa 2009: 1, 27). Children younger than 18 years make up about 40% of the country’s population; 85% of the children are African.

A key issue is the breakdown of traditional African family life emanating from labour migration and poverty. The government report *Social Profile of South Africa 2002-2009* (Statistics South Africa 2009) reveals the extent of the problem:

- Children are disproportionately affected by poverty. More than 60% of children live in households that fall below the poverty line of R550 per month.
- An estimated 3,6 million children are either maternal, paternal or double orphans – with 30% of the orphans being African children. Only 32% of South African children live with both their biological parents and a quarter of children do not live with either of their biological parents. Between 95,000 and 125,000 children live in child-headed households.
- The report warns that the absence of biological parents leaves children open to physical, emotional and sexual abuse (p. 27).

The breakdown in family structure might explain the recent increase in teenage pregnancies - with 160,754 schoolgirls falling pregnant between July 2008 and July 2010 (Govender 2012).

The focus in a discussion paper from National Treasury in 2011 is the disproportionate socio-economic challenges faced by South African youth, defined as those between 18 and 30 years. The paper provides figures that show that:

- About 42% of young people under the age of 30 are unemployed compared with less than 17% of adults over 30.
- Only one in eight working age adults under 25 years of age have a job compared with 40% in most emerging economies.
- 86% of unemployed young people do not have formal further or tertiary education.

The authors warn that unemployment is associated with “social problems such as poverty, crime, violence, a loss of morale, social degradation and political disengagement” (p. 9).

Given the kinds of challenges implied in the preceding discussion, the question is: Where do young people turn to for vital “everyday life” information – apart from that needed for their studies? In 2000, Nkosi pointed out that, despite an evident interest in the information needs of adult South Africans, there had been little research in the needs of youth (2000: 63). Stilwell’s survey of South African research in information behaviour in 2010 (2010) indicates that Nkosi’s comment might still apply. Almost all of her references are to studies of adults or university students.

Stilwell and Bell (2003) describe a rare South African study of the everyday information needs of youth in 1998. Individual and focus interviews, conducted by KwaZulu-Natal’s Ethekweni Public Library, showed that the need for information on topics like: anger, grieving, stigma, health risks, gangs, date rape, sexuality, family violence, and drugs. Among the respondents older than 13 years, however, “information for school projects” was the most frequently cited wish. Stilwell and Bell also report on Rubushe’s Masters Degree study in 2000 of 111 Eastern Cape young people which found widespread ignorance of HIV/Aids, sex, drugs and alcohol. Rubushe’s project, reportedly, goes beyond the mere listing of gaps in information. According to Stilwell and Bell, her respondents were found to be in urgent need of skills in decision making and problem solving.

Of course, information is more than a commodity – which, if provided and “taken”, will solve problems. Information demands cognitive processing into personal meaning and knowledge. Todd’s study of the information processing of young drug users in Australia reveals them to be “active creators of knowledge, manipulating information selectively, intentionally and creatively to build opinions, viewpoints, arguments and explanations” (2004: 40). The implication for librarians who work with young people is that their work entails more than the provision of facts or resources. As Todd points out, libraries can be a powerful force in young people’s lifestyle choices.

South African schooling

The South African government spends a relatively high six percent of GDP on education, having inherited daunting backlogs. In apartheid South Africa per capita expenditure varied between R5, 403 on “white” schools and R1, 053 on schools in the Transkei “homeland”. The Minister of Basic Education has stated that it will take 30 years to build the necessary school infrastructure like classrooms, brick walls, and toilets - at a cost of 6 billion rands (Motshekga 2012).

School attendance has grown to 99% for children younger than 13 years to and to 93% for those from 14 to 17 years (Statistics South Africa 2009). But only 52 of every 100 who start Grade 1 reach Grade 12. The educationist Graeme Bloch calls the underachievement of South African schools a “national disaster” (2009: 58). The annual assessment scores for 2011 lend support to his claim. They reveal that at Grade 3 the national average for literacy was 35% and for numeracy 28%; at Grade 6 it was 28% for languages and 38% for mathematics (Department of Basic Education

2011: 20). Although it is no longer possible to talk of “white” schools, the dice is still loaded against black children in what Bloch calls the schools of the “second economy” (2009: 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 40 countries (Mullis et al 2007). The PIRLS survey might suggest that the lack of access to libraries in South Africa might partly explain the poor performance of South African students. Internationally, 89% of the higher-scoring respondents attended schools with libraries and 69% had access to classroom reading collections.

Access to school and public libraries and to the Internet

It might be assumed that in a youthful and unequal society such as South Africa the chief business of the LIS profession would be the reading and information needs of youth. However, school libraries are to be found only in an elite band of schooling and access to public libraries is uneven.

The most comprehensive overview of South African school librarianship is to be found in Chapter 5 of the sixth draft of *The LIS Transformation Charter*, a vision document published by the National Council of Library and Information Services (NCLIS) (Department of Arts & Culture 2009). The key challenges are identified as:

- 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 to pay for “extras”.
- There is no national school library policy. The national Department of Basic Education has recently issued a new document, *School Library Guidelines* (2012). What the impact of mere “guidelines” will be is not clear; however, the department reportedly is wary of committing to formal policy without the funding to implement it.
- The lack of a unit in the national education department to take on a leadership role.
- The weak capacity of the provincial education departments’ school library support services.

In the absence of school libraries, the relatively well-established network of public libraries, across almost all municipalities, offers a key channel for children and youth’s information seeking. Widespread concern over their deteriorating position from the late 1990s led to a nationwide audit in 2007 (Department of Arts & Culture 2007). It found that fewer than 10% of South Africans belonged to public libraries; they were unevenly distributed; school learners accounted for 70% of their usage; and 74% lacked Internet access. The lack of access to services, especially in the densely

populated former homelands, led to two injections of funds from government between 2008 and 2011 in the form of conditional grants. New libraries are being built across all provinces; scores of librarian posts created (albeit temporary contracts); and libraries' Internet connectivity is growing.

New buildings are not the only way to extend the reach of libraries' information services to youth. The potential of mobile phone networks is evident in the market research, quoted by Czerniewicz (2010), that 87% of the 16 to 24 age group "cannot live" without their cellphones. She warns, however, that, while most South African high school students across all income levels have cell phones, only a small number have mobile broadband Internet subscriptions. The Global Information Technology Report of the World Economic Forum puts the figure across all age groups at 5.8% (Dutta & Bilbao-Osorio 2012: 365).

The NCLIS document *LIS Transformation Charter* (2009) recognises that South African demographics imply a need to prioritise the needs of children and youth – hence its long separate chapter on the dire position of school libraries. But it recommends "developmental" and "seamless" models of service. Its suggestion that more research should be conducted in dual-use models of service was the catalyst for the author's investigation into six dual-use school community libraries.

Case studies

This paper now moves on to report on two case studies of community library services: one, a group of dual-use libraries set up in six remote schools as public library "outreach"; and the second, a so-called "satellite" library in a township on the outskirts of Cape Town. Although both are officially all-purpose community libraries, the case study observations soon revealed that their central function is to serve young people – from pre-school children to unemployed youths. Both have received awards from their provincial authorities for their community oriented services.

Site A¹

Site A, which has been described in a previous article (Hart 2010), comprises six dual-use school-community libraries scattered across a former apartheid homeland in one of South Africa's rural provinces. According to the political scientist Butler (2004: 135), the South African ex-homelands are not "rural" at all but rather immense and densely peopled townships placed far from economic opportunities. The case study region is the poorest region in the Province. It is divided between two municipalities and its 910 square kilometres is home to about 1.3 million.

Because of the inadequate transport infrastructure and the wide scattering of the population, access to the central public library downtown is difficult. This is why in 2001 an officer in the provincial public library service, since retired, approached the international donor for help in setting up six community libraries in remote schools. The six schools are about 50 minutes drive away from the commercial hub. Two

¹ Names are withheld to fulfil promises of anonymity and confidentiality

criteria were used in the choice of schools: their remoteness and the existence of a library room, even if bare and disheveled. The donor support came to an end in 2004 and at present the six libraries are staffed and maintained by the provincial public library service, which falls under the provincial Department of Arts and Culture. From time to time, the school library support service of the provincial Education Department supplies some curriculum related books and its school library advisors try to keep in touch with the six libraries. However, only nine percent of schools in the province have functioning libraries and, with over 150 schools under each advisor's wing, they admit that they have little to do with the six libraries.

The main question guiding the study of Site A was the potential of school-based dual-use libraries in solving the backlogs of school and public libraries. The funding proposal for the international donor describes its aims as:

- increasing numbers of libraries and bringing them closer to the people
- providing electronic access to information
- improving study facilities
- broadening the scope of services offered and
- teaching people how to use information to their benefit, this creating an environment supportive of sustained economic, social and civic development.

Ironically, despite the emphasis on access in the funding proposal, access to the libraries is difficult, with all but one tucked away at the back of the schools, none with any signboard outside the schools and locked school gates often keeping community members at bay. A certain ambivalence in the schools towards allowing open access might partly explain the rather low usage of the libraries by the adults in the surrounding villages. Observation recorded groups of students from other schools in the surrounding villages and a steady trickle of recent school-leavers and a few NGO workers. The students were there for homework assignments; and the others came in to read the newspapers and magazines, play chess, look up information on the one work station with Internet access and type up reports. Two other regular groups were a small group of women in a literacy class hosted by the school and a nursery school group. The Public Library District Manager acknowledges the low use by adults, attributing it to a lack of reading culture, saying:

“It’s mostly used by the schools. But you know it’s something that happens in our black communities. They – the adults are not using libraries. We are still trying to teach them that they use libraries for all their information needs. But it’s the culture that is going on in our black community”.

Elsewhere, the author speculates that restricted conceptions of the social role of public libraries might be excluding potential users (Hart 2011). Muddiman’s research among disadvantaged people in the UK suggests that the institutional culture of libraries contradicts their rhetoric as “places for all” as they are seen as places where the middle class fetch their books (1999: 187). In the case of Site A, it could be that the libraries are seen by the surrounding villages as extended school libraries.

Soon into the study, the librarians' perceptions of their work came into focus. Two questions across the interviews with all six were: "How do you see yourself – a librarian or a teacher?" and "How are you regarded by the principal and teachers?" Research shows how crucial it is that school librarians are regarded as peers by teachers. The following interview extract suggests that, perhaps in keeping with the ethos of public librarianship, the respondent takes no responsibility for the whole information literacy process as assumed by those inside the field of school librarianship. He sees his job as finding relevant information for students and referring them to it:

"I don't think like a teacher, I'm thinking like a librarian... So I don't teach a person or I don't teach my users or people who are coming to the library how to read information. I don't teach them, but I refer them, I show them how to search information... We are directing, we are referring. We are searching for information and give to the person, so as a person can by himself or herself, go and read. "

The issue of the librarians' identity is complex. A strong thread in their interviews is their pride in, and indeed passion for, their work. However, at times a sense of alienation comes through. The following comment alerted the researcher to a possible reason for the discontent that emerged from time to time, namely a perceived lack of "status" in their schools:

"Status always undermines us. Even if you as the librarian are part of their [teachers'] meetings, you are like....you are nothing from other people. They undermine you".

All six report that, although they are invited to some social occasions, they are not invited to curriculum meetings. One puts it down to their being seen as public library staff – and, by implication, not as fellow educators.

Site B

Site B is situated in a relatively small township of about 38,000 people on the outskirts of Cape Town. It was recognized formally as a township by the city in 1992 and its population is estimated to have tripled since 1996 as migrants move to the city in search of work. Ninety percent of residents live in shacks in rented small subdivided plots. Unemployment is thought to be at 60 percent. It has three schools; many of its children attend the schools in the neighbouring suburb.

Site B is the project of the largish library in this neighbouring predominantly white middle-class suburb. The Deputy Librarian at that library has driven its development in the past 12 years. Its history goes back to the early 1990s when the librarian from another neighbouring library used to bring books to the township bus-stop in the boot of her car. The library was then set up in a room next door to the municipal housing office. In 2003, a new library was built by a developmental NGO, responsible for other projects in the township. Since then, in 2005 and 2010, with funds from the NGO and other bodies, two extensions and a children's park have been added for what the NGO fund-raising web site labels as "outreach" activities. According to one

informant, a decision was made to make the outreach wing look “different” from the original library building. Its parent library skims off some of its own resources to run the satellite, with its Deputy and two staff members, residents of the Site B township, spending many hours a week there. The NGO has undertaken to provide R10,000 per month for stipends for other staff, including a computer lab supervisor, until 2017, the year of the Deputy’s retirement.

Site B is, itself, the outreach project of its parent suburban library but it uses the term “outreach” to refer to its own diverse activities. The library has 75 volunteers to run its outreach activities, which were attended by more than 34,000 participants in 2011. The outreach activities include computer literacy and literacy classes, a parents’ support group, business skills programmes, an art club, formal tutoring, a homework club, a girls’ club, and a friendship club aimed at bringing children of different cultures together. These programmes reflect the vision of the Deputy who describes the library as an “ideal arena for social development”. The author’s field notes record how busy the library is. However, there is little sign of the traditional library activities of browsing the shelves and reading the newspaper so evident at its parent suburban library. In contrast to its parent, there are never queues at the circulation desk.

Pointers for new models of service

Both sites raise intriguing questions about the notion of library “outreach”. Site B’s brochures lists its various outreach activities to claim that it is “no ordinary library”. The Manager of the parent library reveals that she used to regard the parent library as the “perfect” model; but she revised her views when confronting the notion of “transformation” in post-apartheid South Africa. The Deputy refers to the suburban parent library as a MCWL (middle class white library) and believes that its continuing existence can only be justified by its work in libraries such as Site B. In her interviews, the Deputy acknowledges the freedom she has been given for what clearly is her life’s work. She admits to an interesting difference in perspective from her manager over the meaning of outreach. Whereas the Manager believes that the outreach funding and activities are separate from the library proper, she would prefer to see them integrated. She sees her outreach activities simply as library projects and is not interested, it seems, in any doubts over their appropriateness in terms of conventional library work. She simply sees the library as being about far more than books and reading; for her it is an agent for social change.

The points of intersection and difference between the two sites give interesting insights for anyone exploring their possibilities as models for the future. Sustainability and durability must be key issues and these are highlighted in the following points:

- Private benefactors have played a crucial role in both libraries; but the reliance on them raises questions about their durability. Having paid for the establishment of the libraries and staffing for three years, the benefactor in Site A is no longer a presence; but Site B still benefits from the ongoing

involvement of its benefactor, which sees it as its pet project. The plan was always for the regional library authorities to take over responsibility in Site A but the six librarians are still only on contracts. The relationship between the city library authorities and the benefactor in Site B, apparently, has been uneasy at times. The library's future will probably be assured in the next few months as its satellite status is being reviewed. However, once it is incorporated into the formal metropolitan services, it will possibly lose its freedom. The challenge will be to maintain its appeal to its teams of volunteers and to the donor.

- Both rely on the passion and leadership of individuals on the ground. This has been their strength but does raise questions about the future. People in both sites are aware of the possible weakness. Thus, the public library district manager at Site A talks of plans to persuade the school district to take more active ownership of the libraries and at Site B the Manager of the parent library recognises the need to pass on to younger staff the vision of her deputy.
- Both rely on partnerships among a diverse array of people and bodies. Their pragmatic willingness to make things work and to serve the needs of their communities is impressive. However, in both sites partnerships with the education authorities, surely a key stakeholder in meeting the information needs of youth, are hardly evident. The Site A libraries are placed in schools but the provincial education school library support service has very little to do with them. And in Site B, despite the numerous educational support programmes, no systematic consultation with the school library services of the Education Department or even with the three local schools is evident. The point is that school library advisors have much to offer public librarians in terms of their knowledge of the school curriculum and information literacy programming.
- Both sites rely on volunteers. The Deputy at Site B calls her team of 75 her “tentacles of support”. Her description of the role of volunteers echoes the literature of bridging social capital, which can be created by interaction between two disparate communities (for example Alkalimat & Williams 2001). Bridging ties transcend social and geographic divides – and can bring access to scarce resources.

Conclusion

The common ground between the two cases is a willingness to break down conventional barriers and to move into fresh ground. They offer intriguing pointers to new models of service which, by moving beyond the concept of “outreach”, are imaginative attempts to meet the needs of young South Africans.

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