

School libraries and their role in promoting a reading culture: Case study of Caprivi, Omusati, Omaheke, Karas and Khomas regions in Namibia

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Abstract

The importance of school libraries cannot be overemphasized. This paper is based on a study on school libraries in Namibia which was conducted by the University of Namibia, Department of Information and Communication Studies from July 2009 to February 2010. The study covered five of Namibia's thirteen regions, namely Caprivi, Omusati, Omaheke, Karas and Khomas. The study employed a qualitative and quantitative research design using a triangulation of data collection methods including surveys, interviews, focus group discussions, and observation. Some of the questions the study aimed to answer were, "What is the state of school libraries?" and "What is their role in promoting a reading culture in Namibia?"

The World Bank (2008, p. xxi) describes how effective school libraries can be as "they provide additional reading opportunities for students, which in turn improve reading skills, comprehension and writing clarity of expressions, which in turn support student performance in all other curriculum subjects. Although the study showed the existence of libraries in all the schools; more than 80 per cent of these were not adequately resourced in terms of reading materials, equipment, and staffing. The study also established that although learners said that they liked reading there was no strong library programme to inculcate a reading culture in the learners. A number of other factors can contribute to a good or bad reading culture. These include the language of instruction and home/family environment. In Namibia, a 2011 report of the education system audit notes that proficiency in English, the language of instruction is below basic. The study concluded that the majority of school libraries in Namibia are not in a position to provide the benefits described by the World Bank above. This is evidenced by the fact that there is a high failure rate in Namibian schools. The small percentage of schools with libraries that were well run happened to have a good pass rate but in these cases the libraries were also adequately resourced, equipped and staffed.

1. Introduction and background literature

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A number of studies have been carried out on school libraries in the southern African region. Anderson and Mathews (2010) investigated the role of school libraries in Malawi in the promotion of culture, literacy and reading culture. In Botswana, Baffour-Awuah (2002), Chipunza (2001) and Metzger (2000), carried out studies on school libraries, which highlighted a number of factors hindering the growth of school libraries include; lack of qualified staff, low funding levels and divided administrative responsibilities for libraries. In a study titled "The conundrum of school libraries in South Africa", Hart and Zinn (2007) describe the current situation of school libraries by delving a little into the educational and historical context. The authors explore the educational inequalities that existed under apartheid as possible reasons for the disappointments related to school library development in South Africa since the first democratic elections of 1994. Zimbabwean studies by Doust (1998) and Nilsson (2002) cited the same problems and highlighted the problem of donated books which are often unsuitable for the learners who are expected to read them.

IFLA/UNESCO (2006) describes the school library as a centre of learning that provides information and ideas that are fundamental to functioning successfully in today's information and knowledge-based society. The school library equips students with life-long learning skills and develops the imagination, enabling them to live as responsible citizens. IFLA/UNESCO continue by arguing that the school library offers learning services, books and resources that enable all members of the school community to become critical thinkers and effective users of information in all formats and media. Sturges (2004) describes school libraries in Africa as being neglected and "Even where some semblance of a school library exists, it is frequently inadequately staffed, with an appallingly sparse collection, and is thus marginal in terms of its impact on the teaching-learning process." Ojiambo (as cited in Sturges, 2004) refers to surveys which have shown overwhelming problems, including the lack of government policy for school libraries, shortages of finance, staff, equipment and library materials.

Magara and Batambuze's 2009 study on "The School Library Development Programme in Pallisa District, Uganda: an impact study" revealed that there were a number of challenges that schools needed to overcome, such as lack of facilities (buildings) and funds for continually stocking and restocking school libraries or collections and the need for continuous skills development for teacher librarians who are appointed to the role without any specialized training.

Studies conducted in Namibia showed the problems reported by the Botswana studies (Baffour-Awuah, 2002; Chipunza, 2001 & Metzger, 2000); the Uganda study (Magara & Batambuze, 2009); Zimbabwe studies (Doust, 1998; Nilsson, 2002) and Sturges and Neill (2004) to be true of Namibia. A study conducted by the Ministry of Education (Smith et al., 2008) in Namibia points to similar problems, confirming an earlier study by the Namibia Library and Information Council (2007), which revealed that most libraries were small corners more suited to being storerooms and could not contribute meaningfully to a learning programme. However, the study further reported that libraries built in recent years and those in the previously advantaged schools were found to be big enough for the purpose they serve. As regards staffing, the same study reported that many library personnel, mostly teachers who were given library functions in addition to their other teaching responsibilities, did not have librarianship training. Some libraries were managed by general workers such as cleaners, who had limited education and were unable to speak English. Many school authorities pointed out that the Ministry staffing norms restricted them from recruiting teacher librarians or allocating library tasks more effectively (Namibia Library and Information Council, 2007).

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2. Purpose of the study

The benefits of school libraries as described by the World Bank (2008) would seem to suggest that every school has an efficient library. The literature as reviewed above however, indicates that efficient school libraries are not common in Africa. This study therefore explored the state of school libraries in Namibia. It aimed to show a link between school libraries, learning and the development of a reading culture in Namibian schools. In order to achieve this, the study used the same indicators as used in other studies, such as reading habits, study habits, library use patterns, levels of staffing, collection development and funding of school libraries.

Namibia's Vision 2030 (Office of the President, 2004) and the Education Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP) recognise the role of libraries, and in particular school libraries, in the development of the country. As the country strives to improve the culture of reading and improve literacy levels, school libraries have an important role. This study therefore sought to address the questions: "What is the state of school libraries in Namibia?" and "What is their role in promoting a reading culture?"

The research objectives were:

1. To investigate the existence of school libraries in Namibia.
2. To access how well established these libraries are in terms of funding and collection development.
3. To assess how well integrated school library activities are into the school curricula.
4. To investigate the reading habits of students with school libraries and those without.
5. To recommend interventions for effective school library systems and programmes in Namibia.

3. Research methodology

This was a multi-school study that used qualitative and quantitative research methods. The study used a triangulation of data collection methods including surveys, interviews, focus group discussions, documents search and observation.

The population was all the combined and secondary schools in Namibia. Purposive sampling, ensuring the choice of regions was well spread, was done to select five of the country's thirteen regions. These were Caprivi, Karas, Khomas, Omaheke and Omusati. Random sampling method was employed to select two schools per each of the five regions for interviews, observation and focus group discussions. The main sampling frame was the list of secondary schools from the Ministry of Education. The first sampling level was the schools; and then within the selected schools respondents comprising learners and teachers were purposively and accidentally sampled. Respondents included: school principals/heads, learners, librarians, and Ministry of Education, School Library Services administrators.

Questionnaires were mailed to all combined and secondary schools on the sampling frame. The questionnaire mailed to the schools management had both closed and open-ended questions aimed to gather data on the existence of libraries, staffing, library budget and collection development, and library programme issues. The purpose of the survey was to make the study more representative and generalisable. The response rate from these mailed questionnaires was very poor. Out of the 247 questionnaires distributed, only 39 (15.8%) were returned. The data from the questionnaires was supplemented with data

from the interviews and the focus group discussions, as well as data collected through desk study research.

Eleven focus group discussions were conducted with learners: two in each region except for Karas where there were three. A semi-structured interview guide was used for this purpose. The same applied to the focus group discussions with the teachers. Interviews with purposively selected school heads and librarians, as well as officials in the Ministry of Education Department of Educational Library Services were conducted. Documents (Education Statistics for 2008, 2009 and 2010) on school performance from the Ministry of Education were also consulted.

4. The Study's findings

This section presents the findings of the study from the questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions. Two 247 questionnaires were distributed to every combined school and secondary school as follows: Caprivi - 50; Omusati - 132; Karas - 15; Khomas - 39; and Omaheke - 11. Figure 1 presents the number of schools that responded: Khomas - 6 out of 39 (15.4%); Omusati - 24 out of 132 (18.2%); Karas - 4 out of 15 (26.7%); Omaheke - 3 out of 11 (27.3%); and Caprivi - 2 out of 50 (4%).

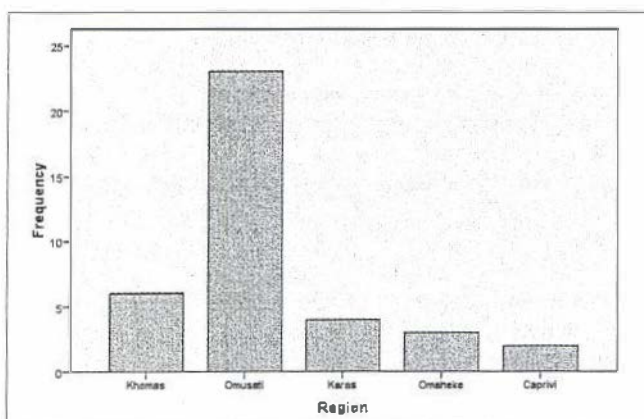


Figure 1: Respondents to questionnaires by region

Despite the poor response from the regions, data from the questionnaires was supplemented by data from the interviews and focus group discussions.

Basic level descriptive statistics were used to organise and analyse statistical data obtained using quantitative techniques, into categories of objects for every variable measured by the different questions in the questionnaire. Qualitative data from the interviews and focus group discussions was analysed using content analysis. The data is integrated and presented in this paper in the form of tables and descriptive narrative under the following headings:

- Libraries' physical infrastructure and facilities
- Staffing
- Funding
- Collections and collection development
- Integration of the school library programme into school activities.

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4.1 Physical infrastructure (school library infrastructure) and facilities

Data on physical infrastructure is presented under the following subheadings: presence of libraries; library infrastructure; library furniture; computer facilities; and internet facilities.

4.1.1 Presence of libraries

To determine if schools had school libraries the question “Does the school have a library?” was asked. All the schools had libraries, which are best described as a room specifically reserved for a library (61%); a storeroom turned into a library with books on shelves (31%) and others (8%). Other descriptions were classrooms with books on the shelves and media centre.

4.1.2 Library physical infrastructure

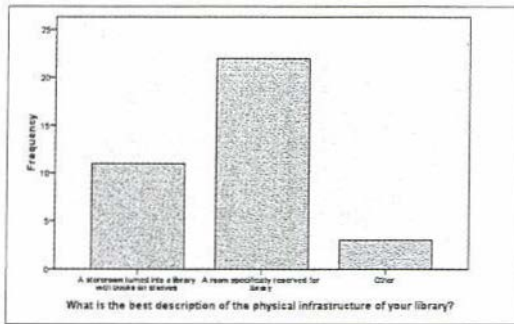


Figure 2: Physical infrastructure of school libraries

Most of these so called libraries were not purpose-built libraries. They were either a storeroom turned into a room with books on shelves, or a classroom with books on shelves. The Education Statistics of 2009 and 2010 (Ministry of Education, 2010, 2011) regarding infrastructure do not even reflect libraries.

4.1.3 Library furniture

Most of these school libraries had tables and chairs although they were not adequate.

4.1.4 Computer facilities

Figure 3 indicates the responses from the schools regarding computer facilities in their school libraries.

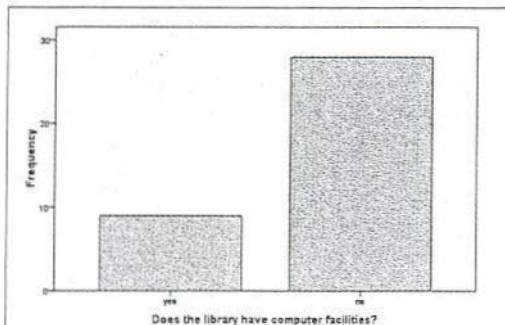


Figure 3: Computer Facilities

The focus group discussions and interviews established that 8 of the 11 schools visited had computers ranging from 1 to 30 computers per school library. The findings from the questionnaires sent out to schools however show that only 23% of the schools had libraries with computer facilities. In most cases where school libraries had computers, the computers were for the librarians' use only.

Education Statistics of 2010 reveal the following statistics of computer rooms (permanent, prefabricated and traditional, i.e. made of poles, metal sheets and tents): Caprivi – 29, Karas – 56; Khomas – 130; Omaheke – 41 and Omusati – 61. This is out of a national total of 770 schools. It should be noted that these figures include primary and secondary schools.

4.1.5 Internet facilities

The responses from the questionnaires regarding internet facilities in schools are reflected in figure 4 below.

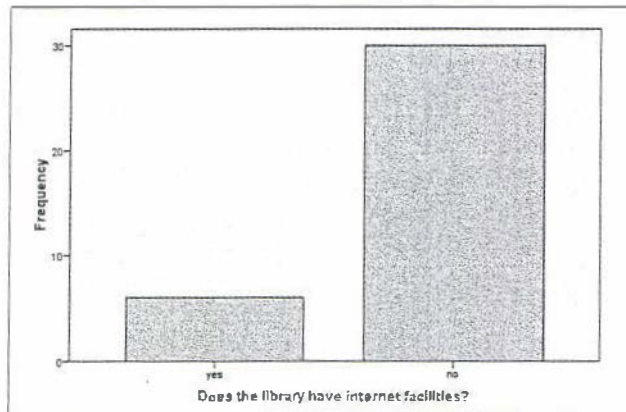


Figure 4: Internet facilities in school libraries

The responses from the interviews and focus group discussions revealed that only 1 school library out of the 11 schools visited had computers connected to the Internet. The finding from the questionnaires sent out to schools show that only 17% of the libraries had Internet facilities. The schools that had Internet facilities rated Internet as very reliable (36%), reliable (14%), and half of the respondents said the Internet was not reliable or not reliable at all.

To establish whether learners have access to Internet, learners were also asked if they have access to the Internet outside of school. Some learners said yes. They had access to Internet from cell phones, nearby public libraries, computers at home and Internet cafés, but some learners had no access to the Internet at all.

4.2 Staffing

The study wanted to establish if school libraries were being run by qualified librarians. Figure 5 presents responses to the question “Do you have specific position for a librarian?”

The findings from the focus group discussions and interviews were that only 2 of the 11 schools visited had a specific position for a librarian: one position each. The findings from the questionnaires sent out to schools show that 61% did not have a specific position for a

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librarian. In most schools, Basic Information Studies teachers and teachers with full-time teaching responsibilities looked after the libraries. In some schools secretaries assisted in the libraries. Findings from the visited school also show that the two specific librarians had librarianship qualifications: B. Bibl Ed. Findings from the questionnaires show that only 22% of the librarians had formal librarianship qualifications. These qualified teachers include those who had studied librarianship as a minor subject, those with B. Bibl. Ed., as well as those who had attended library workshops.

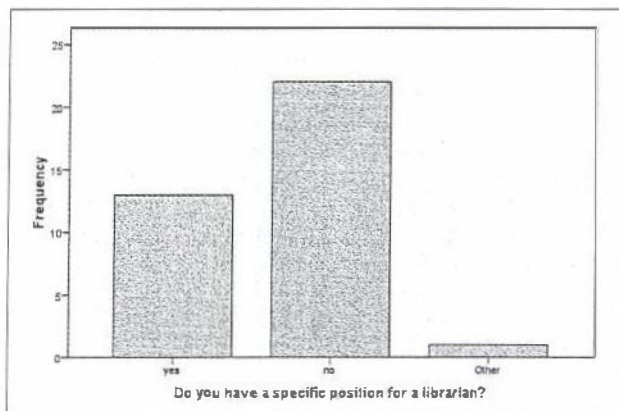


Figure 5: Librarian positions at schools

4.3 Collection development

The data on collection development is presented under the following sub-headings: types of library materials; acquisition of library materials, including methods and frequency of receipt of materials from the Ministry of Education Department of Educational Library Services; and relevance of materials and funding.

4.3.1 Types of materials in the libraries

The types of materials in the libraries ranged from textbooks, reference materials, magazines and newspapers, to audio visual tapes and other materials in different media formats. Most school libraries reported that they had magazines and newspapers (29) in their collection followed by reference materials (28), textbooks (24) and audio visual tapes including cassettes and DVDs (9).

4.3.2 Acquisition of library materials

The responses from the questionnaires indicated that the most common method of acquisition of library materials was through the Ministry of Education's Department of Educational Library Services. The majority of schools reported that they received their materials from Education Library Services (30) followed by purchases from school funds (9) and through solicited donations (9). Some materials were also acquired through unsolicited donations, the smallest number being library materials purchased through other funds (1). The same findings were gathered through focus group discussions and interviews.

The schools were asked when they had last received some library materials from the Ministry of Education's Department of Educational Library Services (ELS). The responses are indicated in figure 6 below.

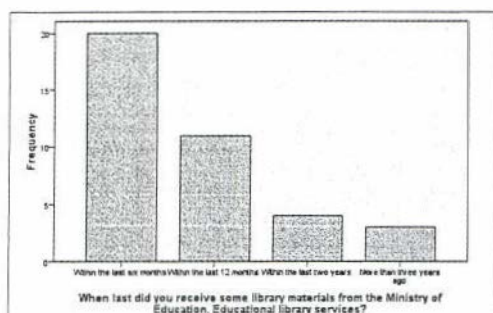


Figure 6: Frequency of receipt of materials from the Ministry of Education

The responses indicated in figure 6 show that most schools had received materials within the last six months. The same was expressed by the interviews. From the questionnaires the responses were: “within the last six months” (20), “within the last twelve months” (11), “within the last two years” (4) and “more than three years” (3).

4.3.3 Relevance of the library materials

In focus group discussions with teachers, most highlighted the outdatedness and lack of relevance of the materials in the library. In some schools they complained about the lack of materials in indigenous languages. The lack of materials on science was also mentioned.

4.3.4 Funding for library materials

Not all schools had library budgets, as revealed by the interviews. Of those with library budgets, the size of the budgets ranged from N\$10 to N\$20, 000. For those schools with library budgets, most of the schools (42%) said the library budget was not at all adequate. When asked about where the sources of funding came from, the responses were: none, school development fund (SDF), Ministry of Education Department of Educational Library Services, readeathon fundraising activities, school budgets and donations. Respondents also provided the following answers on how they spend their allocated library budgets: buying books and magazines, stationery, processing materials, audio visual materials and equipment, teacher reference software for computers and posters.

4.4 Integration of the school library programme into the school activities

The data under this section is presented under the following sub-headings: learners’ reading habits, teachers’ use of the school library for lesson preparation, library usage statistics and library periods and opening hours.

4.4.1 Learners’ reading habits

The focus group discussions with learners revealed that learners generally read regularly. The reasons why they read included reading for fun, to get information, to improve reading skills and to help them in doing their homework. In response to the question “When last did you read a book?” the responses ranged from: “one hour ago” to “not reading at all”. When asked if they read during their spare time, the answers were “yes” and “no”. A follow-up question was asked to establish what they read, and the majority of the learners read fiction though some read newspapers, magazines and reference books.

4.4.2 Teachers’ use of library for lesson preparation

The use of libraries for teaching preparation by teachers varied. Some teachers used the

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library and would have liked to integrate it into their teaching but were hindered from so doing because the libraries were not well resourced. Some teachers used the public libraries. One teacher said that she consulted the library materials in the school library and then referred learners to relevant pages but they found it difficult to consult the materials as they were not given training on how to use them (information literacy skills). However, some teachers said they did not give enough library-oriented tasks. The same was echoed by the teacher librarians. In one of the schools visited, with a well-resourced well-run library and a qualified librarian, the librarian said that she did not receive much cooperation from the secondary school teachers but she did from the primary school teachers.

4.4.3 Library usage statistics

Figure 7 below shows the rate of library usage at different times of the school calendar.

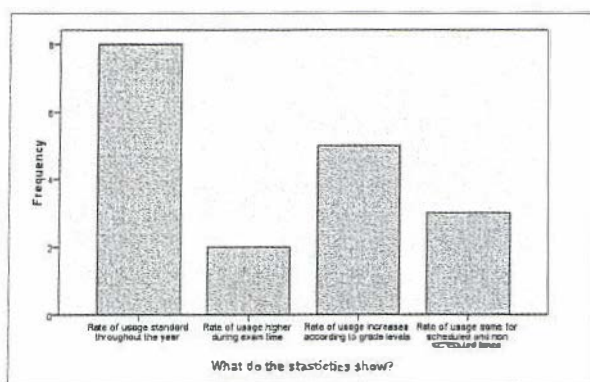


Figure 7: Library usage statistics

As indicated in figure 7, schools indicated that usage tended to be standard throughout the year. Only two schools reported an increase in usage during examination time. Five schools indicated that rate of usage increased according to grade levels; whilst three schools reported that the rate of usage is the same for scheduled and non-scheduled library times.

4.4.4 Library periods and opening hours

Most schools, 5 out of the 11 schools visited - did not have library periods. At the schools that did have, library periods varied from once a week to twice a week. The times the libraries were open was during break time and also after classes in the afternoons.

All the schools interviewed had the Basic Information Science (BIS) subject that introduces learners to how to use sources of information and the library. All schools confirmed that BIS was on the timetable, but in some schools there was a confusion between BIS periods and library periods. In the focus group discussions with learners, in response to the question, "What do you do during BIS period?" some learners responded that they came to the library and read books and the teacher asked them to report on books they had read. In some schools the BIS period was considered a free period.

5 Recommendations from the schools on libraries

Learners and teachers were asked to suggest recommendations on how their school library could be improved. The following recommendations were made.

5.1 Learners' recommendations

- Buy more books such as career books, as well as daily newspapers
- Provide computers for use and access to the Internet
- Libraries be open all the time
- Employ a member of staff with an interest in the library, who can keep the library open all the time.

5.2 Teachers' recommendations

- Bigger library room and more resources
- Materials in the library covering subjects taught at the school as well as materials in local languages
- Provide Internet facilities and photocopiers
- Eliminate the sharing of books amongst learners
- Assign permanent members of staff to take care of the library.

6 Discussion and conclusions

This section discusses the study's findings; determines if the research objectives were met, as well as answering the study's main research questions: "What is the state of school libraries in Namibia? and What is their role in promoting a reading culture?"

6.1 To investigate the existence of school libraries in Namibia.

The study revealed that all the schools have school libraries but most of these libraries are not purpose built. They are either storerooms turned into rooms with books and shelves, or classrooms with books on shelves. This supports the NLIC (2007) finding that most school libraries are small corners more suited to be storeroom and cannot contribute meaningfully to the learning programme. What this shows is that the environment and facilities were not conducive enough to encourage learners to sit down and read the library materials. Although this study did not look at the home environment, the question to be asked is, "Once learners take library materials home, do they have a friendly environment in which they can read?"

6.2 To assess how well established the libraries are in terms of funding and collection development.

The study established that school libraries are not well resourced and the contents of most are outdated, and not relevant to learners and teachers. If learners are to be encouraged to read the materials must be relevant and also current. With regards to funding, school libraries get their funding from the school development fund, school budget, fundraising activities and donations. However these funds are not adequate. These findings confirm Magara and Batumbuze's (2009) findings that school libraries need to overcome challenges funds for continually stocktaking and restocking school libraries or collections.

6.3 To assess how well integrated school libraries activities are in the school curricula.

The learners' reading habits showed that the learners read regularly. These results however, do not confirm what is happening on the ground, and the reason could be that access to school libraries is rather limited since some school libraries are always closed or the opening times are not convenient for the learners. One important reason also reported by learners is that most of their school libraries are stocked with outdated materials that have no relevance to their curriculum. A case in point is that learners want to see a lot of language based books, in English and indigenous languages, as well as textbooks in mathematics and science subjects.

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Teachers, on the other hand, reported that they use the school library for varied reasons, including lesson preparation and research. It was also reported that although they want to integrate library activities into their teaching, they are hindered from doing so by the lack of relevant materials in their school libraries. Some however, use the public libraries as an alternative source of information. A worrisome situation is that a number of teachers do not give library-oriented tasks to their learners due to the fact that some teachers do not support library activities and do not see the relevance and contribution of school libraries in supporting the curricula and teaching activities.

The study revealed that most schools do not have library periods. This was indicated by the results of the questionnaire as well as the interviews. The reason why this is so may be because most schools do not have purpose built libraries where learners can sit and read. These results seem to confirm the findings of the Botswana study by Chipunza (2001), which argued that lack of time devoted to library work is a fundamental factor that hampers effective integration of school library activities in to the curricula.

In a similar study conducted by NLIC (2007) it was reported that lack of trained library personnel in many schools and regular transfers of personnel in charge of libraries, without regard for their role in the library activities, were also factors that were negatively impacting on the effectiveness of school libraries in Namibia. The findings of this study revealed a similar picture, whereby most school libraries do not have a specific position for a librarian and in cases where the position exists, the teacher librarian is often overloaded with teaching. This however, compromises the integral role played by the school library in promoting a reading culture.

6.4 To investigate the reading habits of learners

Learners in most schools seem to be aware of the importance of reading. From the answers that learners provided, they mentioned that reading is fun; it makes them creative and prepares them well for their learning activities. The answers provided on what kind of materials they read ranged from magazines and newspapers, to fiction and non-fiction books. Generally, the findings of the study showed that learners read during their spare time. It was also noted that some learners who do not have well equipped school libraries also use nearby public libraries and internet cafes for their information needs. These findings confirm findings by Smith et. al (2008) who also recommended that public libraries should cater for the needs of learners coming from nearby schools, owing to the fact that some school libraries are poorly resourced.

Although in most schools the library period is indicated on the timetable, a number of teachers do not seem to take this seriously since they do not accompany and support their learners in use of the library. More often, the period of Basic Information Science (BIS), which is a compulsory but non-examinable subject in Grades 4-10 is sometimes confused with the library period. It should be mentioned here that although BIS focuses on teaching information literacy skills, it is slightly different from the library period, where learners are exposed to investigating the truth on their own, through reading and using a school library.

7 Recommendations

One of the study's objectives was "To recommend interventions for effective school library systems and programmes in Namibian schools". The study's findings provide information to educational policy makers, school decision makers, school boards, principals, teachers and school librarians, which can be used to support the establishment

and improvement of school libraries in Namibia. The following recommendations emanate from the study's findings:

- Provide better school library infrastructure to replace the storerooms/classrooms turned into libraries with libraries that are purpose built.
- Provide adequate furniture for school libraries.
- Create librarian positions for school libraries and hire professionally qualified librarians to run the school libraries.
- Provide adequate funding for collection development.
- Provide adequate computers in all schools and Internet facilities.
- Develop meaningful library programmes and integrate these into the school curriculum.
- Revamp the Basic Information Science programme to enhance information literacy.
- Encourage teachers to give library-oriented tasks or projects to their learners (promotion of learner-centred education).
- School librarians to work in collaboration with other stakeholders, e.g. teachers and parents.
- School libraries to participate in national events related to the promotion of reading culture such as literacy day and readeathon
- Teaching loads for school library teachers should be lessened to allow them to commit more of their time in the school libraries and promote a reading culture.
- Partnerships between the training institutions, e.g. University of Namibia and the Ministry of Education Department of Education Library Services, should be consolidated to facilitate continuing training programmes for teacher librarians.

Conclusion

The majority of school libraries in Namibia do not meet the requirements necessary for schools to realize the full benefits from their school libraries. A lot needs to be done to rectify the situation. An area for further research would be to investigate the extent to which the school library, in relation to other factors, contributes to academic achievement in those schools with well-run libraries.

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