

Students' effective use of the library as an Information Resource Centre – a case of Senior Secondary Schools in Botswana

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Abstract

This paper investigated the extent to which secondary school students make use of school libraries. It pursued this objective by first looking at the history of libraries; the concept of a library and the important role libraries play in society; how libraries world-wide have been lately under-funded and the effects thereof. The theoretical aspect of the paper was located in the school effectiveness literature. The empirical investigation was done using questionnaires administered to fourteen randomly selected high school classes of about 38 students each, the teacher librarian, and the school library. The paper concluded that although students satisfactorily use libraries, this is constrained by poorly funded and poorly stocked libraries.

The investigation concluded that students' effective use of libraries is affected by low budget allocations to school libraries which have in many ways imposed restrictions on students' use of the facility. Despite this constraint, students have been reported to make satisfactory use of libraries. The problem of school libraries under-funding is also a problem currently experienced by developed countries that have better established library systems.

Conceptualisation

The Alexander library in Egypt opened around 1304 is believed to be the first library to be established (Collier, 1992). The Egyptians were very proud of their library and referred to it as "the medicine for the soul" (Collier, 1992). The Greeks and the Romans took a cure from the Egyptians and soon established libraries of their own. It is not surprising therefore that some of the all time great philosophers, engineers and mathematicians come from these countries. Libraries are associated with knowledge, information, and skills. Successful countries are those with big volumes of library books covering a wide range of subjects. The University of South Africa (UNISA), a regionally and internationally renowned distance learning centre established in 1873, has a mega library that stocks more than 1.5 million volumes and other items (UNISA, 2004).

Introduction

This project investigated the extent to which secondary school students in Botswana made effective use of school libraries. It also sought to find out if there were any barriers to the effective use of these libraries. The method adopted invited the views of the students, the substantive school librarians, and the teacher librarians through the use of a questionnaire.

In the United States, the history of secondary school libraries can be traced to the last half of the 19th century, to 1876 (Ramsey). Before then, secondary schools received services from public libraries. Such service continued into the early part of the 20th century even after the establishment of the first school library (ibid). In Botswana, following the introduction of secondary education in the 1940s, school libraries, for instance at Moeng College (until the early 1970s), St. Joseph's College and Swaneng Hill School operated from a classroom. Today all senior secondary schools have a purpose-built library. In South Africa, the vast majority of schools have no functional library. Over 60% of schools have no library materials. For example, in the Eastern Cape Province 93% of schools do not have libraries (South Africa Partners Inc.)

A library is not made of books only. Graphic materials, newspapers, magazines, audio and vision equipment are some of the many contents of libraries. 'Books', however, is the popular term for these varied contents of a library. A school library can store a collection of books on its shelves but if the books are not read the collection ceases to be called a library. Only when the materials in the library are used can it be called a library (Collier, 1992). The purpose and not the size is a factor that determines whether a collection of books forms a library. The discussion of this paper is made in the context of a library as a place where a collection of books is kept for public use. Whereas the explicit aim of this study is to investigate pupils' use of school libraries, and to assess the state of school libraries, the study also seeks to determine whether those buildings in schools called libraries are libraries in the sense of usage or purpose.

Purpose and benefits of libraries

Traditionally the teacher was a purveyor of knowledge and information since the print and electronic media were almost non-existence. The teachers heavily relied on memory of what they had learnt some years back during their school days. This type of teaching was not effective as it encouraged rote learning. It is when pupils discover things for themselves that the lifespan of such information and knowledge is elongated. Modern teaching methods emphasize this by encouraging learners to participate actively in their own education in order for them to fully understand and appreciate the meaning of what they learn and not always expect to be told what to do. Information is always there in the library, the duty of the teacher is to teach the pupils how to unravel it. Libraries after all, provide more detailed information than a teacher can ever provide. Studies in fourteen schools in the United States have shown that well-equipped libraries, staffed with trained librarians have a positive influence on student success, regardless of the student's socio-economic and educational background (Hatfield, 2005). Successful schools are therefore not those whose students depend on the teachers as reservoirs of information and knowledge, they are those whose students optimise the use of school libraries.

Schools do not only teach pupils the traditional subjects, they develop the child to participate meaningfully in the world it is going to live in as an adult (Wray, Medwell, Poulson & Fox, 2002), which includes the teaching of societal values (Everard & Morris, 1990; Dreikurs, Grunwald & Pepper, 1998). The library as an integral part of the school, if properly utilized, can play an important role in this regard. A library, in the words of Fafunwa (1991) and Aluede; Jimoh, Agwinede and Omoregie (2004), is "a store house of knowledge". Libraries, it is argued,

can reinforce concepts introduced during lessons of the day and can link what is taught in the classroom to life in the outside world. The library should therefore be viewed in the light of a shift from oral instruction to reading or research that enhances knowledge acquisition.

Constraints to effective library learning

In a number of countries, both developed and developing, funding for the school library is directly linked to the state budget. The dwindling instead of increasing library budget allocations in many countries is an issue of disturbing concern. A concerned educationist in the United States wrote: "If libraries become unimportant, it seems to me that we dilute ourselves as a society" (Hatfield, 2005). In the United States funding for school libraries has dropped 97% from \$26 per student per year to 75 cents (Ibid). Schools in the UK and Canada are experiencing similar cutbacks (Durand, M & Waltman Daschko, M, 2001). Senior secondary schools in Botswana are allocated P25 or US\$5 per student per annum. This figure has been constant for at least the last five years or so and it continues to lose value as the price of library materials rises every year. The cutbacks in library budgets have meant that fewer books can be bought with less funding and this has an effect on the students' learning. The views by Everard and Morris (1990) and by Wray *et al.* (2002) above suggest that libraries make some impact on children's development in one way or the other. Some exploration is made on views on school effectiveness particularly the role the library plays in school effectiveness.

Views on effective schools

School effectiveness criteria can be viewed in the context of the different school clients that are drawn

from multiple stakeholders. The definition depends on what the definer considers is important to them (Hoy & Miskel, 2001). The economist for example may view a school's effectiveness on the basis of the efficiency at which it uses its budget expenditure. A parent, on the other hand, may use a comparison with other schools in public examination results to determine a school's effectiveness. The latter criterion is the most commonly used by people including policy makers and teachers (Haber & Davies, 2001). Schools that show a comparatively higher percentage pass rate are regarded as more effective. It is inconceivable; however, that academic achievement can be realized without pupils' wide use of the library to expand their knowledge. School effectiveness and pupils' library usage, it is argued, are intricately and necessarily linked. The conceptualisation of this paper, therefore, is located in the effective schools literature.

Fidler (2002), like Haber and Davies (2001) also submits that students' test scores are narrowly used as the principal measure for school effectiveness. By using such simple statistical criterion, sight is lost on the broader picture of what school effectiveness really entails (Houliham, 1988). To a prospective students' employer, test scores as the descriptors of success or effectiveness may not be dynamics at play. If one is looking for breadth of knowledge and the intellectual development of the child, using the criterion of academic achievement only is a wrong yard stick. The way examinations are structured does not quite measure skills and intellect. More than these aspects, they measure memory retention. That is, the pupil's ability to remember and reproduce facts and information without necessarily understanding. This approach to examinations has encouraged pupils to overly depend on prescribed texts more than on library books and

material as supplementary sources. It also has encouraged teachers to teach to the test. Prescribed texts, while they may help pupils pass examinations, are not always up-to-date because teachers sometimes recommend books they are comfortable with and sometimes books they have used when they were pupils. As appropriately put by Everard and Morris (1990):

Any vocational knowledge and skills acquired may well be out of date by the time the pupil seeks a job. Indeed in scientific or technical subjects, what is being taught in the schools and universities has already been superseded as it is being taught. The future of children holds fewer 'carriers' of a structured kind. Those who are to succeed will have to jump from raft to raft of new skills as their existing skills and knowledge becomes redundant (191).

Essentially, Everard and Morris's perspective further cements the argument that pupils' text should go hand in hand with library visits by pupils. In summary, Reynolds and Sullivan (1996) submit that school effectiveness refers to a work-centred environment where the student, following encouragement from the teacher to take responsibility of their learning, is eager to discover new information for themselves. This perspective directly links effective learning with the library as "the store house of knowledge" as described earlier.

Research that has been carried out on effective schools has shown little of a library as a factor that can contribute to school effectiveness. At best, if at all, the researchers have assumed that the achievement of pupils is always tied to their use of the library. Even accomplished writers on school effectiveness such as Hoy & Miskel; Everard & Morris; Haber &

Davies, Hanson have not highlighted the contribution school libraries can make towards students' academic achievement in their works. Often, emphasis has been on strong leadership by the principal (Hoy & Miskel 2001); a work-centred environment, an orderly environment and a shared vision (Fiddler, 2002) and parental support (Potter & Powell, 1992; Hanson 2003).

Aim of the study

The general aim of this study is to get the views of the pupils, the teacher librarians, and the school librarians on the library as a facility that serves the educational needs of students.

The aim is to be achieved through the following questions:

- (i) Do students make full use of the school libraries as resource places?
- (ii) Are school libraries adequately stocked?
- (iii) Are the materials in libraries relevant to the learning needs of the students?
- (iv) Are school library budgets sufficient?
- (v) What are the impediments to the students' use of the library?

Methodology

Research design and data collection.

The research methods were chosen upon the basis that they best addressed the above research focuses. With so much research being carried out in schools nowadays, teachers and students do not want to spend too much time answering long questions. The predominantly short answer questions to the informants addressed this concern. Basically the study is concerned with facts on the

use and status of school libraries. To this end it partly employed a quantitative design that used closed questions to capture the facts. By using this method of collecting data, a much bigger population sample can be reached and the resultant outcomes can be reasonably representative ((Best & Kahn, 1998; Gay & Airasian, 2000). Two sets of instruments were used to collect data. First, the questions were designed such that they obtain factual information from the students. The students' questionnaire was the closed type requiring one word answers. Secondly, although staff's (teacher and school librarians) questions were predominantly short answers, part of the questionnaire allowed them the opportunity to express their views on the subject in a more elaborate way. The combination of the two paradigms (quantitative and qualitative), exploited best use of strengths for both of them.

Population and sampling.

Two types of populations were targeted. First, the students who are referred to here as the primary population on account of their numbers (Bogdan & Biklen 2003) were involved. Students were selected in order to obtain first hand information as primary users of school libraries and because they are the ultimate beneficiaries of library facilities. Secondly, the teacher and school librarians, although they constituted a smaller population, were also considered key informants because of their direct involvement in the running of school libraries. The teacher librarian's role is to integrate the curriculum with the library materials. In more established and advanced school library systems, the teacher librarian is a fully qualified teacher who has taken an additional specialty course to become a librarian (Durand & Waltman Daschko, 2001).

In Botswana schools, for a long time the library has been a responsibility of the English

department. The teacher librarian was therefore a teacher of English without special training in running a library. This meant the library would be closed when this teacher was teaching unless there was a volunteer available. With the schools growth, it has become necessary to deploy the services of full-time trained librarians who are salaried. All high schools now qualify for this post because of the large students' enrolments. In addition, the Ministry of Education has started sending teacher librarians for a year's course in library studies at the local university. This arrangement has enhanced the complementary roles played by both the school and teacher librarians. The trained teacher librarian knows better what is good for the students and can therefore influence more appropriate library purchases. In addition to their main duty of keeping the library and making book issues to students, school librarians are also responsible for the library budget expenditure. The latter would therefore provide accurate and reliable statistics on book issues to students in any given period. Also, they would answer from a more informed position, the question that asked whether libraries had enough and relevant stocks. The school librarian's involvement in this type of study is therefore self-evident while the teacher librarian represents the interests of the different subjects in the schools.

There were 27 public high schools in Botswana at the time of the study. Seven, all from the southern region of the country, were conveniently selected on the basis of their relative proximity to the researcher's work place. The seven schools represented 26% of all high schools in the country. Students' samples were obtained from groups of form four and five classes. No specific class was preferred. Any form four and form five which was free at the time of carrying out the study was used. There are 38 students in each of the form four and form five classes. 532 students were therefore

targeted. All school librarians and teacher librarians from the seven schools were automatically involved. Altogether, the population sample was 546.

Procedure.

Prior to visiting the schools the researcher sought permission from the heads to use their schools for the study. This was done through the telephone for most of the schools. Schools which are nearer were visited. The communication between the researcher and the schools included asking the head to identify teachers who would help coordinate the exercise; the date and time the exercise would be conducted; and approximately how long it would take to do the questions. At each school, the researcher personally administered the questionnaires. Prior, a pilot test was run on the questions using a volunteering school which did not participate in the final exercise. From the pilot results the researcher was able to determine the level of difficulty of the questions, the appropriateness of the questions and the estimated time it would take to answer the questions. The amendments that followed the pilot helped enhance the validity of the investigation.

Data analysis.

The fact that the questions were short and easy to answer contributed to the high rate of return yielded from all the different population groups. Since the study involved large quantities of data to be analysed, particularly from the students' population, they needed a systematic way of grouping it into generic and more manageable units. The analysis of the data was done by determining the number of times the 'yes' and 'no' responses occurred. The data were then displayed using a frequency distribution table. The quantitative data from the staff were similarly treated.

This method of data analysis followed one suggested by Pendaeli (2000).

Results

What follows is an analysis of the responses according to the different sample groups. The first of the analysis is based on Table 1. Out of the expected 532 students' population sample, 524 completed the questionnaire. The table shows that most of the students use the library once or twice a week. This, it would seem, is because of the imposed restrictions on the pupils' use of school libraries. 45% of the students said they are not allowed the use of the library anytime even when they are not attending lessons. Most of the time they go to the library, they are under the supervision of the subject teacher. This was expressed by 70% of the students. Most of the students refuted the statement that they go to the library mostly during the examination. The students have shown some positive aspects of the library as follows: 64% said their libraries are stocked with relevant materials. 74% thought the students' community views school libraries as important information centres. 91% said they consult the library to augment the textbooks.

Findings from the teacher librarians

A total of six teacher librarians participated in the completion of the questionnaire. All the six expressed satisfaction with the rate at which students use the library. The material in the libraries, they all believe, was relevant to the educational needs of the students. A teacher librarian wrote: "Materials in the library include up-to-date magazines, newspapers, fiction and books all which help broaden the reader's general knowledge". Contrary to what the students said, the teachers made the observation that students use the library mostly during examination times. As will be noted

later, the teacher librarians' view is corroborated by those of the school librarians. Also, the findings show that about half the schools that participated in the investigation have timetabled library periods for some and not for all the classes.

Whereas the contents of the library are relevant, there are not enough books for the large students' enrolments. The relevance of the books to the learning needs of the students can be attributed to the realization that 66% of the schools that participated involve representatives from the students' body, the different

subject departments and the school librarians. In the other schools (33%), only the school librarian and the departments' representatives make decision on library purchases. Some individual comments on students' use of the library were that there is a high demand on the use of the library by both students and teachers. However, the books are too few to go around the large students' numbers. Coupled with lack of space in the libraries, this situation militates against students' wishes to use the library more frequently.

Table 1 Students' views on their use of school libraries

Usage indicators	Frequencies	Percentages			
• I use library between once & twice a week	300	57			
• I use library three times or more a week	87	17			
• I hardly use the library	137	26			
Sub-total	524	100			
	Yes	(%)	No	(%)	Total
I go to library mostly as part of the Class with the teacher	363	(70)	152	(30)	515
• I use library most during exams	222	(44)	287	(56)	509
• I use library only during exam	38	(8)	463	(92)	501
• Our library is stocked with relevant material to our learning needs	332	(64)	183	(36)	515
• Students view library as an important information centre	379	(74)	134	(26)	513
• There is no need to use library as text books are adequate	46	(9)	466	(91)	512
• There are restrictions to the use of the library even during students' free time	236	(45)	285	(55)	521

Findings from school librarians

Five school librarians participated in the survey. At one school the school librarian post has been vacant for a while. In another the officer was absent on the day the instrument was being administered. It

should be noted that there was a lot of commonality between the responses by the three groups of respondents, particularly between the teacher and school librarians. All the respondents in this category also rated the students' use of the library as satisfactory. In the month of March

students are restricted; there are generally, insufficient stocks in school libraries and that not all students who visit the library borrow books. Some go there to use the books and leave them there. The satisfactory rating of the library use is further supported by the students' enthusiasm and desire to have libraries opened for longer hours. There is further evidence by 91% of the students who said they do not rely on textbooks only for their studies.

Evidence from the teacher and school librarians does not corroborate that from the students on the issue of whether the students use the library more during examinations or not. The students claim they do not use the library more than any other time of the year during examinations. The other two groups view it otherwise. These conflicting views raise some argument on the issue. Libraries still remain the quietest places in the densely populated educational institutions in Botswana. They are tranquil places where one can do studies with maximum concentration. Not only are they quiet places, some libraries are fitted with air-conditioners. Given these facts and the fact that temperatures in Botswana can be very high for most of the year, students would therefore prefer libraries to classrooms for their studies, particularly for examination purposes. Since students are not barred from taking their notebooks or textbooks into the library, they can enjoy the convenience provided by the library without having to use the material in the library. Even world wide, including universities, students tend to crowd libraries more during examinations periods more than any other times. It would seem likely therefore that the teacher and school librarians made a valid point in suggesting that students use libraries mostly during examination times. Be this it may, evidence from the findings suggests that students use the library satisfactorily.

Although the materials in the school libraries are relevant to the educational needs of students as indicated by: 64% of the students; 80% of the school librarians and all teacher librarians, the number of library volumes is disproportionately smaller than the students' population. Both the teacher and school librarians blame this state of affairs on the small amounts allocated to libraries. However, as intimated earlier in this paper, the problem of library budget under-provision is not only unique to Botswana. Even developed countries such as the UK and USA are experiencing significant reduction in library budgets. The way the trend is unfolding, the arguments that classroom teaching needs to be complemented by library studies is likely to be undermined. Also, the reduced or under-provided budgets are likely to even further compromise the quality of educational standards of the students. As decried by a USA educationist early in this paper, "If libraries become unimportant, it seems . . . that we dilute ourselves in society"

A library in a society as Fafunwa (1991) and others described it, is truly "a store house of knowledge". Any society that values knowledge ought therefore to invest in libraries. The author advances the argument that the socio-economic development hopes of developing countries in particular, such as Botswana lie in the knowledge the people possess. Properly stocked, school libraries can support research, education and therefore the development of knowledge. It is important therefore that children should be encouraged to form good reading habits and be allowed to develop the skills of searching for information on their own at a tender age when they are still at school. The Botswana national vision that aspires for an informed and educated nation by the year 2016 may not be fully realized if school libraries continue to receive meagre budgets that restrict library usage by pupils. Whereas

developed countries are also experiencing reduced library budgets, the situation there cannot be compared with that in developing countries like Botswana. In the first place libraries in developed countries even if they are recently experiencing cutbacks, have over the years when their economies still permitted built stocks.

In the case of Botswana since its political independence in 1966, the Ministry of Education has, on average, been receiving the largest share of the national budget. The importance attached to education by central government has, however, not been reflected in the allocation of school libraries expenditures by those responsible for distributing funds to the various sections of the Ministry. Libraries, as has been pointed out, challenge and develop the learners' intellect and therefore are integral parts of school curricula. As a medium class economy and a small populated country (1.7 million), Botswana has the economic ability to improve school libraries contents.

Conclusion

The study concludes that in as-much-as students have the drive and motivation to use school libraries, their enthusiasm is likely to be rapidly waned by the poorly stocked libraries. Although their reasons for not using the library are not known, only 26% of the students said they hardly go to the library. The state in which libraries are in now will not reduce this percentage; instead the numbers who hardly visit the library may increase. The notion by Wray (2002) that libraries enhance the quality and breadth of students' knowledge is not a new concept. Although not new, it would seem those who have overall control over national or school budgets do not 'put the money where the mouth is'. However, despite the financial constraints, under-stocked libraries, and restricted

times for students to use the library, students still use libraries satisfactorily, the findings revealed. Collier (1992) had suggested that "only when the materials in the library are used can it be called a library". The conclusion that students satisfactorily use libraries qualifies the school libraries in Botswana, (in the sense of Collier's definition of libraries) to be truly libraries.

Limitations of the study

The following limitations should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings:

Students' attitudes towards education generally and towards the library as an information and knowledge centre can be influenced by the setting and environment in which their education takes place. These attitudes towards studies in the different sections of the country may therefore be different. The findings from this study which are from a convenient rather than a random sample and which were obtained from only one section of the country may not be representative of all high schools in the country. Future studies could consider using a stratified sample and also increase both the staff and students' samples in order to enhance generalization of the findings.

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