



How school libraries improve literacy: some evidence from the trenches

Genevieve Hart

Abstract

The article comes out of a panel discussion, featuring five teacher-librarians, which was broadcast to schools across the Western Cape Province of South Africa in 2011. Four of the panelists are graduates of the University of the Western Cape's school librarian programme. The request for the broadcast came from two managers of the Qids-Up school improvement project in the Western Cape Education Department, which has sent collections of books to over 400 historically disadvantaged schools across the province. The aim of the project was to improve prevailing low literacy levels with injections of attractive reading materials in the languages spoken in the schools. The two managers, however, were concerned that the donations of books had had little impact. The article focuses on participants' stories about their reading projects. The discussion provides inspiring and convincing evidence for those, like the author, who have been arguing for years that without libraries and dedicated school- or teacher-librarians, the millions spent on book donations and literacy projects might be wasted.

Introduction

Considering that every school library mission statement across the world puts literacy at its centre, the topic of the role of school libraries in literacy might at first sight seem trite. However, experience in South Africa in the last few years has shown that an understanding of the links between school library and literacy cannot be assumed. The South African government claims to have spent millions of rand on literacy development in schools through book donations and literacy programmes, yet literacy levels in this country are still extremely low. The underlying argument of this article is that if attention had been paid to the development of school libraries to manage and champion the use of such resources, they would be making a difference by now. The difference literacy makes to overall school performance has been shown in research across the world. A recent example is the finding of a longitudinal study of 4 000 American school children, that a child who cannot read at grade level by Grade 3 is four times less likely to complete his/her schooling with a certificate than his/her more proficient peers (Hernandez 2011).

This article reports and reflects on a panel discussion featuring five teacher-librarians, which was broadcast in June 2010 to schools across the Western Cape as part of the Telematics school improvement project of the Western Cape Education Department (WCED). Four of the panelists were recent graduates of the school librarian programme of

the University of the Western Cape (UWC). The request for the broadcast came from two managers of the QIDS-Up literacy project in the WCED, which has sent collections of books to over 400 historically disadvantaged schools across the Western Cape (Western Cape Government 2009). The aim of the QIDS-Up project is to improve the prevailing low literacy levels with donations of attractive reading materials in the three primary languages of the Western Cape: Afrikaans, English and Xhosa. The donations attempt to match the language profiles of the schools. The two managers were, however, concerned that the book donations had had little impact in many of the schools, and hoped that the broadcast might encourage schools to use the QIDS-Up resources to set up sustainable libraries.

One of the quandaries in teaching on the Advanced Certificate of Education (ACE) school librarian programme at UWC is the motivation of students as they enroll. It is a demanding programme of eight modules over two years, delivered in late-afternoon classes twice a week. Most students are full-time subject and class teachers whose ACE studies are funded by the provincial education department, but without any promise of a librarian post upon conclusion. (The allocation of government school posts is the mandate of national government, and as yet no provision has been made for school librarians.) Uncertainty over the status of school librarianship within the education system has provoked some uncomfortable soul-searching within the ACE programme. Questions that arise include: *Are people being trained just to be set up for failure? What are their expectations? Do they know what the ACE involves? Are they aware of what the job of a school librarian entails?* In this article the focus is on their role in literacy education, therefore these questions are not directly addressed (see Hart 2012 for more on that topic).

One of the key issues emerging from the broadcast was the leadership role the panelists were taking in improving their schools through their library literacy projects. Their anecdotes provided inspiring evidence of how it is indeed possible to bring change to a school via a library project. As suggested in the title, all five participants were at that stage working in disadvantaged circumstances; their schools serve communities with high levels of those social problems associated with poverty and unemployment; and their “libraries” fall far short of international norms. Four participants were full-time teachers, juggling their classroom work with their library responsibilities. The fifth was a retired teacher working as a volunteer. The common thread that emerged from the recording was the participants’ new-found passion for and belief in their fledgling libraries. Their stories centred on changes in themselves and their teaching, and on how they brought about change in their schools. One participant, for example, reported that her school had just been awarded a prize for the most improved literacy in her district – going from a general score of 30 per cent to over 60 per cent.

Background

To understand the themes of the panel discussion it is necessary to provide some background and context relating to school libraries and school literacy in South Africa.

School libraries in South Africa

The most comprehensive overview of South African school librarianship is to be found in Chapter 5 of the LIS Transformation Charter, a vision document published by the National Council of Library and Information Services, the advisory body to the Ministers of Education and Arts and Culture (2009). The chapter makes the case for school libraries, first, by arguing that they are vital in improving schooling and redressing historical inequalities. It refers to the fact that in 1994, at the demise of apartheid education, the per capita expenditure varied between R5 403 in “white” schools and R1 053 in schools in the Transkei “homeland”. The chapter then describes the present weak position of school libraries, identifying the key challenges as follows:

1. Few exist: fewer than ten per cent of schools have functioning libraries with an annual budget and a staff member. The few comprise the historically advantaged, so-called ex-Model C suburban schools, which are able to supplement their government budgets by levying fees from their largely middle-class parent bodies;
2. There is no unit in the central education department in Pretoria that might take the lead in planning for a national school library system;
3. There is no national school library policy, despite five or six attempts at formulating a draft since 1996. Since the publication of the charter, the national Department of Basic Education has issued a new document, *National Guidelines for School Library and Information Services* (2012). However, the value of mere “guidelines” is questionable.
4. The provincial education departments’ school library support services lack capacity. Evidence in support of this comment in the LIS Transformation Charter is to be found in the author’s recent observation in a study in a province Western Cape: there, a provincial school library support official had over 200 schools under her wing and where staff shortages in the head office meant books were piled ceiling-high, waiting to be processed and distributed.

The Transformation Charter makes 12 recommendations to address these problems, but at the time of writing there was little evidence of any real progress.

School literacy

As the political scientist, Butler (2004:81), points out, the education system can have a direct impact on righting past inequalities. However, there is consensus that, although six per cent of our GDP is spent on education each year, and the education funding pie is more than 49 per cent larger than in 1994 (the year that saw the demise of apartheid education [Bloch 2009:126]), the outcomes are disappointing. Probably the crispest way to convey the state of South African schools is to point to the Annual National Assessment scores published in the early part of 2011. At Grade 3 the national average <score?> for literacy was 35 per cent and for numeracy 28 per cent; at Grade 6 it was 28 per cent for languages and 38 per cent for mathematics (Department of Basic Education 2011:20).

In the introduction to this article reference was made to the link between a child’s reading ability and his/her overall success at school. Moreover, the links between literacy levels and

socio-economic class are clear (see, for example, Hernandez 2011). Although it is no longer possible to talk of “white” schools, in South Africa the disparities between the historically white sector of schooling and the historically black sector are evident. The dice is still loaded against black children in what Bloch (2009:59) calls the schools of the “second economy”, as shown in the statistic that in 2007, two per cent of white school-leavers failed, compared to 39 per cent of blacks. Bloch (2009:17) claims that well over half of South African schools are dysfunctional.

South African children came last in the Progress in Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) study in 2006, which tested primary school learners’ reading in their home languages in 40 countries (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy & Foy 2007). The PIRLS survey suggests that the lack of access to libraries in South Africa may partly explain this poor performance. Internationally, 89 per cent of higher-scoring respondents in the PIRLS survey attended schools with libraries, and 69 per cent had access to classroom reading collections. Fifty per cent were taking books home from their classroom collection every day, while an equal percentage visited the central school library at least once a week.

In the South African context, Murray (2011) uses Stanovich’s concept of the “Matthew Effect” to show why children who have a wide choice of books and read a lot, prosper in terms of their reading, while children in poorly resourced schools struggle to learn to read, come to dislike reading, and fall further and further behind. Pretorius et al’s series of studies in disadvantaged schools provides evidence of the positive impact on reading providing access to collections of new books in children’s mother tongues and of reading interventions such as book clubs (see, for example, Pretorius & Machet 2004; Pretorius & Mampuru 2007; Pretorius & Currin 2010; Pretorius & Lephala 2011).

Literacy cannot be defined solely in terms of scores. It is a “socially and culturally constructed practice” (Nassimbeni & Desmond 2011:98) which has to be understood within certain social contexts. Children’s reading habits, for example, depend on the attitudes and beliefs of the adults who surround them. A library might make books more accessible, but much depends on the value teachers place on them. Thus, other explanations for the prevailing weak literacy in South African schools might well be found in research on the readiness of teachers for reading development. Rasey and Koppenhaver (2009) found much common ground in their review of 15 studies of teachers’ reading habits. There seems to be consensus on what Applegate and Applegate (2004), in another allusion to biblical texts, call the “Peter Effect” – meaning that teachers who do not have a love of reading cannot expect their charges to read.

In the past few years, the WCED has initiated three projects in response to the prevailing literacy problems: the daily reading half-hour project; the 100 Books per classroom project and the QIDS-Up school library project. The 100 Books project was designed to provide resources to support the daily half-hour silent reading programme. Its evaluation report (Further Education and Training Institute, UWC 2006) offers support for the author’s earlier contention that the failure of the various South African school book projects over the past few years might (at least partly) be explained by the non-existence of libraries. The final sentence of the report warns that the 100 Books project should not be a once-off intervention. One of its key recommendations is that “guidance needs to be

provided on the facilitation of books that will maximise their usage and integration in addressing a culture of literacy” (p. 8). Scattered throughout the report are comments on the need to train teachers to manage the resources, to use the books more effectively and to integrate them into classroom work across the curriculum. These directives sound like the job description of a school librarian.

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

Panel discussion

In planning the 90-minute broadcast, the author and colleague Sandy Zinn came up with 12 questions for the five participants to consider, which would cover their motives for setting up their libraries as well as the successes and challenges they faced. It was hoped that the questions might provoke discussion among the audience of teachers across the province, who were invited to send in comments and questions for a follow-up broadcast two days later. But underlying the 12 questions was the question which has preoccupied the author as a school librarian educator for a number of years: *How do our fledgling teacher-librarians in typically disadvantaged schools cope with their daunting challenges?* Most are, in fact, full-time teachers – with maybe a few hours a week for the library.

The purpose in this article is to examine the many comments on reading and literacy which are scattered throughout the 90-minute broadcast, as well as participants’ responses to the two questions the author posed, which were directly related to literacy and to the Qids-Up project:

- Please tell us about the literacy levels at your school.
- Have the Qids-Up books been useful? How are they managed and used in your school?

In keeping with qualitative content analysis techniques, the approach in this article is to extract the threads of meaning running through the discussion, rather than to report methodically on the questions in the order in which they were posed.

Panel participants and their schools

As mentioned, the panel discussion broadcast was the result of concerns among Qids- Up managers that the project was underachieving. The author and Sandy Zinn selected five teacher-librarians to participate: Four were UWC students deemed to have valuable stories to tell the audience of teachers and principals across the province. The fifth was invited after her name appeared in a newspaper report on school libraries. All five worked in so-called township¹ schools: four in Khayelitsha, the huge township on the outskirts of Cape Town, and one in a rural community outside the city.

Muriel Moses is a Grade 4 teacher in the rural school just mentioned, which she says serves many farm workers’ children who are bused in from farms in the region. Her

library is well laid out and spacious; but it is only open at intervals and for an hour after school as she cannot leave her Grade 4 class. Muriel has a team of student library assistants, who help her each day wheel out trolleys of books to the classrooms – according to whatever projects or assignments are being undertaken. Next door to the library is a computer room with about 30 workstations where each class has two half-hour sessions each week, under the supervision of their class teachers.

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

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

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

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

stocked fiction shelves – crucial to the success of the school across the curriculum, as Helen pointed out in the course of the panel discussion.

Literacy: the raison d'être of the school library?

A sample of the replies to the author's first question on why participants had taken responsibility for their libraries revealed their belief that improving literacy levels would compensate for the poverty and restrictions of the surrounding communities.

Our school had a big room at one point and that library, the library had not been used for a long time. So it was a white elephant and it was, the place was used as a dump site. ... And then I decided to take up the chance. I went [to a workshop at UWC] and, that workshop, you know, it got me thinking that maybe I could come and make a difference in our school because our school has a very low literacy level so from then on the whole thing just began (Samukelo)

Because my school is situated in a squatter camp, which is a disadvantaged area, there are few libraries around. ... At my school I have a corner for teenagers where they can learn when they think they are playing. Like teenagers, how to keep yourself healthy, learn about sexuality, teenage pregnancy and so on. And then when they go to class and their teacher gives them projects relevant to what they have been thinking they're playing about. You see so now they know everything about it because they learn it from the library. (Faith)

The theme continues on being asked why their school *needs* a library. Muriel pointed out that her school's farmworker families have no other access to reading materials, and that, now with an active library, the children keep asking: "*When are we going to the library?*"

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

Helen's reply was significant, given that her school is designed to nurture science and technology. She noted that higher English marks as a result of her fiction collection had led to higher marks in other subjects:

I think very soon all of the staff saw such dramatic improvements in performance that they had to concede that it was very, very beneficial. I mean our English matric average went up to over 70%, and we had a major improvement in mathematics and life sciences. And also for the very first time our kids who were very bright suddenly started succeeding at the academic universities like UCT, which they hadn't done before however bright they were, because their worlds were so narrow. And I reckon that the library and reading has played an immense role in that. (Helen)

Helen's point on the benefits of reading fiction for her students' future university studies was suggestive of the research in the social and cultural aspects of literacy (see, for example, Dunsmore & Fisher 2010). Later on, she came back to the point to emphasise that although her school's highly intelligent students were gaining entry into good university programmes, the drop-out rate was too high. She attributed this to the barrenness of their township environment, which leaves them out of their depth at university. She claimed that her fiction campaigns around such teen bestsellers as Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series had helped prepare her students to take their places more confidently. Perhaps they built frames of reference which were useful in the lecture room and <facilitated> social interaction with their middle-class peers and lecturers (who might well seem as alien to them as Meyer's vampires and werewolves!).

Faith echoed Helen in her comment on the joy of seeing how her work in the library allows "location" (township) children opportunities to gain access to university:

And it has been a highlight in my teaching experience being involved in managing the library because I am proud to say I am changing learners' lives who are from rural [areas], who are from the location. But now because of the library they are able to improve their results and get Bachelor [pass] and be accepted at university and the universities of technology.

Impact of the library on literacy

Much of the discussion revolved around the impact of the library on their schools' literacy levels. Faith began the conversation on this topic with an acknowledgement of the low literacy rates at her school:

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

Her frustration was that she had a good collection and a spacious room, but the library was open for general use only before school and during intervals. Her strategy has been to stock the language teachers' classroom collections. She always has a car boot full of newspapers which people queue up for each day. The author's photos of groups of students scattered across the campus during interval, poring over books, show that she is making inroads.

Before Zukiswa took charge of her school's reading programme, her primary school's literacy scores were dismal, below 30 per cent. Her great achievement was her successful bid for the Biblionef container library and then using it, together with the daily reading hour, to turn around the reading culture in the school. The scores are now 76 per cent in Grades 3 and 6, and for the past three years her school has led the district in both literacy and numeracy. She proudly reported that Dr Brand, the District Manager, sends other schools to her to learn:

Yes they send me people to come and check, "Why, how have you done it?" And I always tell them, "Reading, reading." And at my school we really respect the 30 minutes reading. She provoked laughter with her description of an unexpected side-effect of the school's strict adherence to the reading period:

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

G Hart: So the book becomes like a weapon to keep problem parents away. [laughter]

Muriel then joined in with a comment on the success of what she calls her school's reciprocal reading programme. She agreed with Faith that the problem is that children just do not understand the meaning of a text, even if they are able to read it word for word or sentence by sentence. Her school has moved away a little from an insistence on silent reading. For the literacy hour she now sends out books to classroom teachers who read with their children and discuss the books with them. As a result, her school recently improved its literacy scores to between 60 and 70 per cent.

Helen's school does not have a literacy period; she claimed it was not needed as the school had a strong reading culture, as evidenced by the frequent use of her library. But she referred to her NGO's work in other schools in Khayelitsha, in commenting on the benefits of the reading period and pointing out how crucial the support of the principal is:

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

Helen provoked loud laughter when she admitted to being addicted to teen literature. It was interesting to hear how the library has changed her life. She used to be an English teacher at the school, but it is through her library work that she has turned around the reading culture:

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

absolutely ... I'm an addict. [laughs]

Conclusions

Clearly, there has to be some caution in drawing conclusions from a discussion among only five people. However, the discussion provides convincing evidence that, despite working in the “trenches”, these teacher-librarians are making a difference in their schools. It is hoped that sharing their stories will contribute insights into how individuals can bring about change through their library work. As Flyvbjerg (2006:228) points out in his defense of case study, small-scale qualitative studies can indeed contribute to the larger understanding of an issue – their value coming from their “force of example”. Samukelo described her satisfaction at being a change agent:

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

It was refreshing to hear the panelists associate libraries with renewal and with the future. They understand that their libraries could be dynamic multimedia learning centres, and they are unanimous in the satisfaction they take in seeing evidence of their impact, despite the challenges they face.

Both Muriel and Zukiswa could point to dramatically improved literacy scores. Muriel's pride in her results was evident, on being asked what she likes about her library work:

That is why I love being in the library. Love seeing the results that comes from just being there and helping others and helping the children. And the teachers, of course.

Her plaintive appeal just after these positive words received warm support from the others: “*And I just hope that one day I'll be able to spend most of my time in the library. That would be really really lovely and it would benefit the whole school.*” The lack of time in the library is the key challenge they all face – except Helen. But, of course, the sustainability of Helen's voluntary position has to be questioned. Five themes emerged from the broadcast:

1. The five panelists were revealed to be exceptional people. The depth of their insight was impressive. The broadcast discussion led to a more reflective discussion in the classroom with the subsequent intake of ACE students, and the author is confident similar stories will emerge if the broadcast were repeated with another group;
2. Within two pages of the transcript, the participants used the word “passion” three times. They agreed to take on the library out of a sense of curiosity and concern over literacy scores. They all admitted that they had little idea of what they would be in for, but once involved in the work they experienced a sense of joy and passion;
3. Their commitment and hard work are admirable. Four had two full-time jobs; Helen worked five days a week without pay;
4. Closely linked to their passion and commitment was their vision. They had a clear sense of the role of the library and its literacy work in improving their schools and broadening the horizons of their students;

5. Pride in their achievements and new skills was clear. They recognised that they have become different as teachers and as people.

Despite their precarious position, these teacher-librarians offer positive news for the profession of school librarianship. They all agreed that they had developed new identities. In the extract below, at first Zukiswa hesitated to take the title of “school librarian” because she did not hold an official school librarian post, but she then firmly corrected herself:

*Before I was a school librarian ... In fact, I'm not a school librarian full time, the levels of literacy at my school were very low ... **But I'm a school librarian.** [emphasis added]*

Faith's pride in her achievement is clear:

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

This pride is justified, yet it raises questions for the LIS profession in South African. For example: *How will Faith sustain this commitment if her school continues to expect her to do two jobs? How much more could the panelists be achieving if they were freed of their classroom teaching to focus on their library work? What support should the library profession be offering them?*

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Note

- 1 In South Africa a township school, on the whole, is understood to be a historically disadvantaged school serving black communities. The historically “white” “advantaged” suburban and inner-city schools have more diverse student bodies, as their superior facilities attract many township residents.

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