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Providing Books to Rural Schools through Mobile Libraries

Abstract

International literacy tests, such as PIRLS show that South African primary school learners compare negatively with their peers in other parts of the world. Added to this, learners in rural schools in the country perform significantly worse than their peers who attend schools in urban areas, with the former learners also having other challenges, such as poverty and poorly resourced schools. In order to support literacy in South Africa, SAPESI and other partners initiated a project where mini-buses are converted into mobile libraries, and books are provided to schools without permanent libraries. This paper reports on research that was commissioned by the Free State Department of Education, and sponsored by the Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical assistance, to appraise the work of these mobile libraries. Findings show a commitment by the staff involved to contribute to the development of marginalised learners attending rural schools.

Keywords: mobile libraries, literacy, rural schools

Introduction

Kofi Annan, former UN chairperson, once indicated that “literacy is a bridge from misery to hope ... a platform for democratization” (<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/literacy>). The ability to read with comprehension is essential, particularly in a developing country, such as South Africa. Yet Zimmerman and Smit (2014), based on the opinions of several authors, point out that the reading comprehension of primary school learners in South Africa is of a poor standard. South African learners performed far below par in both the PIRLS 2006 and the adapted prePIRLS 2011 tests. Van Staden and Bosker (2014, p. 7) recommend that in order to address this deficit, reading in the classroom, beyond the “formally scheduled reading time” during language lessons, is required to overcome this obstacle. According to Applegate and Applegate (in Van Staden and Bosker, 2014), teachers should create classrooms that encourage learners to engage in reading, and the teachers themselves should be role-models who enjoy reading. It is of particular importance to address this problem in rural schools as learners in these schools performed significantly lower in the abovementioned tests than their peers who attend schools in urban areas (Nkosi, 2012, p. 1). Nkosi (2012, p. 1) quotes Vijay Reddy, executive director at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), who indicates that if “you improve [rural] schools you improve the national scores”.

The Free State province is one of nine provinces in South Africa, and regarded as a rural province. In the context of South Africa, there are different scenarios for rural schools. In all five districts, many schools are situated on farms some distance from towns. The majority of the learners who attend these schools live in dismal conditions, and most of these schools are quite small, often with only one or two teachers teaching all the grades. In two of the five districts in the Free State Province, a number of schools are also situated in the former “native homelands”, where people today still live in poverty and neglect (Gardiner, 2008, p. 9). Only

some of the schools have electricity and running water, and at many of the farm schools, learners and staff members have to use pit toilets as no proper ablution is available. Gardiner (2008, p. 14) argues that: “there is a crises in the whole of South African education system, and that this crisis is most serious among learners in rural schools”.

According to Nkosi (2012), Sarah Howie, the director of the Centre for Evaluation and Assessment and the research coordinator for PIRLS in South Africa, indicates that schools need resources to improve learner performance but many schools are without libraries. Paton-Ash and Wilmot (2015) confirm that only 7% of state schools have stocked libraries. In order to support literacy in South Africa and to address the deficit of infrastructure to provide reading books to rural schools, since 2007 SAPESE and other partners¹ have been sponsoring mobile libraries for all nine provinces in South Africa. In the Free State Province, these libraries are managed by the District Teachers Development Centre (DTDC) staff members. Towards the end of 2014, the Free State Department of Education, in collaboration with the Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical assistance (VVOB) commissioned the University of the Free State to embark on a participatory action research project aimed to:

- improve research capacity within the DTDC;
- describe the work that the mobile libraries do; and to
- appraise the effect of the mobile libraries on schools and learners, towards improving their functionality.

This report provides a synopsis of the findings of this research project that will conclude in July 2016.

Methodology

We used a Participatory Action Research approach. The participants in the research projects are the resource coordinators, library subject advisors, library assistants, mobile library operators and teachers and principals in 10 of the schools that are visited by the mobile libraries. The study followed a qualitative approach, using interviews, documents, focus group discussions and observations as strategies to collect data.

Research and other training

In order to develop research capacity, and also to enable the project to have a participatory nature, a number of workshops were held throughout the project. Initially information about research was shared and then the details of the project were collaboratively planned. In follow-up workshops, the participants were provided with information in terms of data analysis and report writing, and an observation sheet was collaboratively developed to assist with describing how the

¹ Sony collects children’s books globally; The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs provided funding; Mitsui OSK Line transported the mobile libraries from Yokohama to Durban; JTI SA and Sumitomo Corp. provided financial support; Honda SA provided generators; Volcano Advertising provided PR and Marketing support; Toyota SA, Nissan SA, Isuzu Truck SA and Mitsubishi Corporation provided vehicle maintenance support.

library books are used. One of the action plans that was implemented was the facilitation of a short workshop for mobile library operators and library assistants to bring them on board in terms of where the project was going, but also to provide them with particular information that they requested.

Findings

Functioning of the mobile libraries

The mobile libraries are mini-buses that have been converted into libraries. Books, mainly provided by the sponsors, are stocked on shelves on the inside of the vehicles, and in the case of the newer buses, also on the outside. The appearance particularly of the first set of buses is appealing. One participant stated “*The physical appearance of the bus is intriguing and seems fun for the learners. They give it joyful attention when we arrive*”.

Each of the five districts have one or two media subject advisors, a resource coordinator (experienced, senior, qualified educator) who, amongst other things, manages the mobile libraries in the district. Each district has 2 mobile libraries, each with a mobile library operator (driver) and a library assistant. The minimum requirements of these two posts are grade 12, and the mobile library operators must have an appropriate driver’s licence and annually obtain a public driver’s permit. Many of these staff members, however have post-school qualifications.

The mobile library operators are responsible for driving and taking care of the bus, and also help the library assistants when packing the bus with books from the stock-holding at the DTDC. As many of the schools that are visited are without electricity, the mobile libraries are equipped with generators. Each bus is equipped with a laptop, a scanner and a printer. From Mondays to Thursdays, the mobile libraries travel to different schools, where the library assistants issue books to the school using an electronic issuing system (LIBWIN). The school then receives a printout of all the books that are issued. Upon return to the DTDC, the data are transferred to the mainframe of the LIBWIN system.

Owing to the many schools that are visited (between 50 and 80 schools per district) and the distances that the mobile libraries have to travel, schools are usually visited between one and three times a term. When the mobile libraries visit the schools again, they collect the previous books, and new books are issued. At some schools, the teachers select the books, and at others, learners are invited onto the bus to select books. It often happens that the Intermediate Phase learners and their teachers select books, while the Foundation Phase teachers select books for their learners. Most teachers keep the books in their classrooms, in what they call corner libraries (mainly a simple carton box or a desk). Even if a particular pupil selects two or three specific books, in the end, all the other learners in the class are afforded the opportunity to read them, because they returned to the corner library. At only a few schools are the learners allowed to take the books home, as the teachers are concerned that the learners will not return the books in good condition.

At the start of the term, the school visit programme is given to the schools. This is a challenge in itself, because communicating with the schools is problematic (no landline, fax machines or email facilities available). Mostly, the mobile library staff

members confirm their visit in the morning by calling to a teacher's cellular phone, although this is quite costly.

Each DTDC centre packs and organises the bus according to needs in that particular district. At most centres they use a combination of the Dewey classification system, and age appropriate reading (splitting Foundation Phase and Intermediate Phase fiction). In some of the buses the books are also sorted according to language. Often the books are packed with only the backs of the books visible, but in others, books are placed "*with the cover facing the teachers. It saves time and they can immediately see what is available*". The library assistants and the resource coordinator jointly plan which resources to load, as the resource coordinator is the one with the knowledge about the teaching profession while the library assistants know the needs of the schools.

Value of the mobile libraries

When the mobile libraries get to the schools, it is not just an administrative exercise of issuing books. The mobile library operators and library assistants usually interact with the learners. They will talk to the learners about the books, and inquire about why they chose a particular book. Sometimes the mobile library staff member will "*pick a book and ask a learner to read to them*". The positive, inviting and caring manner in which the Mobile Library staff members engage with the learners needs to be noted.

The library assistants and the mobile library operators know their resources well and are able to assist and advise the teachers on particular books, as one of them explained: "*I help the learners and the teachers to choose the books that they need to help them to be more efficient in the class*". Furthermore, the libraries specifically stock non-fiction books that "*educators can use in order to empower themselves*". In general, there is no shortage of books, as was explained by a participant: "*Fortunately SAPESI and SONY International assisted in getting donations to stock the mobile libraries. We really have a lot of books to ensure that the service to schools will continue*".

The mobile library staff members are convinced about their goal:

"We want to improve reading, especially English. Being able to communicate in English will improve the experience of learners in other subjects as English is the language of teaching and learning."

The participants are convinced that the service makes a "*difference in the learners' lives by improving literacy in the rural areas*". Classrooms have been converted to a print-rich environment. When the bus visits the schools, sometimes the teachers will call a learner to read to the class, but also the library staff members will ask some children to read to them, or tell them about the books that they have read.

In terms of how strategies are used by teachers, a participant explained that "*most of the schools have a reading period, and they use the mobile library books for that ... reading to improve reading skills and vocabulary*". In many of the multigrade classes, the books are furthermore, a great help to the teacher. When the learners of one grade are actively being taught by the teacher, learners from other grades get up and fetch a book from the library corner to read upon completion of the work that was given to them.

Most schools are keen to join the project, because of what they gain. One principal at a school that had not been serviced by the mobile library previously, explained their understanding regarding the mobile libraries as follows: “*[it is] a library brought to school to offer schools and learners access to some of the resources*”.

While this is a remarkable project, it has its own challenges.

Challenges and concerns

The long distances that library staff travel and particularly, the gravel roads that are in a poor condition, can be hard on the staff members, but also on the vehicles. They often have to deal with breakdowns. On the positive side, some of the service providers that are contracted at the centres provide speedy and excellent service to get the vehicles back on the road again.

Although the participants appreciated the number and the quality of the books that they have available, more books written in African languages are needed. Furthermore, some concerns were raised regarding the books that learners select.

Many intermediate learners take out only very simple books, and often Walt Disney stories only. The library staff believes that due to television, they might be familiar with the story and believe that there must be a way of encouraging them to read unfamiliar stories. Furthermore, primary school learners seem to be under the impression that they must borrow only story books. At one school that I visited, the teachers were upset because a primary school learner took a large non-fiction book that did not fit into the library corner. The learners were then explicitly instructed to select only small books. On the other hand, secondary school teachers seem to believe that their learners are supposed to take out only non-fiction books. One participant explained: “*Secondary schools only take non-fiction books, claiming that learners need those. This prevent the learners from reading for enjoyment.*”

The mobile staff expressed their unease about many teachers rigidly sticking to the departmental workbooks and wanting the learners to read only curriculum related materials.

In view of the challenges and concerns mentioned, and the nature of participatory action research to take action towards improvement, I need to note a number of initiatives and strategies that emerged.

Strategies towards improvement

The mobile library operators and library assistants are key factors in the success of the mobile libraries. It seems that the different resource coordinators take it upon themselves to contribute to the development of these mobile library staff members. One of the library assistants explained: “*Since I started here, we go to various workshops where they taught [sic] us how to use the books*”. During the research project, the UFS also provided the mobile library operators and library assistants with some training, although a number feel that they still need further clarity on reading strategies and on dealing with difficult customers and unresponsive schools.

In one district the mobile staff members are planning to prominently display some non-fiction and various age appropriate story books to stimulate interest. In addition, some mobile library operators and library assistants have decided to talk informally to the individual learners while they are browsing through the displays

and point them to some books, based on the interests of the learners. One resource coordinator decided to address this at the next training opportunity for the teachers at the DTDC. One district furthermore, wants to also involve parents, and is thus planning “*a road show, maybe at a large school, and invite the parents. It is important that they see the value of reading*”.

It was suggested by one of the staff members that the resource coordinators should specifically provide “*a workshop for the farm school teachers on how to use library books complementary to the curriculum books*”. Flowing from this, a group of research participants a training programme on how to use resources effectively in the classroom is being developed by.

It is a problem that schools do not want the learners to take books home, thus the one district is in the process of obtaining kits from a NGO called READ that will show the learners how to take care of library books.

To overcome the challenge of books often not being available in the African languages, some districts mentioned the possibility of doing translations of the English books that are available for Foundation Phase learners, and paste these on the same page as the English print. Not only will that allow learners to read in their mother tongue, but also create the opportunity for them to acquire English at the same time. This possibility needs to be followed up.

Even though it is not their responsibility, most of the mobile library operators see their task as beyond the driving of the buses. They also engage with the learners when they come to the bus to collect books and in that way, become a second library assistant providing service to the schools. Similarly, some of the library assistants also have the required driving licences and PDP licences, thus assisting with the driving of the buses.

Conclusion

The aim of the mobile libraries is to provide the learners and teachers at rural and farm schools with books, and that is what they are doing as best as they can. While the mobile libraries cannot make up for challenges in teaching and learning or in infrastructure, the learners and the teachers are provided with resources to encourage reading and stimulate literacy development. The importance of the role the mobile library operators and library assistants play, is invaluable. As these people are the link between the books and the children, their professionalism and enthusiasm need to be applauded. This endeavour truly serves as an example to the international community about providing education to marginalised children.

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