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Competencies in school librarianship: An African overview

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Abstract:

The paper highlights the fate of African school librarianship through the years leading to the declaration on universal schooling. It draws on examples from different countries about efforts that have been undertaken to develop school libraries, and demonstrates how the training of school librarians has been carried out in the different countries.

Introduction:

In recent years, several African governments have moved towards the attainment of equitable access to basic education for children of school going age. African governments have committed themselves to achieving the Millennium Development goals, which among others include the priority of having Education For All (EFA) by the year 2015. The consequences of the above commitments have been rapid expansion in education and the inherent concerns about whether pupils are receiving quality education and basic learning competencies. Following the introduction of universal schooling, it remains to be seen whether African school librarianship will seize the opportunity to redefine its mission and relevance to the schooling community.

African School Librarianship:

Whereas the above developments in education are a positive indicator of change, school librarianship in Africa has been the only laggard. In most of Africa, school librarianship has been

a victim of shortages in funding; absence of policy and legal coverage; and professional training problems. The observation below sums up the situation, " As the decade came to a close, school libraries were said to have the lowest of priorities in educational spending. The majority of schools possessed no library. Where a semblance of a school library did exist, it was often no more than a few shelves of outdated and worn out material, inadequately staffed." (UNESCO, 2001).

Uganda's 13,332 primary schools are reported not to have any kind of adequate school library provision and that even the best primary schools can only afford to lend out books from an over-crowded and unsuitable storeroom. The situation is not very different in the secondary schools. However, interest in school libraries is growing and government through the Ministry of Education and Sports is taking the lead in formulating a school library development policy for Uganda. Since 2001, the National Book Trust of Uganda with Sida support has been channeling book donations to help primary schools establish libraries through the National Library of Uganda. The Uganda Library Association has meanwhile helped to train teachers responsible for these libraries.

In Botswana, IASL reports that every one of the 206 Community Junior schools still had a library, though some of them were non-functional. The report goes on to say that forty primary schools out of more than 700 had school libraries. In Zimbabwe, IASL report decries the fact that neither library nor reading materials are considered among the requirements for registration of a school. By 2002, there were 6,272 schools registered with the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture.

A study of African school libraries (Rosenberg, 1998) reported that Mali began a 'library in every school' campaign with the pilot phase involving 10 schools, with 20 more to follow out of the nearly some 250 public schools that offered 9 years of education. Schools were required to nominate teacher librarians who would then be trained by the government.

In South Africa, the READ trust founded in 1979 by a small group of volunteers had grown to a significant trainer and supplier of materials. The trust trained teachers in librarianship and in ways to encourage literacy and writing skills. In 1997, the Education Foundation found that 17% of schools in South Africa had libraries.

In Mozambique, box-book libraries were distributed to reinforce understanding of Portuguese, the country's official language. Training was incorporated after a mid-term evaluation found that many teachers were poorly prepared to teach early stages of reading and writing.

In Egypt, a survey of 14 urban and rural schools of varying standards found that students were encouraged to use the school library and learning materials, and most schools had a computer and several software programs (UNESCO/Danida case-studies: Egypt).

The situation of school librarianship in Africa gets uncertain when you consider communities in some African countries that have suffered decades of wars and political turmoil. In countries such as Angola, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and many others, schools were destroyed and with them any libraries they had.

School Library Education:

The above analysis depicts that school Librarianship in Africa has suffered decades of neglect. However, UNESCO notes that as the post Jomtien era opened, the World Bank had at least fourteen projects involving primary or secondary school library development. There has also been a light over the horizon especially in the area of training.

In Uganda, the East African School of Library and Information Science, Makerere University offers certificate to postgraduate training for persons seeking a career in librarianship. Currently, most of the qualified workforce in some of the school libraries went through this system and were later recruited by the respective school authorities. Most recently, Gulu University and Uganda Christian University are planning Library and Information Studies courses. The lack of sufficient numbers of qualified school librarians to fill vacancies of school librarians in Ugandan secondary schools will very soon be a problem of the past. There is however a need to anchor some training courses to specifically cater for primary school librarianship.

In Botswana, the University of Botswana has been undertaking the training of teacher librarians. Teacher librarians at the lower level obtain funding from the Ministry of Education to pursue a two-year certificate course. The training is carried out during vacation period.

In Zimbabwe, IASL reports that there are few trained librarians to occupy leading positions in the country and employers do not seem to be clear about the necessity to hire professional librarians. However, government introduced library training at the two polytechnics, one in Harare and the other in Bulawayo, where certificate and diploma courses are offered. A degree programme for Library and Information Science was established at the National University of Science and Technology.

In most of Africa, teacher or school librarians have been trained either at the countries' polytechnics or universities offering librarianship training. People who may not qualify for training at the polytechnics or universities, benefit from in-service training courses. National library associations and other non-government organisations have offered training opportunities in information technology, communication, leadership development, readership development and other skills required for the efficient functioning of the school library. IFLA and IASL could supplement the formal programs.

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