

# **The Potential of School Libraries for Promoting Less Polarised Social Relations in the Post-apartheid Era**

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## **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to highlight the potential school libraries have in promoting less polarised social relations in post apartheid South Africa. The role of the school library as an integral part of the education system is discussed. Under apartheid school library facilities were available mainly to white children and this was a feature of an elitist and racist education system which helped to reinforce and promote racially polarized inequalities. In the post apartheid era library facilities are being introduced in schools in black areas. These libraries provide skills and help empower black children and create opportunities for them to pursue education and better themselves. The provision of library facilities in black schools is part of a process of democratising educational resources, and is important for promoting a society which is less racially polarised in terms of opportunities and resources. However, education policy makers in contemporary South Africa have failed to recognise the potential of school libraries for helping children from traditionally disadvantaged backgrounds to develop intellectual and emotional skills and to empower and better themselves. School libraries continue to be marginalised in many black schools and this has undermined the role they play in promoting less polarised social relations in post apartheid South Africa.

## **Libraries and Democracy**

More (2004) argues that South African libraries come from a painful journey of restricted access, censorship and suppression of ideas and opinions. The

role our libraries were compelled to play pre-1994 was not honorable, especially in relation to the freedom of access to information for all. Library collections were constantly censored and the free flow of information was restricted. As a result the majority of the population was denied access to libraries. The majority of the nation remained ignorant or ill-informed. Library services to black communities in urban and rural areas were non-existent. The collections of the few libraries which existed in the townships left much to be desired. The libraries failed to meet the information needs of that era. The communities, specially the youth of that era, needed information on freedom, democracy and other ideologies. Such information could not be found in our libraries. These libraries were labelled apartheid structures. The transition to democracy made it possible for libraries to be regarded as vehicles for empowerment and change. In the spirit of our new democracy, transformation is taking place in our libraries. Since democracy aims to improve the quality of life for all citizens libraries are now open and accessible to all. Democracy in South Africa will become a hollow process if citizens are not informed (More 2004). Therefore, there is a need for the development of public and school libraries to assist in social transformation.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA 2004) in its statement about libraries and sustainable development emphasises that libraries and information services promote sustainable development by ensuring freedom of access to information. Libraries and information services help people to improve educational and social skills, which are indispensable in an information society for sustained participation in democracy (Asamoah-Hassan 2004). IFLA in its contribution to the World Summit on the Information Society clearly stated that libraries:

Contributed effectively to the development and maintenance of intellectual freedom. They encourage social inclusion by striving to serve all those in their user communities regardless of age, gender, economic or employment status, literacy or technical skills, cultural or ethnic origin, religious or political beliefs, sexual orientation and physical or mental ability (IFLA 2004).

### **The Role of the School Library**

The progress of a country mainly depends on the education of its citizens. Our school education system is under pressure all the time for continuous

expansion. The challenge on one-hand it to meet the growing demand for school education and on the other, to ensure qualitative viability. It is within this context that school libraries have their own role to contribute to the standard and quality of education. The school library is essential to the development of the human personality as well as the spiritual, moral, social, cultural and economic progress of the community (International Association of School Librarianship 2003). The changing role of the school library in post apartheid South Africa indicates that the library being a social institution is set up by society to serve its needs. However, a school library if often considered a routine requirement without recognising its importance in the learning process.

The school library is the heart of the school and can play a vital role in helping the educational system to achieve its goals. It is central to the fulfillment of the instructional goals and objectives of the school and promotes this through a planned programme of acquisition and organisation of information technology and dissemination of materials to expand the learning environment of all students. A planned programme of teaching information skills in partnership with classroom teachers and other educators is an essential part of the school library programme.

Therefore, the value and importance of the school library cannot be overemphasised.

... a well-resourced and well-managed learning resource centre is a vital part of any school. It has a central role in supporting the learning and teaching of all members of the school community.... It supports and enhances the academic and pastoral curriculum and has an important role in promoting policies of equity, inclusion and the raising of achievement (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals 2002).

Since school libraries form an integral part of the education system, they should:

- \* be developed and evaluated as an essential part of the physical resources of the school;

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- \* provide adequate resources to ensure the delivery of quality teaching and learning;
- \* offer curriculum support;
- \* support educator development as well as learner achievement; and
- \* focus on improving reading ability (Department of Education 2001a).

The school library provides a wide range of resources, both print and non print, including electronic media, and access to data which promotes an awareness of the child's own cultural heritage, and provides the basis for an understanding of the diversity of other cultures.

The school library functions as a vital instrument in the educational process, not as a separate entity isolated from the total school programme but involved in the teaching and learning process. Its goals could be expressed through the following functions:

**Informational** - to provide for reliable information, rapid access, retrieval and transfer of information; the school library should be part of regional and national information networks.

**Educational** - to provide continuous lifelong education through provision of the facilities and atmosphere for learning: guidance in location, selection and use of material and training in information skills, through integration with classroom teaching and promotion of intellectual freedom.

**Cultural** - to improve the quality of life through the presentation and support of the aesthetic experience, guidance in appreciation of arts, encouragement of creativity, and development of positive human relations.

**Recreational** - to support and enhance a balanced and enriched life and encourage meaningful use of leisure time through provision of recreational information, materials and programmes of recreational value, and guidance in the use of leisure time (International Association of School Librarianship 2003).

Studies conducted in the USA have found that a good school library programme improves learner achievement. In 1993 and again in 1999, the

Colorado State Library and the University of Denver Library and Information Services Department studied the impact of school libraries and school librarians on learner achievement. They found that:

... a school library media program with full-time library media specialist [librarian], support staff, and a strong computer network (one that connects the library's resources to classrooms and labs) leads to higher student achievement regardless of social and economic factors in a community (Lance 2002).

Lance in the International Reading Association (2004) suggested the following recommendations to ensure that the goals of the school library are realised:

- \* Staff school libraries with professional and support staff;
- \* Stock them with current books and licensed databases as well as computers for Internet access;
- \* Fund them to support the schools curriculum;
- \* Adopt flexible scheduling for school library hours; and
- \* Utilise the school computer network to extend the library's programme into every classroom.

### **The South African Education System**

The history of education in South Africa is marked by segregation and inadequate schooling for most black people. In the wake of apartheid, South Africa faced a crisis in black education. In 1991, the per capita spending on white pupils was about four times that for blacks and black schools lacked such necessities as libraries, science equipment, playgrounds, heat, electricity, and indoor plumbing. The standardised curriculum had been attacked for being too academic and Eurocentric, and teachers who were hired to implement the limited goals of Bantu education had meager qualifications (Murphy 1992). Since the abolition of apartheid and the establishment of the Government of national unity, South African society has been involved in a process of comprehensive political, social and economical change, focusing on the establishment of a non-racial democratic

society. Education is considered one of the most important vehicles to achieve not only these political aims but also to make South Africa a leading nation (economic as well as social) in the world (Boekhorst & Britz 2004). This implies a radical change in the educational system. The new system empowered the different provinces but also kept a central role for government. To accommodate this, a national Department of Education and nine provincial Departments of Education were established. The new educational system is in essence outcomes-based. The new education system had also inherited the many problems of a segregated and inadequate schooling system for blacks.

### **The Apartheid Inheritance**

According to Karlsson (2003) studies conducted by the National Education Policy Investigation's Library and Information Services Research Group (NEPI), the Education Policy Unit (EPU) and the government-commissioned School Register of Needs (SRN) found that extremes characterised the school library landscape during apartheid. In 1996 of 26,734 schools 4,502 (16.8%) had libraries (Department of Education 2001b:39). While these libraries were not only in schools for whites, white learners were affirmed and advantaged to a superior extent over learners of other racial groups. But the majority, being black learners, were subordinated and oppressed with negligible or no provision, and coloured and indian learners were less advantaged than white learners but more advantaged than their black peers. Thus, the post-apartheid education system inherited a situation in which eighty percent of all South African schools had no libraries and insufficient learning materials for learners to access the curriculum (Bot, Dove et al 2000).

The *South African School Library Survey* established that less than 30% of South African schools for example had functional libraries (Department of Education 1999). Functional libraries are limited to those schools that have enough resources to fund and manage them. Most schools in South Africa simply do not have the means to run libraries (Boekhorst & Britz 2004). Karlsson further argues that there has been a lack of significant improvements since 1994 in the exemplar of library-based collections, suggesting that social transformation has not reached its full potential yet

and there is much transformative work to be done. The evidence of continuity in the apartheid conditions within the school environment is disturbing for it points to the difficulty of readdressing apartheid inequalities and injustices. However, the school library has the potential for promoting less polarised social relations in post apartheid South Africa.

### **The Potential of the School Library to Overcome Social Polarisation**

Learners who come from poor economic backgrounds and do not receive much intellectual stimulation before they attend school and are often under prepared and disadvantaged (Buddy & Williams 2005:33). School libraries contribute to social transformation since they are the site at which a firm foundation for a reading culture, independent and resourceful learning are laid for the citizenry in their formative years. School libraries have the potential to break down socially polarised and subordinate identities. Kozol (2000) in a study conducted in the South Bronx of New York City found that the school library provided a window of opportunity for children to overcome the barriers that society had forced on them:

... because young children in impoverished sections of our cities need wide-open windows to the world of infinite variety beyond the walls that our society has built around their lives, and there are not too many windows quite so wide as those provided by spectacular resources in a well-endowed school library ... beautiful school libraries developed with the artfulness of skilled librarians-remain the clearest window to a world of noncommercial satisfaction and enticements that most children in poor neighborhoods will ever know. To shut those windows is to close down one more opening to democratic amplitude and one more opportunity to fully realized cultural existence (Kozol 2000:48).

The introductions of library facilities in schools in black areas are important since they provide skills and help black children to create opportunities for them to pursue education and better themselves. South African education fosters a new move to teaching and learning in the context of curriculum transformation. This move is based on 'knowledge construction' as

compared to the old system that emphasized 'knowledge transmission' or 'knowledge transfer'. The rationale for this move is that it is about learners constructing their own understanding as they try to make sense of their own environment (Marlowe & Page 2005). Jonassen (1994) mentions a number of principles that are guidelines to how knowledge construction can be facilitated. These include:

- \* Creation of real-world environments that promote contextualised learning;
- \* Provision of tools and environments that help learners interpret the multiple perspectives of the world;
- \* Provision of multiple presentations of reality; and
- \* Focus on knowledge construction and not reproduction (Jonassen 1994).

A school library has a crucial role in meeting the abovementioned principles through its policies, programmes, resources and strategies that reflect constructivist pedagogy by providing the real-world environment, learning tools, varying interpretations of reality depicted in numbers of resources, and by focusing on the individual's active construction of knowledge. In doing so school libraries provide neutral spaces of equal opportunity and access to resources that empower disadvantaged learners. Karlsson (1996) argued that school libraries in terms of their resources have the potential to break down social polarised and subordinated identities by *firstly* creating equity. Karlsson (1996:18) argues that a school system must have equity if it is to provide opportunities for every child to develop his/her potential and become an adult who participates in the economy of the country and the democratic processes of society. Thus the learning resources available in the school library must be provided in such a way that they counteract the inheritance of the past and create equity for a fair and just culture of learning and teaching.

*Secondly*, in terms of democracy, South Africa is still an emerging democracy, since there are many aspects of our society which must be exposed to democratic principles. Schools that provide school learners with resources must become democratic in their policies and practices. As democratic governing bodies are implemented in schools, library services



should establish advisory committees. Not only will mechanisms of participatory democracy such as democratic governing bodies and committees, ensure that resources are more appropriate to the learning and teaching needs of users in school, but such practices and processes will provide learners with a foundation for their adult lives (Karlsson 1996:18).

*Thirdly*, in terms of social inclusion efforts to improve the quality of learning and to prepare students for their adult and working lives should take account of the need to provide learning resources which support the curriculum and new approaches to learning. Not only must learning resources uphold constitutional values such as non-sexism and non-racism, but they should provide an offering that will expose the learner to critical, divergent and marginalised voices, particularly those that were silent and censored in the past.

The nature of the collection of learning resources should, for example, ensure that gender and other social issues are introduced so that learners develop a more holistic understanding of the nature of society and the ability to think independently and critically (Karlsson 1996:20).

*Fourthly*, in terms of information skills, global developments, such as the internet, require information skills for navigating the various electronic networks. Karlsson (1996) argues that the transformed computerised school library with electronic workstations should become the new learning space in which students acquire and use information skills to broaden their education experience. In order to introduce the necessary changes to the education process, educationalists and librarians need to collaborate in the design of curriculum through which learners will acquire information skills which are transferable skills.

*Fifthly*, in terms of language, culture and nation building, Karlsson (1996:21) argues that in a society characterised by diversity, issues of language and culture are highly emotive and require careful handling in public schools. The school library has a special role to play in this context, especially in the event that most school learners may not be instructed in their first language after the first two or three grades or receive instruction in their cultural practices and religion. The school library therefore provides public schools with an institutional mechanism to cater for diversity in our society. In addition cultural and religious collections could expose learners to resources that have the potential to develop understanding and tolerance

of others. Such collections could be important components for nation-building in our public schools. Thus the provision of library facilities in black schools are part of a process of democratising educational resources, and are important for promoting a society which is less polarised racially in terms of opportunities and resources. However, education policy makers in contemporary South Africa have failed to recognise the potential of school libraries for helping children from traditionally disadvantaged backgrounds to develop intellectual and emotional skills and to empower and better themselves.

### **The Continued Marginalisation of the School Library**

Subsequent to the 1994 national elections, many within the education sector invested their energies in developing policy options and drafting policy frameworks that would drive the post-apartheid social transformation to change the inequalities in school libraries. However, in the attempts to transform the inequalities of the past and introduce enriched concepts of education, instability within in the school library system has unfortunately occurred (Zinn 2000).

Since 1994 South Africa has undergone a process of educational transformation. The curriculum, *Curriculum 2005 (C2005)*, implemented from 1997 onwards, is evidence of new ways of thinking about education and learning. These changes, of course come from the need to construct a new integrated system from the fragmented and unequal apartheid education system. But they also represent a response to global pressures. Internationally, there is recognition that the so-called information or knowledge society demands lifelong learners (Hart 2004). The outcomes-based approaches of South Africa's *Curriculum 2005 (C2005)* reflect international trends. It claims to have moved away from rote learning and memorisation. The 2001 *Revised National Curriculum Statement* (Department of Education 2002) lists the following attributes of the learner which reflect, it is claimed, the values and ethos of the constitution: The learner:

- \* has the linguistic skills needed for a multi-lingual and multicultural South Africa;

- \* is curious and ready for scientific and artistic discovery;
- \* can adapt to an ever-changing environment;
- \* has a problem-solving bent of mind;
- \* can gather, analyse, organise, evaluate and communicate information;
- \* is able to take decisions in a complex technological society; and
- \* is equipped for social, political and economic demands for South Africa in our local and global context.

These attributes are echoed in the specific outcomes spelled out for each Learning Area of the new curriculum, as shown by Zinn (2002). The fifth attribute in the above list is of specific interest to librarians as it gives them a foothold in the curriculum. In recent years, the library profession had identified *information literacy* as central to its social mission. Information literacy refers to the complement of skills that enable citizens to recognize a need for information, find information efficiently, analyse it and assess it critically, use it to meet the identified need and to solve problems. In addition, as Zinn (2002:9) points out, all the other attributes in the above list overlap with information literacy. Libraries contribute directly to all of them (Hart 2004). The new school curriculum, with its acceptance of the need for information literacy and its shift to resource-based learning, has given librarians the room to become agents of change. The word 'change' implies a proactive leadership role, in contrast to the more passive supportive role usually assumed appropriate for the library profession within educational circles (Hart 2004:110).

At school level it was hoped that the school librarian would be the best person to mediate information skills. Unfortunately, the rationalisation of school personnel also resulted in the specialist post of school librarian falling away in 1995. Some school librarians became full-time class teachers, while others left the schooling system. Few schools could afford to pay for a school librarian out of their own budgets (Zinn 2000). A recent study conducted by Boekhorst and Britz (2004) which examined information literacy at school level in South Africa concluded that libraries can play an important role in enhancing information literacy at school level. Unfortunately this role is currently undervalued (Boekhorst & Britz 2004). The shift to constructivist approaches by *C2005* which see learning in terms

of active discovery, problem-solving and knowledge construction should provide a more favourable climate for libraries which are the sites where much of this kind of independent learning takes place. This at least is the assumption of many librarians. Whether their understanding is shared by educationists is a thorny question according to Hart (2004). Evidence of gaps in thinking between librarianship and educationists were seen in the review and revision of *Curriculum 2005* from 2000 onwards.

The final report of the C2005 Review Committee states that 'well-resourced' schools are coping well with the new curriculum but there was no mention of libraries (Department of Education 2000). Librarians perhaps would assume the existence of functioning libraries in these 'well-resourced' schools. However, the absence of any mention of libraries in the final revision of C2005 (Department of Education 2002), even after two representations to the Review Committee by LIASA's (Library and Information Association of South Africa) School Libraries and Youth Services Interest Group (Library and Information Association of South Africa 2000), indicates that educationists do not share this assumption (Hart 2004:112). A study conducted by Maepa and Mhinga (2003) investigated the barriers that hinder effective use of the school library by teachers and learners in the Limpopo Province. Barriers included a lack of insight among principals and educators into the educational role of a library. Thus educators themselves do not fully understand the role of the school library within the context of outcomes-based education. These sentiments are echoed by Hart (2004:15) who concludes that:

It is true that Curriculum 2005 is on paper a library friendly system. It expects learners to use a wide range of resources in the course of independent research projects. It therefore should have enhanced the position of the library profession whose libraries provide the sites for this kind of learning. Yet there is consensus among librarians that the position of libraries – school and public – has deteriorated in the last few years. How can this puzzling contradiction be explained? Could it be that educators and curriculum planners just do not share librarians' understanding of what a resource-based curriculum means?

Therefore, educational changes and policies in post-apartheid South Africa have not led to a call for more and better school libraries since educators lack insight into the potential role of libraries in educational and

social transformation in South Africa. This situation is ironic because libraries have the potential to break down social barriers. Kozol (2000) argues that school libraries are a normal part of a democratic society and their marginalisation leads to increased social polarisation:

Denial of these normal aspects [existence of well-resourced school libraries] of a democratic culture to children of the poor cannot be justified as 'prudent stewardship' of public funds or as an unintended consequence of accidental or archaic systems of financial allocation. It is a conscious act of social demarcation: a shameful way of building barriers around a child's mind, of starving intellect, of amputating dreams (Kozol 2000:49).

## **Conclusion**

School libraries are an important part of a democratic society and they play a vital role in social transformation by promoting less polarised social relations in post apartheid South Africa. Ironically the role of the school library in postapartheid South Africa has been further marginalised. Thus educational changes have not led to a call for more and better school libraries since educators lack insight into the potential role of libraries in educational transformation in the country. The absence of clear direction that should have come through policy and a regulatory framework has resulted in conditions in many of the existing school libraries deteriorating further. The lack of national government commitment to policy and guidelines regarding school libraries has further marginalised the important role of the school library in post apartheid South Africa. As a result the potential of the school library to break down social barriers and subordinate identities has been undermined. This situation will continue unless national government, educators and librarians acknowledge the value and importance of well-resourced school libraries and their contribution to educational and social development.

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