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“Don’t They Know How Important It Is?” A Case Study Of Information Literacy Education In A Small South African Town

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Abstract The paper comes out of a month-long case study of information literacy education in two public libraries in a small South African town in the rural province of Mpumalanga, undertaken in October 2004. The participant observation study is the second phase of a two-phase mixed methods study, which explores the capacity of public libraries in South Africa for information literacy education – in the context of the dire shortage of school libraries. The focus in the second phase is on the connections between public libraries and schools. However, the relations between the two libraries and their staff members are found to impact on these relations with the study finding that historical context and the conflicts arising from unequal positions of power impact significantly on information literacy education in the town. The paper concentrates, however, on just two threads of enquiry: the views of teachers and principals in the seven schools of the town on the educational role of libraries as revealed in interviews; and pupils’ use of the two public libraries in seeking information for their school assignments. The study reveals a lack of cognizance of the high level demands of information-seeking in libraries among the teachers. They tend to see the library as a warehouse from which things are “fetched”. The study finds a paradox – a gulf certainly exists between the public libraries and schools but the gulf comes from shared limited conceptions of the educational role of public libraries and of information literacy. The intense gaze of the participant observation contributes a nuanced understanding of the challenges for information literacy education in South Africa.

Introduction

The paper reports on a participant observation case study which was undertaken throughout October 2004 in the two public libraries of a small rural town in South Africa, given the pseudonymous name of Woodsville. The case study is the second phase of a study in the rural province of Mpumalanga, which set out to investigate if, in the context of dire shortages of *school* libraries, public libraries in South Africa might assume an enhanced responsibility for the information literacy education of school learners.

Phase 1 of the study, an interview survey of a sample of public librarians in Mpumalanga, found ambivalence among its public library respondents towards their curricular role with widespread doubts over where such a directly educational role should be expected of public libraries. However, it also found a dawning recognition that they had no choice but to intervene – given the obvious needs of their young users and the shortages of resources in schools. The focus in Phase 2 is on the relations between public library and school. Bundy’s study of the role of Australian public libraries in information literacy education highlights the importance of close relations between public libraries and their local schools. He suggests that the “shared endeavour” of information literacy education demands an end to the professional insularity he found among the librarians in his survey (2002: 68).

The aim in this paper for the Research Forum of the International Association of School Librarianship is to demonstrate the value of the research methodology as much as report on the findings. The relationship between the two phases of the study is complex. The first phase “informs” the second by uncovering certain threads of interpretation and questions to follow up. However, the second phase case study of information literacy education in the Woodsville public libraries starts afresh - open to alternative or contradictory interpretations (Klein & Myers, 1999: 76). In participant observation or ethnographic case study the researcher is “present to participate, observe and/or interview” (Wolcott, 1992: 32). The extended observation and iterative interviewing of the month-long second phase looks closely at the relationships between the staff of the two library branches and at their relationships with the surrounding schools, in order to explore the inhibiting and facilitating factors in an information literacy programme in a public library. It, in addition, explores the attitudes of educators in the Woodsville schools towards the educational role of the library – something the public library survey of Phase 1 could not do. The data, discussed in this paper, come from a variety of sources and range across various times in the field study, for example:

- observations of interactions and incidents
- formal interviews and follow-up interviews with the staff of the two public libraries
- informal talk with participants
- structured interviews with 22 Grade 7 and 8 educators, one teacher-librarian and seven principals
- analysis of curricular teaching and learning materials.

The web-like nature of interpretive research presents challenges for its writing up. The account that follows first sets the scene in the belief that the “unruly beast” of context cannot be ignored (Dervin, 1997); then, it follows up two threads that were unravelled concurrently:

- The first leads from a failed information literacy intervention in one of the Woodsville libraries into the town’s seven schools – interviewing Grade 7 and 8 teachers to follow up the question from the Woodsville public librarian given in the title of the paper, “Don’t they *know* how important it is?”

- The second thread of discussion remains inside the public libraries in order to examine their experience of pupils' information-seeking behaviours.

Setting the scene: introduction to Woodsville

In describing Woodsville, its two libraries and seven schools, the apartheid heritage of racially based land allocation and schooling cannot be ignored, as it still impacts on school attendance and library usage. Woodsville Library is situated in the commercial centre and has four schools within walking distance, one high school, one primary school, a relatively new private English-medium school of 55 learners, and, a little further away on the other side of a ravine, a primary school in what was formerly designated the "Coloured" township, Bergsig. Hillside Library is to the north of the town in what might still be called the black or African township, some four kilometres from the town centre. The township has one high school and one primary school. Woodsville Library has three staff members, Tara Botha, the Librarian, Tenji Miti, her assistant, and a cleaner; Hillside Library has two staff members, the librarian in charge, Naledi Matolo, and a cleaner. (The names in this paper are pseudonyms as anonymity was promised).

The seven Woodsville schools exemplify the precarious position of school librarianship in South Africa. The "libraries" in the historically disadvantaged schools in Bergsig and Hillside are in fact storerooms for collections of textbooks and reference materials, clearly for the use of educators only. The library room at Forest Primary is used all day as a classroom and so is closed to other classes.

The two historically advantaged schools, Woodsville High School and Woodsville Primary, have the "standard" library rooms of the pre-1994 dispensation; but both closed them some years ago, after losing their librarian posts. The High School removed the books from the library to turn it in to a computer room with Internet access. This decision reflects clearly rather widespread perceptions among educators in the study that access to the Internet renders a school library redundant. The computer teacher at Woodsville High School articulates these perceptions:

GH *In your schooling did you have libraries? In your primary school?*

Teacher *Yes in Pietersburg we did because in those days we didn't have computers.*

GH *Do you think then that computers will take over libraries?*

Teacher *Yes Because most of the computers come out now with the whole atlas on it, the whole Encarta on it, come with the Oxford dictionaries on it....Why do all the library administration around the library when you do have access to a computer? It's much quicker. The only disadvantage that I can see is that children don't read anymore. (Interview 6 22 October)*

Two years ago, Woodsville Primary School re-opened its library which is a large apparently well stocked room. Its teacher-librarian, however, is a fulltime Grade 4 teacher. The library is viewed as her “extramural” activity and is opened at break times, by special appointment for teachers to fetch books to take to their classrooms in the school day, and for one hour on two afternoons a week. The teacher-librarian’s interview provides insight into the decline of school libraries in the advantaged sectors of South African schooling, which, before 1994, could be assumed to have well-stocked libraries staffed by full-time qualified librarians (Overduin & De Wit, 1987). Of particular interest are her comments on educators’ conceptions of the library, since they may offer some explanation for the decline, beyond the often-cited failure of Government to provide policy:

Teacher- *Yes the department scrapped the posts. About ten years ago.*
librarian *They just disregarded the posts and with Curriculum 2005 it’s a very important part of the school. What I do find about the majority of people, staff members, they are uneducated about what the activities of a librarian are. They just think it’s a packing away of books. I bought R2000’s worth of books standing in that storeroom of mine. Fortunately I have a mother who helps me cover books and the last two years I have a mother who’s computer literate and she in actual fact computerised this whole thing. [Interview 13 7 October]*

Before 1994, the school had a fulltime librarian. Obviously, there are systemic reasons for the loss of the post: all non-classroom-teaching jobs were under threat after 1994 as new teacher/pupil ratios were enforced in an effort to re-allocate resources more fairly in post-apartheid South Africa. However, the teacher-librarian’s comments on her colleagues suggest that it is their conceptions of her work – to be nothing more than “packing books” – that explain their assumption that what was a fulltime professional job can now be done in a few hours a week. They also might have contributed to their belief that the mere provision of Internet access in their computer room might replace the library programme.

Inter-library relations: the failed information literacy intervention at Hillside Library

The question in the title of this paper comes from an interview with the Woodsville librarian, the pseudonymous Tara Botha, after the failure of an information literacy initiative in the first week of the Woodsville case study. She had arranged with Hillside Primary that its Grade 7 pupils would come in groups to Hillside Library for tuition in the library’s reference sources. Tara had prepared a series of quiz-like questions and the children were to tutor one another. However, after the visit by the first group of 10 children, the second group did not turn up and soon the initiative just fizzled out. Her plaintive question reveals Tara’s frustration with the Woodsville teachers and underlie my subsequent interviews with teachers in the Woodsville schools.

Although, immediately after the children failed to turn up, the two public librarians, Tara Botha and Naledi Matolo, laid the blame on the teachers in their conversations with me, the interviewing and observations in the two public libraries in the following days led me to review this version, which I came to see as only partly “true”. In an interview after it had become clear that the initiative was to be abandoned, Tara blamed the passivity of the Hillside Librarian, Naledi Matolo, who, she claimed, had not properly planned the intervention. And, indeed, my observation times and informal chats with Naledi Matolo confirmed her boredom and wish to find another job. However, in the following extract from a more formal interview, she reveals her anger with Tara Botha and her employers that she has been overlooked in the recent restructuring of posts and pay scales:

*Why not me? Because I'm black maybe. Or because I'm at the township. Or because my library's not busy. That's not my fault...
I'm not considered and I'm not recognised. (Naledi Matolo, Interview 12 October)....*

And later, in alluding to the failed information literacy intervention, she reveals some irritation that Tara does not allow her enough autonomy:

I don't expect a thing from Woodsville. Sometimes I get – like the programme we're doing with the Grade 7s. It's the idea of Woodsville. Sometimes I do my own things here – apart from Woodsville's ideas. (Interview 12 October 2004: 7)

The revelations of the fraught nature of the relations between the two librarians recall Klein and Myers's two points that interpretive research has to be open to differences in interpretation among participants and has to confront the influence of social context on the actions under study - including possible conflicts resulting from “power, economics and values” (p. 77).

The revisions towards more nuanced interpretation in the course of a few days, described above, serve to illustrate the benefits of qualitative case study, which, according to Stake, allows ideas to be “structured, highlighted, subordinated, connected, embedded in contexts, laced with flavour and doubt” (1994: 240). The power of the methodology is that it allows for the forming, breaking up and re-forming of interpretations in the course of the study. In the preliminary interviews of Phase 1, both the Woodsville librarians had reported “very positive” relations with their local schools – and this had been a factor in my choice of site. Yet, within three days of my arrival at Woodsville, the picture was revealed to be far more complex.

Educators' perceptions of the role of the public library in education

The visits to the Woodsville schools, after the failure of the intervention with the Hillside Primary Grade 7 class at Hillside Library, were framed by Tara Botha's question. The purpose was to find out if her conceptions of the importance of the library matched those of the teachers in the surrounding schools.

The interview with the teacher in charge of Grade 7 at Hillside Primary is enlightening. In the extract below, at first he claims blandly to have a good relationship with the public library, even citing the request by Naledi Matolo to have his class visit the library. Then, as it becomes clear that I realise that the intervention failed and probe for reasons, he becomes more honest.

GH *How would you describe your relations with the public library?*

Teacher *I think “good”. Because the other day they came, the lady who’s working there came to request for some learners to come over. We have a healthy relationship.*

GH *But that effort didn’t work out did it? She took 10 and she wanted 10 more- then 10 more ...but it stopped ...*

Teacher *Yes she took 10*

GH *What happened?*

Teacher *From what I heard from the learners, they have learned something. It’s a good start. It’s a question of working together with the lady and ourselves and encouraging the learners to utilise the library as it is supposed to be.*

GH *So it was a good start?*

Teacher *Yes*

GH *I asked Naledi what went wrong when the next group didn’t come.*

Teacher *You see. You are doing a job you are charged to do. You are in the classroom to make sure learners learn. We have a problem when it comes to your classroom. When you have taken all 10 learners to the library, you must have an aim. You must be able to come back and see what you have done.*

GH *Was it that it did not fit in?*

Teacher *I think so. We would have sat together and had a timetable of a kind you know. Making a plan, revising it, making sure this thing is progressing. (Interview 17)*

Fundamentally, the Hillside educator does not seem to view the librarians as a partner in the educational programme. A lack of trust is apparent when he says:

I don’t think it’s wise to send them over there without you every time. First I think, number one, the lady over there needed to have a particular partner in the school to work with. I don’t think the people working over there in the library they shouldn’t just sit back and expect the, especially the young learners, to use the library. I think learners should know - if the teacher is not there, they do have someone there who is acting as the teacher.

In their interviews, the other two Hillside Primary Grade 7 educators are vague, with one struggling to remember the event that took place the previous week:

It happened a few months ago – No, was it last month? The librarian came here and asked the Principal whether we must group the kids so that they can pay a visit to the library. (Interview 23)

However, the Principal appears to have no recollection of the incident when I ask him later. Tara Botha clearly took too much for granted in her assumption that the school would share her enthusiasm.

I have reported elsewhere on the questions I asked of the 23 Woodsville Grade 7 and 8 teachers, in order to probe their views of the public library (Hart, 2005). On one level, the educators appear to acknowledge firmly the role of the public library in the new curriculum; yet, a series of direct questions on their use of the library in their teaching and personal lives reveals that they have very little to do with it. The open-ended questions which ask teachers to elaborate on their view of the role of the public library in the educational programme of their school provide evidence of a certain obtuseness or blankness with regard to libraries. The 19 educators who claim never to consult the public library in planning their assignments seem surprised at the question. Their explanations are instructive, for example:

It never crossed my mind.

I never thought about it.

I've never needed it.

I've never involved them. There's no reason to.

When pressed to define the role of the library in education, most describe it as supplementing the resources of the school. It is the place where children go to “fetch” information. Thus:

When we teach the kids they must then go and get resources.

They supply learners with information.

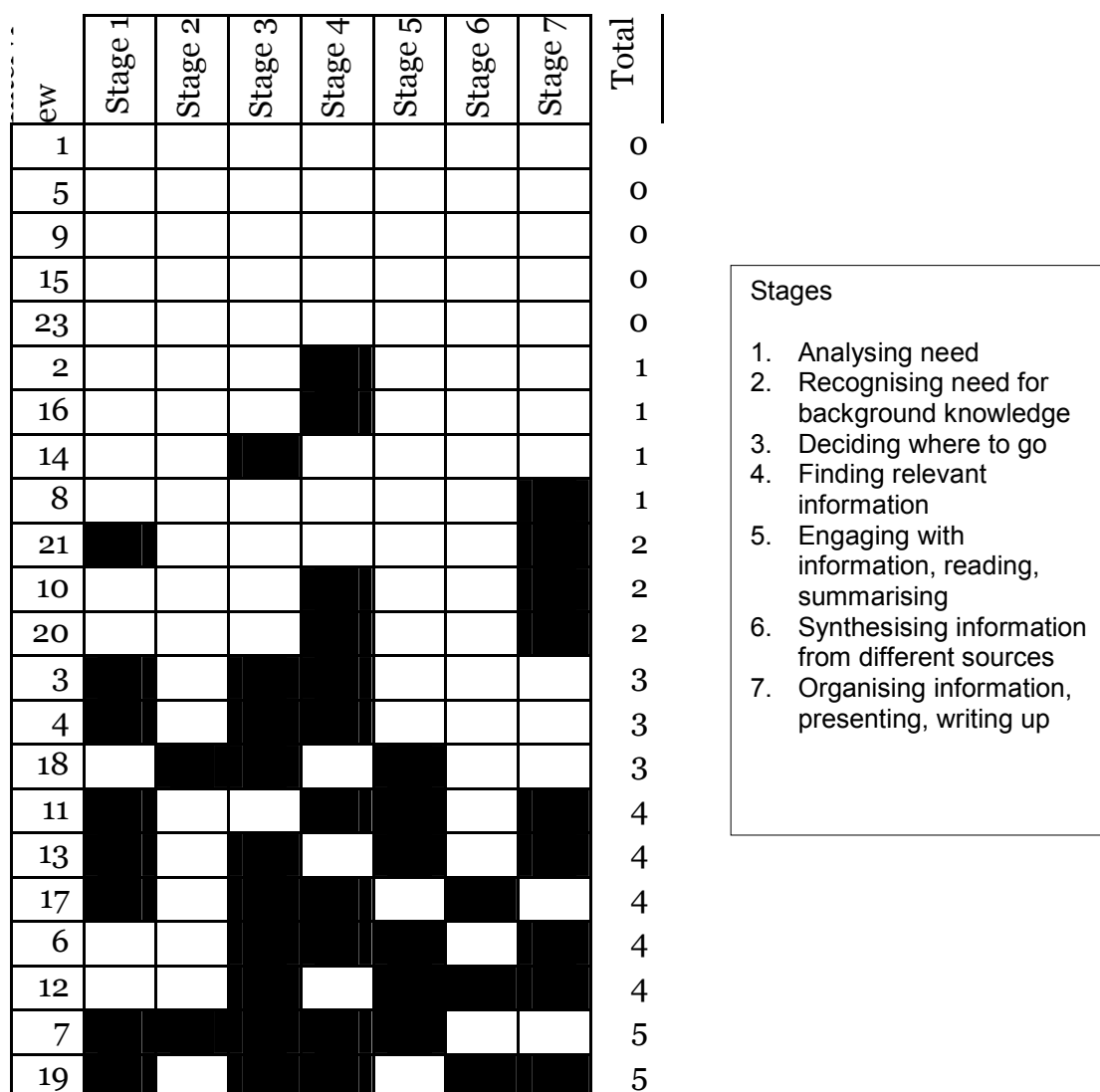
They have stuff; they have things available. They put them out on tables.

There are only four replies which allow a larger role for the public library – in the learning of their pupils rather than the above “putting out” of materials. On the whole, it seems that the Woodsville educators lack cognizance of the demands of information seeking in the library. They see it as a warehouse where librarians hand over information on demand – so why would they need to consult with library staff in planning their work?

A possible explanation for the educators' lack of cognizance of libraries might lie in their backgrounds. As Pretorius and Machet put it in their study of literacy education in schools in KwaZulu Natal, literacy behaviours are “socio-culturally constructed” (2004: 59). The interviews revealed a marked divide – between the white teachers, who were brought up with access to books and libraries, and the black teachers, who had few books at home, whose schools did not have libraries and whose neighbourhoods rarely had public libraries.

Educators' conceptions of the role of the public library in their learners' assignments must be connected to their perceptions of the skills demanded. Question 22 in their interview presents them with a school project and asks them to describe the phases or stages necessary to complete it – in keeping with the various models of the information seeking process described in the literature of information literacy education (for example Loertscher & Woolls, 1999). Figure 2 maps their replies. It shows a preoccupation with Stages 3 and 4, the “finding” of information, interestingly in common with the public librarians in the Phase 1 survey, who were asked the same question.

The major difference between the Phase 1 librarians and the Woodsville educators is awareness of Stage 7, the writing-up and presenting phase, which 43.5 percent of the Woodsville educators mention, while only 7 percent of the librarians in the first phase do so. While caution should be exercised in generalizing this to wider populations, there is clear evidence that there is some discontinuity between the views of the educators and the librarians between the sixth and seventh stages. The suggestion in Phase 1 was that public librarians perceive their work to be complete once they hand the information to the learners.



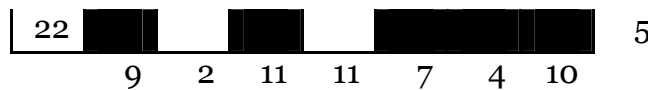


Figure 2: Educators' awareness of stages in the information seeking process

Another noteworthy difference between the two groups lies in the awareness of the role of libraries in information-seeking. Unlike the librarian respondents, most of whom see information finding in terms of the library, not one of the educators mentions “library” or “librarian” in describing the information seeking of a learner. Similarly, there is no mention of libraries in their descriptions of information literacy. It seems that libraries just do not come to mind when educators are asked to think of information-seeking.

A tentative answer to Tara Botha's question

The preceding discussion leads to the conclusion that the likely answer to Tara Botha's question is, “No”. The Woodsville educators do not know how important the public library is. It appears that educators might not connect the library with the learning needs of their learners. On the whole, the library to them is a place where information is “fetched”; the work of the librarian is to hand it over.

This conception reflects their simplistic conceptions of project work which underestimate the high-level information skills required. Most underestimate the challenges of the early phases, when the problem is identified and meaningful questions formulated. Very few show awareness of the crucial early phases where learners have to negotiate an understanding of their task through preliminary background reading and discussion (Kuhlthau, 2004). The success of project work depends on these early processes (Doyle, 1999; Branch, 2003).

Afternoon pressures

The restricted views of the Woodsville educators might explain the under-preparedness of school learners for their information seeking in the Woodsville libraries. The survey of public libraries in Phase 1 of the Mpumalanga study confirms anecdotal comment in public library circles and some previous research that the new curriculum has brought a huge increase in use of South African public libraries by school pupils – owing to their need for resources for school projects and the lack of such resources inside their schools (Maepa & Mhinga, 2003; Hart, 2004). However, the visits and interviews in Phase 1 gave only glimpses of the usage. For example, one telling photograph from the first phase shows two young girls waiting at the desk in a rural library with the shadowy figure of the librarian in the background at the shelves. They had asked for help with a project on “a South African hero”. After thinking for minute or two, the librarian had said, “Oh! I know- Chris Hani!” She then left the girls at the desk and spent a few minutes at the shelves. She returned with a book and the girls happily left the library with it.

The vignette that follows provides an opportunity for more insight into the glimpse given in the photograph from Phase 1 and serves to highlight questions on the connections between public libraries and schools and the value of participant observation.

Vignette: Woodsville Library, Friday 22 October 2004

It is 2.30pm in Woodsville Library. Every nook and cranny is crammed with bodies. It is very noisy and Tenji Miti and Tara Botha frequently call out: “Hey Guys! This is a library! Keep it quieter!” Tenji Miti approaches me with a girl she has been talking to near the photocopier, where there is a long line of school learners waiting for her to copy pages, and asks if I can help her.

GH *What do you need to do?*

Learner *It's for Afrikaans. I have to write a paragraph for Afrikaans on an illness. And I must have pictures.*

I shepherd her to the medical books in the children's section just behind the copier – hoping to find a juvenile book on illnesses in Afrikaans.

GH *Which illness?*

Learner *Which illness can I do?*

She shows me a piece of paper with some words scribbled – hoes [cough], maagpyn [stomach pain], tuberkole [tuberculosis], bors-kanker [breast cancer].

GH *Which are you interested in? Maybe you already know something about one?*

Silence from the learner. She stands looking unhappy. I guess that she wants to be “given” an illness. Seeing no easy book in Afrikaans on the shelves, I take her to the standard Afrikaans encyclopaedia set Kennis and pull down the Index volume. She hangs back so I open it up at “T” for Tuberkole and show her the reference to Volume 26 page 161. Still she hangs back so I show her that volume. Still she waits so I pull it down and open it up at page 161. I see an article, well-laid out with several pictures and diagrams. The learner glances at the pages and mutters something.

Learner *I just need a few sentences.*

GH *What do you want to find out about the illness?*

The learner looks blank. I wait for what seems a longish time but then find myself continuing

GH *How about – “What is TB?” “What causes it?” “How do you know you have it – its symptoms?” “And then maybe how it is treated?” Look – it’s all here under these headings. Why don’t you read this and take what you need. The Afrikaans is easy, there are lots of pictures, and you won’t have to translate from English.*

I now withdraw. A few minutes later I see her at the photocopier – Tenji is copying an article from World Book Encyclopaedia for her. The Kennis volume is lying on the table.

The incident shows the risks of relying on observation alone. My interaction with this student mirrors the behaviour of the public library staff, which I was observing and recording in the busy afternoons. Just as I observed them doing, I darted around the library, sometimes leaving the student standing in one place and sometimes with her in my wake. The student had no idea of my thinking processes as I went from section to section and had no interest in my explanations as I moved from book to book. What she wanted was a page to photocopy. The incident did more than just enrich my observations; it gave me direct experience of the reality experienced by public library staff and enabled me briefly to see through their eyes – one of the purposes of interpretive qualitative research.

The Vignette serves to highlight the following issues:

- the prior learning of the students in the classroom before coming into the public library
- the role of educators. The interviews with educators described in the previous section might indicate that the Woodsville educators are unaware of the high-level learning demands of project work.
- public librarians’ conceptions of their role in information literacy education. Is it their responsibility to provide a page or two to copy? Or, given the probable absence of information literacy education and library programmes in the schools, is it to intervene more positively in their education and to contribute to their lifelong learning competencies?
- the receptivity of the learners themselves to information literacy education. My attempt in the above vignette to persuade the student to define her need, for example, was ignored

A closer look at the afternoon activities in the Woodsville Library might throw light on these issues.

The Grade 9 CTA assignments

Throughout the case study month, Grade 9 learners were coming to the public libraries with assignments from the Department of Education’s *Common Tasks for Assessment (CTA) Grade 9*, in the various learning areas. The assignment on World Heritage Sites in the *Human and Social Sciences (HSS) Learner’s Book* (South Africa. Department of Education, 2004). serves to illustrate the learning challenges

evident in the busy afternoons in the Woodsville public libraries. The task is “to design and produce an information pamphlet on the Drakensberg Heritage Site” and the desired learning outcome is indicated by its heading “synthesising information”. The specific outcomes of the task are then listed as:

- the ability to understand the nature and use of sources
- the ability to deduce and synthesise information from sources and evidence
- the ability to use sources and evidence to formulate arguments and to state a position.

Immediately after the list of outcomes, the “resources needed” are listed:

- Sources B-E (paragraphs and a poem extracted from textbooks, the Constitution, and a web site, provided in the Addendum).
- A4 paper
- pen and pencil
- pictures from old journals and magazines.

The task, thus, demands some technical skills and a synthesis of information on the Drakensberg site with four “topics” being given on Page 10 as a guide to structure the pamphlet’s content. The sources provided for the task in the Addendum are selected and tailored extracts – from a web site, a textbook and from the South African Constitution. If the emphasis in the task is on “synthesis” of information, rather than say “finding” relevant information, then of course the provision of sources is perfectly acceptable. Not all tasks have to develop all aspects of information literacy (Thomas, 1999: 51). However, the stated outcome “synthesising information” suggests the provision of a few sources for each topic so that learners show they are able to organise, collate and integrate fragments of information and sometimes contradictory information (Loertscher and Woolls, 1999: 87). But each source in the Addendum seems to be geared for one of the given topics: for example the poem in Source D, headed “Another Account”, is obviously suitable for Topic 3, and Source B, with the cryptic title “Pamphlet on Heritage”, is suitable for Topic 1. However, a closer look at the content of the sources shows how badly-chosen they are. They just do not provide the information required to answer the questions in the four topics. The need to visit a library or the World Wide Web is clear, although never mentioned. Indeed, none of the CTA booklets gathered in the course of the month make any reference to library resources or to libraries, despite the reality that the CTA tasks brought scores of Grade 9 learners to the Woodsville public libraries. The oversight mirrors a general absence of recognition in South African curriculum documents of the role of libraries.

Observation, moreover, suggests that the provision of library resources or Internet access in schools would not, in itself, solve the chief challenge confronting public library staff – namely, the inadequate information skills of their users. The major problem for the public library staff on the first encounter with the HSS task on 9 October stemmed from the confusion of students, who seemed to have no grasp of the task and its demands. After an hour of running around the library looking for material on archaeology, the library staff insisted on seeing the CTA booklet and then

understood the assignment and the students' confusion. The students had presented Tara Botha with Topic 3 written on a piece of paper:

How did the early inhabitants relate to their environment and to nature?

What significance did nature play in their belief systems?

There was no clue in these sentences as to which "early inhabitants" were referred to. The students were working only on that topic and were unable to articulate that they needed information on the early inhabitants of the Drakensberg. The wording of Topics 3 and 4 assumes that the learners will see them in relation to Topics 1 and 2. A closer look at the instructions revealed that all four topics were to be done by all the groups. Having misread the instructions, the learners were attempting Topic 3 in isolation.

This encounter and the one described in the Vignette above recall the insistence of Kuhlthau and other information literacy theorists on the crucial importance of the early phases of the information search process, which was alluded to earlier. Both the Grade 9 HSS students and the girl in search of information on illnesses were "lost" because they were trying to focus prematurely. Without the groundwork of some background knowledge and context, it is perhaps inevitable that the public librarians' attempts to help them are unsatisfactory. To verify this statement, ideally these groups of learners should have been followed home and back to their classrooms for ongoing observation but this was beyond the scope of the study. However, the participant observation inside the libraries suggests three contributory factors:

- students themselves lack insight into the process of information literacy. They do not know what they need and are impatient if they are not quickly handed pages to copy.
- learners' reading in English is often inadequate. They struggle to make sense of library materials and, as in the above example, often just do not understand instructions given in their assignments.
- the individual learning support that is required to fill gaps is difficult in public libraries in the afternoons. In working with one student or one group, the librarian has to ignore the growing queues of learners, for example at the photocopier.

Conclusions

The above discussion has described two threads of enquiry: the interviews with educators and the participant observation study inside the Woodville public libraries. The threads, however, have to be intertwined to gain a nuanced understanding of the Woodville reality. For example, evidence from the educators' interviews indicates that the majority of the 23 educators believe that their learners are acquiring information skills at school - with many of the 15 saying confidently that they learn the skills via assignments and projects. However, observation in the libraries and interviews with library staff contradict their optimism. Many of the learners who flock to the public library in the afternoon lack information skills. They lack the cognitive strategies required by project work, being unable to formulate relevant questions, to analyse the problem, to browse to build background knowledge,

to analyse and evaluate information. Many are demonstrably unable to do more than photocopy pages from books handed to them by the public library staff.

At first sight, the chief assertion of the case study in terms of information literacy education is paradoxical. Woodsville educators and librarians are divided; yet their division comes from shared views of the role of the public library in information literacy education. The Woodsville educators almost all see the library as a warehouse of information sources and of reading materials; the public library staff, in their turn, see information literacy education in terms of library orientation and what Kuhlthau calls “source-based” instruction (1993; 2000). This shared view restricts the role of the public library in the learning programme and perhaps explains the impasse public libraries experience. Unless the public library establishes itself as a partner in the curriculum, it cannot do more than merely cope with the hectic afternoon use of their facilities by ill-prepared learners. Both educators and librarians have incomplete conceptions of the “process” of information literacy – of how the phases of information seeking are interdependent. The result is that the crucial importance of the cognitive negotiations involved in the early phases of the information seeking process is under-estimated. Tara Botha and the other library staff know the symptoms because they see them every day; but their library orientation programmes and once-off reference book quizzes will probably not be the cure.

The paper has hopefully demonstrated the value of the participant observation methodology. The weaving together of ongoing observation, iterative interviewing and analysis of documents allows for the triangulation of findings and the continuous sceptical revising that Klein and Myers (1999) contend are the hallmarks of good qualitative research. For example, different participants’ various and shifting versions of the failed information literacy intervention at the beginning of the study provide a richly nuanced picture. No one version is **the** right one. Historical context and the conflicts arising from unequal positions of power are found to impact significantly in information literacy education in the town – a finding that would be perhaps impossible to uncover in once-off interviews or snap-shot visits.

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