The Information Literacy Education Readiness of Public Libraries In Mpumalanga Province (South Africa)

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This study examines if public libraries in a province in South Africa are ready to assume an enhanced responsibility for information literacy education, specifically that of students, and, if so, what inhibiting and facilitating factors might exist. The public libraries in the rural province of Mpumalanga provide the case site. "Readiness", at one level, refers to physical capacity and, on a second level, to more subjective attributes such as staff attitudes and beliefs. The paper reports on the first phase of the study – in which both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered by means of a questionnaire/interview survey of 57 public librarians in 46 sites. The study finds that Mpumalanga public libraries are indeed heavily engaged in serving school learners. Shortcomings in certain physical facilities, such as the lack of space and absence of retrieval tools, are inhibiting factors with the heritage of apartheid still impacting on the availability of and quality of service. The low level of professional education of public library staff is found to impede innovation in library programming. The prevailing information literacy education model largely comprises one-to-one support, although there is a fair amount of source-based group library orientation. Moving towards information literacy education will depend on a shift in conceptions of the educational role of public libraries. In the absence of recognition of their curricular role by public library authorities and educators, many public librarians are not sure that their services to school learners are legitimate. There is, however, dawning recognition that present approaches are not meeting the needs of school learners and that more effective communication with educators is required. This recognition comes from public librarians' frustrating encounters with learners rather than from insight into information literacy education theory and experience. The fundamental conclusion is that sustainable information literacy education in public libraries will depend on more dynamic leadership and on a vision of a new model of public library.

Introduction

This paper reports on one phase of a study which investigates the readiness of public libraries in South Africa to take on an enhanced role in information literacy education – specifically that of school learners. The word "readiness" refers to "capacity" which has two layers of meaning:

- the physical facilities and infrastructure available to public libraries to serve schools, and

- the will to take on an enhanced role in information literacy education.

The study has two phases: an interview survey which informs the follow-up case study of one site. This paper reports on only the first phase. Both phases employ both qualitative and quantitative methods in the belief that, to understand social phenomena, methodological pluralism is beneficial (Dervin 1997, 23; Sawyer 2001, 166).

The study will, it is hoped, contribute to the building of knowledge in a relatively uncharted field, and also provide insights useful in meeting the challenges that confront public libraries in South Africa. Existing research has focused more on the external factors impacting on library programmes than the subjective factors of library staff's own conceptions. Bruce and Lampson's report of their survey of the views of librarians in the State of Washington on information literacy education claims to have found only three similar existing studies – two of one group of Canadian academic librarians' attitudes towards information literacy education and one of academic librarians in New Zealand (2002: 82).

Theoretical frame of study

Perhaps the most influential theoretician in the field of information literacy education at school level is Carole Kuhlthau. To Kuhlthau, information literacy is an ability for lifelong learning, involving the use of information independently to build personal knowledge. Her empirical work with information users, across a number of projects and across a number of years, shows information-seeking to be a constructive process of sense-making and problem-solving. The major outcome of Kuhlthau's research is her Information Search Process (ISP) model, which identifies seven phases in the information-seeking process and depicts its interaction between cognitive processes, affective factors and behaviours (1993, 2004). A crucial turning point is the fourth phase, Focus Formulation, when the learner, having explored the need or topic in the early three phases, finds a personal focus in the information he or she has encountered.

The implication is that information seekers need to be taught about the *process* and useful strategies at its various phases as much as about the mechanics of information sources. Kuhlthau's contribution to practice is reflected in what has been called a paradigm shift in the field of user education – from the standard source-based library instruction towards an embedding of the skills and source instruction in the learning process of school or university assignments. The shift has also meant a widening of focus in that the goal of information literacy education is not to teach about information resources in the library only, nor is it the sole responsibility of librarians. Following the ISP, several rather similar so-called process models have appeared in the professional literature, which offer frameworks for information literacy programmes (Loertscher and Woolls 1999, 84–113).

A perusal of the information literacy literature uncovers debate over a potentially fundamental shift in the social role of the library profession – what Peacock calls a "metamorphosis from librarian to educator" (2001, 27). The domain of information literacy might well be new territory for public librarians who, it has been suggested, might be more familiar with the acquisition, storage and dissemination of information than with its communication and use (Curran 1990, 351). Bruce and Lampson's study indicates how restricted views can limit public libraries' potential as "agents for information literacy", with, for example, their public library respondents' claiming that their clients have no need of information literacy as they are on hand to serve their information needs (2002, 91). Bruce and Lampson conclude that public librarians need a broader view that accepts a stronger pedagogical role in teaching critical thinking skills (2002, 103). The LIANZA survey of information literacy education in public libraries in New Zealand might lend support in its finding on the significance of librarians' preconceptions of what they do and do not do (Koning 2001).

Clearly, public librarians' conceptions of information and information literacy – and of their role in information literacy education and, indeed, in formal education as a whole – are central to the study's purpose. Christine Bruce's groundbreaking phenomenographic research in conceptions of information literacy among a group of Australian academics reveals the risk in assuming homogeneous views of information literacy. She identifies three clusters of conceptions:

- those that see information literacy in terms of information technology (IT) and information sources

- those that emphasise the information process and information control

- those that describe information-seeking in terms of knowledge construction, knowledge extension and wisdom (1997, 173).

Bruce shows how some conceptions are more "complete" than others. Thus, conceptions in the third cluster contain those in the first and second clusters. Bruce acknowledges that individuals or programmes are likely to favour one or other of these clusters; but she contends that a "*complete* information literacy programme needs to operate across the artificial boundaries of these groupings" (1997, 173).

The argument in this section has been that the construct of information literacy education makes new demands of library staff. However, two points are pertinent:

• The conceptual frameworks for information literacy education might exist; but they might not be called "information literacy education".

• Information literacy education has evolved from earlier forms of library user education. Kuhlthau, herself, acknowledges that it co-exists with these earlier approaches (Kuhlthau & McNally 2001).

The implication of these points for the study in Mpumalanga is that it cannot take a purist approach. Any intervention in the learning of the child in the public libraries of the research site is of interest to the study.

South African public libraries post-1994

In the early 1990s, one of the policy think tanks, set up by the government-in-waiting, the African National Congress, the National Education Policy Investigation, advocated a "radical" philosophy for a "developmental" public librarianship, in which information is seen as a "key element in the implementation and sustenance of democracy and the education and empowerment of people" (1992, 55). Arguably, education in information literacy – or what Dudley calls "community informacy" (2000, 31) – encapsulates the developmental and educational mission of public librarianship. Information literacy education might well be its unique contribution to social inclusion in South Africa where, however, on average, less that 10 percent of the population belong to public libraries (Van Helden & Lor 2002).

However, there is consensus that the expectations of the early 1990s have not been met. The restrictive economic policies at all levels of government have hit public libraries hard (Hooper &

Hooper 2000; Kagan 2002). Lor, then Head of South Africa's National Library, contended in 1998 that budget cutbacks were "crippling" public libraries. Leach's follow-up survey of public library services in the same year reports widespread cuts in materials budgets, staff and training.

Another factor is the ambiguous relationship between provinces and municipalities with regard to public libraries. The 1996 South African Constitution defines public libraries as a provincial responsibility and ignores the status quo, dating from pre-1994 provincial ordinances, that their staffing and day-to-day administration costs are in the hands of the third tier of government, the municipalities. In theory, money spent by local authorities on libraries is unauthorised expenditure in terms of public finance legislation. A sense of insecurity will prevail until this anomaly has been attended to (The Print Industries Cluster Council Working Group on Libraries 2005, 87) – perhaps by the National Council of Library and Information Services whose function is to advise on library legislation (South Africa 2001).

Local government has been mandated in recent years to deliver social and economic development, although widespread doubt exists over its capacity (Portfolio Committee on Provincial & Local Government 2003). Local government reform is aimed at integrating historically divided communities and at improving basic services in previously disadvantaged areas. A central strategy is the restructuring of local government into three categories of municipality. Clearly, this restructuring, in which independent towns have been merged into sprawling local municipalities, has huge implications for public libraries.

As public libraries struggle with these issues, they have, at the same time, experienced an increase in use by school pupils (Maepa & Mhinga 2003; Hart 2004). The author has heard a public librarian stand up at a conference and describe her library as a "beer hall" in the afternoons. One of Nkosi's librarian respondents in the Eastern Cape reports children "sitting on the doorsteps and crying because they can't get in" (2000, 260).

Research problem

Across the world, the information literacy education of school-goers has been identified as the *raison d'être* of *school* libraries. There are two arguments for *public* libraries in South Africa to take on this mission:

- the demands of the global economy for information literate school leavers – reflected in South Africa's reformed school curriculum, Curriculum 2005, which is widely described as "resource-based", which relies heavily on continuous assessment via portfolios of work and projects, and which lists information skills as a critical outcome (South Africa. Department of Education 2002)

- the shortage of school libraries in South Africa. Less than 30% of schools have libraries (South Africa. Department of Education 1999).

Whether public libraries are able to provide for the needs of school learners for information literacy education is the question at the heart of the study. The capacity of librarians for teaching has been questioned (Peacock 2001; Bruce & Lampson 2002; Clyde 2002). The author's previous study of pupils' use of two public libraries in a disadvantaged community in Cape Town documents

the *quantity of* use but raises questions over its *quality* (Hart 2004). It is significant that Moore's survey of information literacy education for the Prague Summit on Information Literacy (2002) has no mention of public libraries. The gap might point to the central challenge of information literacy education in public libraries – how to integrate it into the learning programme of students.

Research questions

There are three categories of research questions that emerge from the problem. Firstly, there is the question that addresses the issue of physical capacity:

- Do the libraries have the facilities and resources required to run effective information literacy programmes? These include space, staff and retrieval tools.

Secondly, there are those which examine existing information literacy education for school learners:

- What programmes involving school educators and learners are being run at present?

- What are the relationships at present between libraries and their local schools?

The third category asks about the attributes of public library staff in terms of their experience of and attitudes towards information literacy, information literacy education, and, indeed, towards a stronger educational role for public libraries:

- What are their perceptions of information literacy and information literacy education?

- What experience of and education in information literacy theory and practice have they had?

- What experience of and education in Curriculum 2005 have they had?

- What are the attitudes of public library staff towards an enhanced educational role?

There are, in addition, more speculative questions, answers to which may well lie in the exploration of the preceding questions:

- What might inhibit information literacy education programmes in public libraries?

- What might facilitate information literacy education in public libraries?

Research site

Mpumalanga Province's social and economic characteristics throw into relief the critical issues highlighted in the preceding discussion. In terms of school library and public library provision, it typifies South Africa's "rural" provinces with, for example, only 18 percent of its schools having a library (Bot 2005, 6). Most of Mpumalanga's public libraries are what Vavrek (1995, 4), writing in the American context, calls "rural and small town libraries". Mpumalanga has a public library service point for every 28,673 people (Van Helden & Lor 2002). The distribution of the libraries in the Province is, as elsewhere in South Africa, uneven, with its towns fairly well provided for but

with few libraries in its two sprawling apartheid-era "homelands". The Director of the Mpumalanga Provincial Library Service estimates that his province needs 98 new libraries in these areas (Le Roux & Hendrikz 2003, 264). In apartheid South Africa, the libraries in the "white" towns would have been barred to blacks. Historically, each of the small towns of Mpumalanga Province developed an adjacent township to provide housing for black workers and many of these townships have their own libraries.

Methodology

Research design

The research problem implies the need for a two-phase and mixed methods exploratory study. The first phase of the study (the focus of this paper) is a broad survey of the public libraries in Mpumalanga Province, gathering both qualitative and quantitative data by means of interviews, based on a semi-structured questionnaire. The aim is to gather quantitative data on the resources and facilities within the libraries and their services to schools – and, by means of several open-ended questions, qualitative data on staff attitudes towards the impact of Curriculum 2005 and possible changes in their role.

The chief benefit of personal interviewing for the project is that it provides for the exploration of complex concepts with participants whose exposure to the professional or research literature cannot be assumed. The visits to libraries also allowed for a certain amount of observational data – recorded in notes and photographs.

Sampling

The sampling process was based on a list of public libraries which was provided by the Director of the Mpumalanga Provincial Library Service. The list's six geographic regions were used as the basis for stratified sampling. Size was another factor. The "big" libraries are those defined by the Director as those "with collections of more than 45,000 books and more than three or four members of staff" (Hendrikz 2004a) and were all included in the survey. He listed only three "small" libraries, which he described as having only one staff member.

In addition to library region and size, other variables of socio-economic situation were considered in the sampling frame. The author's previous research in the metropolis of Cape Town had uncovered significant differences in resource provision between suburban libraries, situated in historically white areas (so-called historically advantaged libraries), and township libraries (so-called historically disadvantaged libraries) (Hart 1999). Therefore, it was felt that the survey in Mpumalanga Province had to include adequate numbers of libraries within formerly black disadvantaged areas. The final sample comprised 46 sites.

In all, 57 interviews were conducted – involving the senior librarian and, in larger libraries, the staff member responsible for information literacy education. The mean age of respondents is 39 years; the average number of years in their present library is six years; nine out of the 11 official South African languages are represented.

Research instrument

The questionnaire/interview contains a mix of question types – closed, open and Likert scales – to provide for triangulation – the qualitative data throwing light on the quantitative data, confirming tentative findings and suggesting directions for the follow-up study of Phase 2.

The questionnaire has five sections. The aim in Section A, *Library Resources and Facilities,* is to collect figures on library membership, circulation, staff, and resources. Section B of the questionnaire investigates the present status of information literacy education in Mpumalanga Province's libraries. It also records the partnerships the libraries might have with other organisations since effective information literacy education requires alliances with other role-players (Curran 1990; Bundy 2002).

Section C, *Perceptions of Information Literacy Education,* explores more subjective territory in the belief that peoples' perceptions give insight into their worldviews, which influence their personal beliefs, values, attitudes – and behaviours. How someone conceives information literacy must depend on his or her experiences of information handling and his or her own information literacy. Assessing information literacy is a thorny issue. Several researchers have used Kuhlthau's ISP model as a benchmark (for example, Isbell & Kammerlocher 1998; Limberg 1999). The premise is that people who are conscious of the phases and strategies of the information process are more likely to be information literate, although of course they might have no inkling of Kuhlthau's ISP model. In Bruce's terms, they belong in the more "complete" categories of conceptions of information literacy, as discussed earlier. The interview does not ask respondents directly to solve an information problem, as Todd did in an Australian school (1995) or ask them to describe a critical incident, as Stilwell and Bell did in a South African school (2003). It rather disguises its intention by asking respondents to describe the steps a school learner might go through in tackling the school project, "Culling Elephants in the Kruger National Park". This approach was deemed to be less threatening; while their own information literacy should be reflected in their descriptions of what they expect of school learners.

Section D gathers personal information. Then Section E asks interviewees to make final comments on the role of the public library in information literacy education.

Discussion of results

Only some findings can be presented owing to space restrictions. The quantitative data were summarised and analysed with the aid of Microsoft Excel spread sheets. The responses to the open questions, which yielded qualitative data, were analysed through coding and tabulation.

Some usage statistics

The juvenile membership and borrowing statistics are of specific interest, given the study's focus on school learners. Overall 64.4 percent of members are adults and 35.6 percent are juvenile. There is a highly significant difference between the percentages of members registered who are children in the historically disadvantaged libraries versus the historically advantaged ones (Chi-squared = 6062.9, df = 1, p<0.0001). Figure 1 shows the significant difference between the percentages of monthly circulation figures for children in the historically disadvantaged libraries versus the historically advantaged ones (Chi-squared = 4831.2, df = 1, p<0.0001).
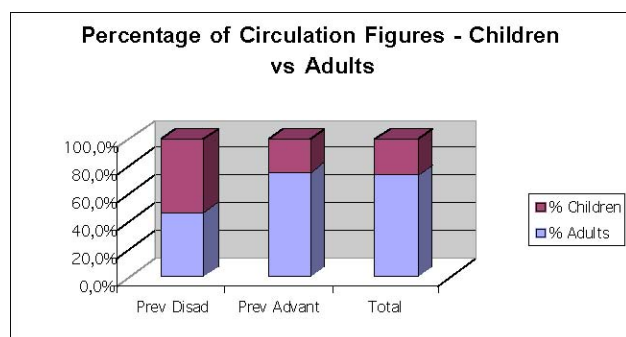
Figure 1: Percentage of circulation figures for children vs. adults.

In considering differences in membership and circulation between the historically white libraries and those in the townships, the difference between *use* and *borrowing* has to be acknowledged. The low circulation and membership figures in many libraries might mask the reality on the ground, evidenced by informal comment in the course of the interviews and by several questions to be reported on later, that the libraries are extremely heavily used, mostly by school learners, many of whom are not formally signed-up members.

Respondents' comments suggest that black youth now forms the dominant user group in the Province. With the abolition of apartheid, many black children who are living in the townships now attend schools in the nearby towns. In reflecting on the increased numbers of black youth in her library, the librarian in charge of a central town library shows understanding of the links between curriculum and libraries in her remark:

- Bantu education did not expect libraries (Questionnaire 3).

The apartheid political economy assumed that black schools were preparing youth to be mere cogs in the labour force – with no need of libraries (Stadler 1991).

The heritage of apartheid might well play another role in the shifting patterns of library use. There is a thread of comment that the historically white libraries are better resourced – or at least perceived to be. One township librarian alludes to this in her comment:

- In apartheid time, they couldn't use it [the library in town]. So now they can, they perceive it to be better. So they go there. I accept it (Questionnaire 33).

Two heads of previously white libraries in downtown areas agree, with one saying:

- They don't get the same service in the township; we have more stock (Questionnaire 39).

The educational role of the public library is the question at the centre of the study so the informal comments, provoked by the questions on circulation statistics, on changes in role are of interest. Several suggest that the heavy use by black youth has meant a shift to a focus on demanding than in the past because their users are more "needy", several small town librarians

are philosophical about the change. One, a public librarian for over 20 years, says:

- I'm still enjoying it. That's our job [namely "to help"] (Questionnaire 35).

Others see the shifts in emphasis as a "problem". Perhaps in several of these respondents, the negative perceptions stem from a lack of capacity to cope with *increase* in use rather than objections to the shifts in *kinds* of use. For example, one librarian in a large town library opened her interview with these words:

- We have a big problem here. You should see our reference room in the afternoons. Staff are running around. Before we used to have one staff member in there. After 2.00 now we have three – and it's not enough. They [i.e. staff] are running around, making photocopies, they are complaining that they are working too hard. They can't cope (Questionnaire 11).

Library resources

The visits to the libraries uncovered the urgency of the issue of physical size or space. The shortage of space clearly causes frustration among some staff members, who sometimes betray a wish for children to use their libraries quickly and not "loiter" – as illustrated in the comment below:

- They must get the book and *go home* (Questionnaire 8).

Only two libraries in Mpumalanga Province, the two largest, have dedicated separate children's libraries, open and staffed all day by specialists. Two other libraries have separate children's rooms but they are open and staffed for only half the day. The norm across the Province is that staff stationed in the adult section move across to the children's section, according to demand.
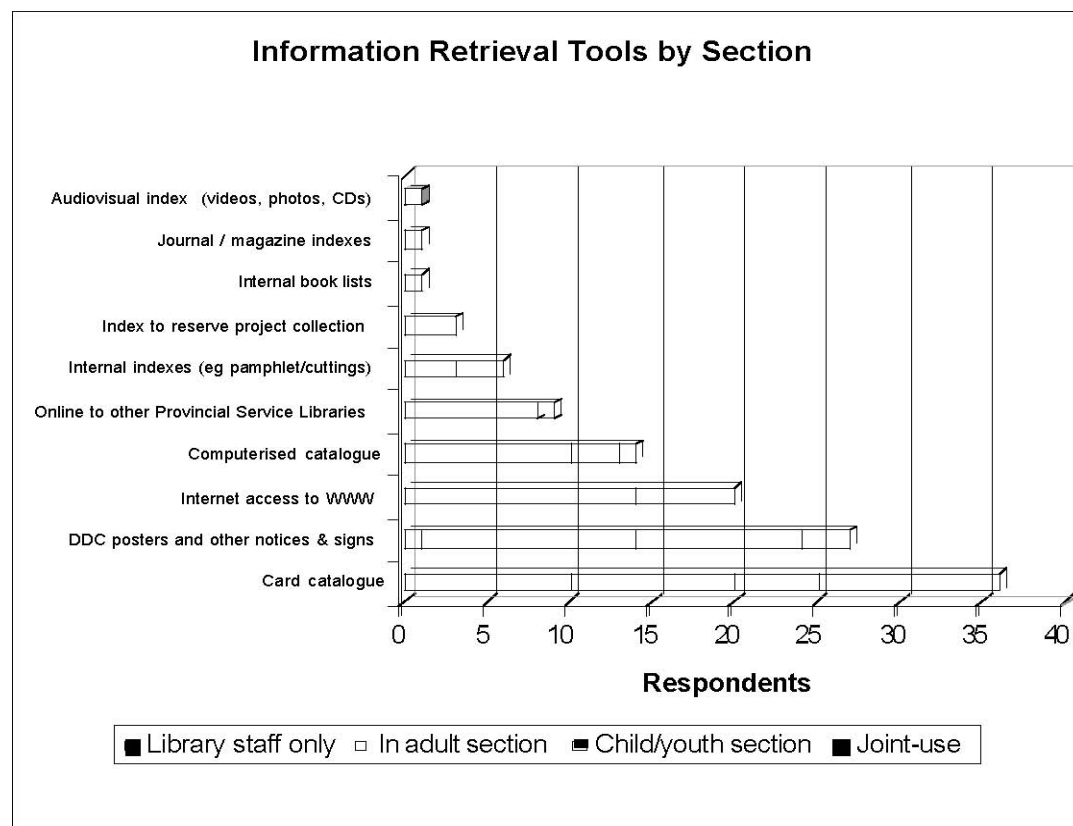

Figure 2: Information retrieval tools by section

Figure 2 depicts the provision of retrieval tools. Information retrieval skills are a key attribute of information literacy; thus the provision of retrieval tools is clearly crucial to public librarians' capacity for information literacy education. Only six libraries provide a separate catalogue for their juvenile users. Twenty have a catalogue accessible to staff only. Only six libraries provide indexes to newspaper cuttings collections – three of these being in a back office.

Significance tests by library "history" reveal that the historically advantaged libraries (HALs) are better equipped with retrieval tools – OPACs (Online Public Access Catalogues), World Wide Web access, poster guides to Dewey Decimal Classification system, in-house indexes – than the historically disadvantaged libraries (HDLs).

On the day of the interview, only seven of the 46 libraries were providing direct public access to the Internet and only three to an Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC). Moreover, only 12 of the libraries had their computer catalogues up and running for staff use. It is hard to make sense of these low figures. In the past few years, the Carnegie-funded Building Electronic Bridges (BEB) project has spent five million rands on building a provincial database of 120 million electronic library records and placing 120 computers with Internet connectivity in all public libraries in the Province (Mpumalanga Provincial Government. Department of Sport, Recreation, Arts & Culture 2004). A possible explanation is given by the Director of Mpumalanga Provincial Library Service, who explains that many local authorities have not paid Internet fees (Hendrikz 2004b). The BEB project had subsidised the first six months and then local authorities had been expected to take over the charges. Whatever the problems with computerisation, in the meantime, card catalogues in several libraries have been dismantled.

Examination of the figures relating to the provision of indexes to in-house newspaper cuttings and project collections suggests that the issue is more complicated than physical facilities. Of the 17 libraries that build in-house cuttings collections and the 25 that maintain school project collections, only nine provide for public access to them via indexes. This neglect might rather point to more intangible factors, such as librarians' beliefs about users' information-seeking behaviours. Many respondents indicate that they expect their users to ask for help. One librarian explains why her catalogue is in a dark back passage thus:

- They could use it but they don't want to (Questionnaire 40).

Or, perhaps the issue is rather gaps in respondents' education and training. One librarian defends her placing of a luxuriant pot-plant on her catalogue cabinet by saying that users "make a mess of the cards" (Questionnaire 35).

Staffing

The average number of staff in the libraries in the sample is 3.5 – with the median being 1.5 and the highest 20. Contrary to the figures given by the Director of Mpumalanga Provincial Library Service, 22 heads of libraries are in fact the sole staff member of their library. The 22 are evenly split between historically white and black areas. Thirteen respondents report that their library has empty or frozen posts, eight from the group of one-person libraries.

Figure 3 depicts the relationship between numbers of staff and circulation figures.
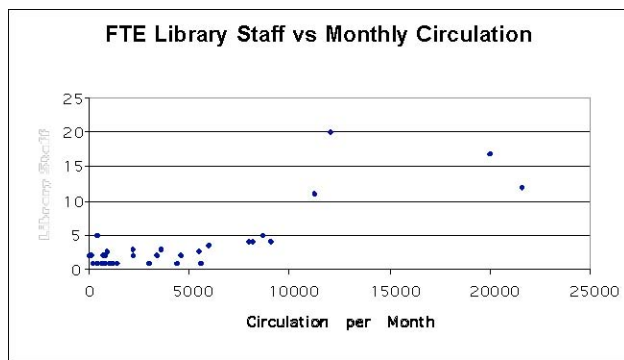
Figure 3: FTE library staff vs monthly circulation

Spearman rank correlations between FTE (fulltime equivalent) numbers of library staff, membership and monthly circulation are all significant at p < 0.005.

The "one-person library" was used at times as a variable in the analysis of data as it was deemed to be possibly significant for information literacy education in the Province. Indeed, several respondents report that they would like to do more outreach work in the community and in schools but are unable to leave their libraries. The opening hours of the small libraries are rather restricted – with only well-staffed libraries open after 4.30pm and on Saturdays. As several respondents in townships and small towns point out, the result is that working people and children who attend school out of the townships cannot access their libraries. In her comment on being a single staff member, another respondent questions her ability to meet the wide range of demand asking:

- How can we cope will all the diverse needs? (Questionnaire 24)

Her words reminiscent of some of the international comment on the challenges facing rural libraries, which provide for information needs as diverse as in any large city but with fewer resources at their disposal.

Figure 4 shows that only 17 of the respondents (30.3%) have a formal post-Matric professional qualification, mostly a diploma or degree in Library and Information Science.
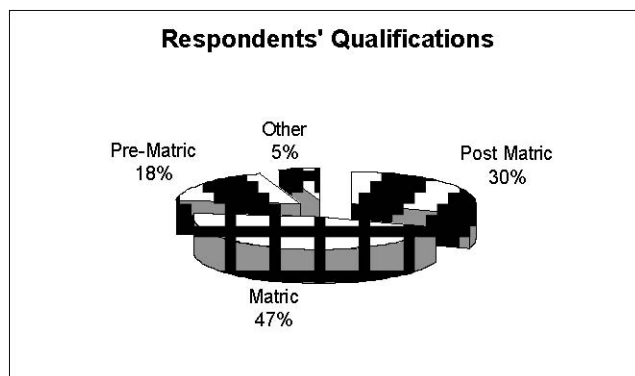

Figure 4: Respondents' qualifications

Only one of the 17 professionally qualified staff reports some exposure to the concept of information literacy education in his degree coursework.

Analysis of the responses shows that staff in township libraries are less likely to have tertiary qualifications than those in previously advantaged areas, echoing the author's findings in her study of Cape Town librarians in 1999 (Hart 1999). Six respondents, in charge of township libraries, do not have school-leaving Matric, having being promoted from cleaning positions. How someone is appointed to run a small town library became an issue of interest after several respondents reported that they had been seconded to the library after working as clerks for the municipality. Comments from professionally qualified respondents reveal their unease with the situation. For example, a qualified librarian with 15 years experience warns that the downgrading of public library work will impact on all staff:

- We do a lot. We need higher salaries. The situation is making qualified librarians move on – therefore *we'll* all suffer (Questionnaire 48).

The evidently low level of professional education among the study's participants implies the need to examine their access to workplace skills development and in-service education. As Table 1 shows, respondents report very little professional development. The most common workplace training is computer training. The 17 respondents who report training in information literacy education are those who attended a workshop in Middelburg on 16 March 2004, which was run by the Centre for Information Literacy at the University of Cape Town, at the request of the Director of Mpumalanga Provincial Library Service, and in which the author participated.

Table 1: Respondents' in-service training in past three years

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In-service training courses attended in past 3 years	Responses
Library computer system course	41
Computer literacy or other computer application	39
Training in how to teach information / library skills to library users	17
Information / library skills training (improving your own skills)	16
Internet course	8
Other (All six referred here to Customer Care Course given by local authorities)	6
Children's literature	4
Some aspect of school curriculum: e.g. Curriculum 2005 / Outcomes Based Education / Project work	3
Children's needs / psychology	2

Whether their education and training, pre-service and in-service, have prepared public library staff for their work is a crucial question for the research project. One respondent defends the appointment of her former cleaner to run the nearby township library by saying, "She's been around for years, she knows it all". Her words might well refer to familiarity with administrative procedures. Kagan links the low status of librarianship in South Africa to a tendency to stress practical "skills" and "training" rather than "theory" and "education" (2002, 4). The issue is not

confined to South African public librarianship. In examining the "crisis" of "disorganized and unproductive" rural libraries in the United States, Luchs (2001, 51) contends that the prevailing low level of professional education of their staff is their biggest weakness.

Existing information literacy education

On average, the libraries report having 7.3 schools within a radius of three kilometres. The largest number is 40 schools, reported by the librarian in a rural library in one of the densely populated apartheid era Bantustans. Libraries in historically black communities are reported on average to have 8.6 schools within three kilometres compared with the 6.2 in the historically white. Seventeen respondents report that their library has a "special" relationship with at least one school – in terms of block loans and contact with educators.

Nine categories of information literacy education are represented in Figure 5. The most common information literacy education activity is "library orientation", in which classes are brought to the library and introduced to its layout and services. Positive responses to the categories referring to more focused user education come from only 11 libraries. Only three respondents report that they sometimes work with the same class in a sustained way over more than one session.
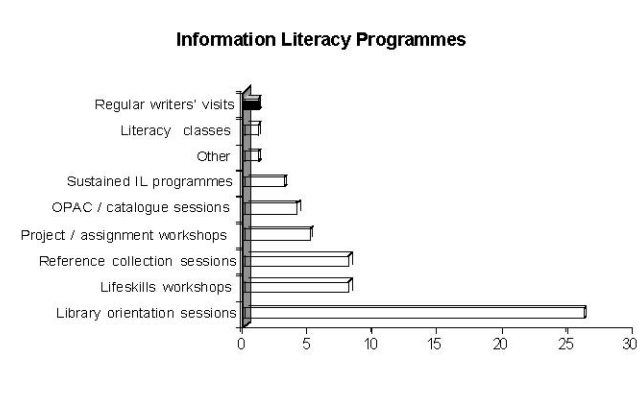

Figure 5: Information literacy programmes

No pattern within municipalities can be detected and only eight respondents claim to have a mention of information literacy education in their mission statements. There is evidence elsewhere that institutional support is a key element in effective information literacy education (Koning 2001; Bruce & Lampson 2002). Information literacy education in Mpumalanga Province's libraries might, indeed, depend on the interest or even whim of individual staff members as evidenced in the response from a librarian (one of the staff seconded from municipal offices in the mid1990s), who feels that information literacy education is not something she has to do:

- I do it when I feel like it. Sometimes I'm just tired. I don't *have* to do it (Questionnaire 9).

Several other responses echo her view that information literacy education cannot be expected of public librarians, for example:

- Because we should not be teachers – our job is just to help them find information (Questionnaire 7).

Respondents' perceptions of information literacy education

Respondents' attitudes to and conceptions of information literacy education are probed in a number of Likert scale questions which ask for responses to a range of statements, each of which is followed by an open-ended question. Qualitative data is notoriously difficult to present concisely so this section will provide only summaries of some of the tabulations. The section focuses on two issues, each probed across several questions in the questionnaire/interview:

- respondents' perceptions of information literacy

- their perceptions of their educational role.

Most respondents describe an information literate person in terms of use of the library – someone who uses the library and its resources and who can find information. There are a few references to other attributes such as the ability to communicate well, to articulate a need for information and to share information with others. Only one mentions how information might serve to change perceptions and build knowledge.

The choice of words frequently betrays a view of information as, in Curran's term, a "utility" (1990) – something that is fetched, and that librarians give. Thus, most responses belong largely within Bruce's first cluster of conceptions that were referred to earlier – those that see information literacy in terms of knowledge of information sources. As mentioned earlier, Kuhlthau's contribution to information literacy education theory is her distinction between information literacy as a subjective cognitive process and approaches that see it in terms of *getting* the right answer in a source (1993; 2000). When the responses in Mpumalanga Province are viewed in the light of Kuhlthau's research, then it is clear why most will be placed within Bruce's first cluster.

Respondents' descriptions of the stages of school project work support this interpretation. The Mpumalanga participants are pre-occupied with *finding s*kills – with 39 mentions. Seventeen describe the first step as "asking the librarian for" the information needed. Only four show awareness of the need for learners to see the bigger picture before they focus on finding specific information with talk of "having a mental picture" and "having questions ready". This last quotation perhaps hints at Doyle's contention that, in the information society, "Knowing how to ask the right questions may be the most important step in learning" (1999, 99). Branch describes the finding of an essential question as the "hardest part of any inquiry" and finds that, once learners are persuaded or allowed to spend more time exploring a topic in order to find the essential question, then the later stages go more easily (2003, 37). The frequent references in Mpumalanga to "photocopying" often suggest that respondents feel that their job is done once they hand the child the page for copying. The significance for the study is that the pre-occupation with the finding stage, especially if "finding" really means "fetching", might allow librarians to distance themselves from the pedagogical issues of whether children understand the concepts they are "researching" and what they do with the bits of information found for them by library staff.

The questions probing respondents' perceptions of their role in education yielded richly nuanced results. Figure 6 provides an analysis of the responses to the Likert scale statements.
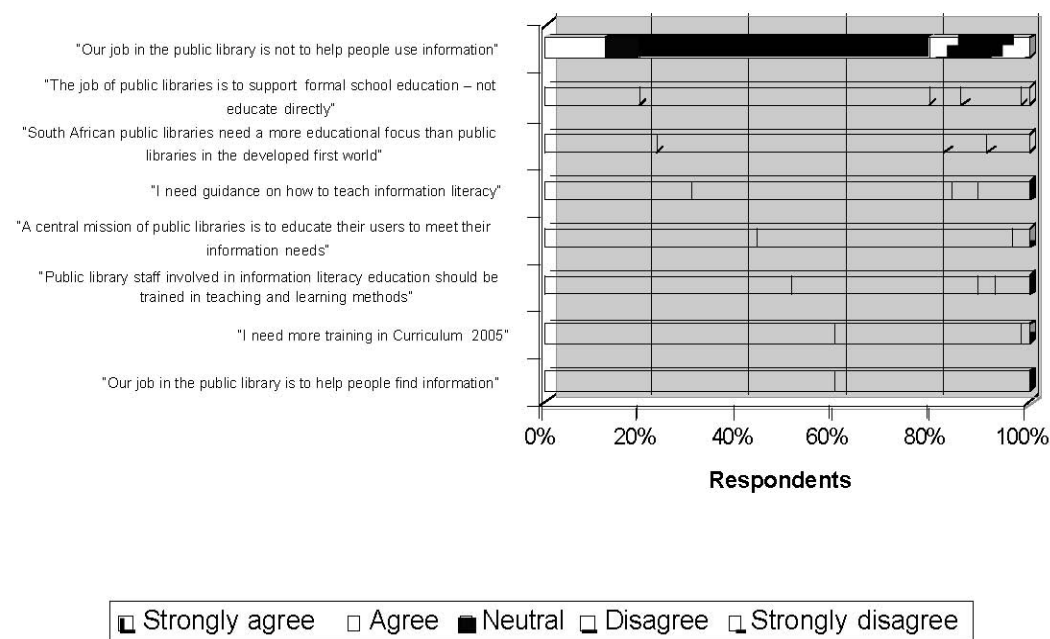

Figure 6: Perceptions of role of public libraries in education and information literacy education

Some contradictions are evident – for example a strong majority (45 out of a total of 56 responses) agree that public libraries should play a "supportive" rather than "direct" role in formal education. Yet, the next two statements in Figure 6 show that equally strong majorities agree that South African public libraries need a more educational focus than those in developed countries.

Other accompanying informal comments and responses to the next open question, which asks respondents simply to comment on the educational role of public libraries, are further evidence of widespread ambivalence. The frequent use of words like "should", and "supposed to" implies a dilemma. Many respondents seem torn between how things *should* be, according to their long-held beliefs, and how things are in reality. The threads of thought might be categorised as follows:

- Libraries have new kinds of users – whose background has not prepared them for library use.

- The lack of school libraries means that children are not learning information skills at school.

- Public librarians are subject to conflicting demands – between curricular needs and leisure reading, for example.

- Should they be expected to be teachers?

Public libraries lack capacity for information literacy education in terms of space, stock and staff.

Two comments that best encapsulate the ambivalence are:

- Five years ago everything changed. But we are supposed to serve *all* communities. We're supposed to be a *public* library (Questionnaire 11).

- In a way I agree [that our role is to educate] – but there must be money and resources. I would say we must "support" education 20 years ago. But OBE [Outcomes Based Education] fell on us – it was chaos (Questionnaire 3).

Overall, it seems that, whatever their personal feelings about the changes, all agree that they are experiencing increased pressure on their services and that they lack capacity to cope with learners' demands. The interviews, even those with respondents who welcome their educational role, are permeated with a sense of crisis – emanating, apparently, from the pressures of student numbers and the lack of accompanying support from their authorities. Whether the heavy use of public libraries by learners, in itself, implies information literacy education and what *kind* of information literacy education is being conducted are then the key questions. These frame the follow-up case study of two public libraries in one small town that is the second phase of the study.

Conclusions

Respondents' descriptions of information literacy and of the information search process indicate incomplete conceptions of information literacy and a restricted view of the role of the public library. To staff who see their job to be the organisation of a collection of books and the handing over of bits of information on demand, the public has no need of information retrieval tools and no need to learn independent information seeking skills. It seems that, to many respondents, offering instruction might represent a shift in their conceptions of what is expected of them – namely, merely to provide information on demand. Nonetheless, a dawning recognition that the public library has no choice but to intervene in pupils' information literacy education is discernible.

From its beginning, the project acknowledged two layers in its research problem. One layer refers to physical capacity, such as facilities and staffing. And indeed, shortcomings in certain physical facilities, such as the lack of space and absence of retrieval tools, are inhibiting factors with the heritage of apartheid still impacting on the availability of and quality of service. The second layer refers to more subjective attitudes. The study highlights the interdependence of both sets of factors. For example, if a library is short of physical space, staff might resist change, feeling that they just cannot cope. However, conversely, it could be argued that it is the lack of vision – or of a philosophical and conceptual framework – that hampers solutions to the physical challenges. The study shows how underlying beliefs about information literacy and the educational role of public libraries impact on information literacy programming.

The fundamental conclusion of the study is that sustainable information literacy education in public libraries will depend on dynamic leadership and on a vision of a new model of public library. The Mpumalanga Province study finds information literacy education at present to be ad-

hoc, dependent on the energy of individual staff members. Sustainable programmes, that will meet the needs of South African school learners and contribute to an informed citizenry, urgently require a more solid framework. Perhaps South African public librarians should return to the discussion documents of the early 1990s, which were referred to earlier, and articulate a vision of a social developmental role. Given the South African government's increasing emphasis on the role of local government in the development of rural communities and of social capital, public libraries surely must be recognised as development agencies whose specific contribution is community "informacy". Their present and potential role in information literacy education gives public librarians a strong position from which to argue their case. The newly-established National Council of Library and Information Services, alluded to earlier, might provide the arena for such vision building.

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