

**WHAT DO TEACHERS REALLY THINK OF LIBRARIES? SOME INSIGHTS
FROM A STUDY OF SCHOOLS AND LIBRARIES IN A SMALL SOUTH
AFRICAN TOWN**

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My doctoral research (still incomplete at the time of writing) is an investigation of the role of public libraries in South Africa in the information literacy education of school-going youth. It has two phases – the first, a wide-ranging survey of information literacy education and staff attitudes towards it in Mpumalanga’s public libraries that I undertook in March 2004, and the second, a participant observation study in October 2004 in two public libraries in a small rural town, Woodsville (a pseudonym), to the east of Mpumalanga. The purpose in this paper is to highlight how perceptions of the educational role of the public library among educators and public librarians impact on what Bundy (2002) calls the “shared endeavour” of information literacy education in the public library.

The premise of the study is that, in a country where less than 20% of schools have functional libraries (South Africa. Department of Education, 1999; Bot, 2005) and where there is a new curriculum that, according to widespread consensus, emphasises resource-based enquiry learning, public libraries might well have to take on a more active role in information literacy education than they might be expected to in countries with better developed school library structures. My earlier research, which involved interviews in one week with over 800 pupils in two public library branches in a disadvantaged township in Cape Town, found most of them to be in the library to “do a project”, with 78% claiming never to use any other library and only 3% reporting access to a school library in the course of their current project (Hart, 2003).

However, there are questions over the capacity of South African public libraries for information literacy education, for example:

- How knowledgeable are public librarians about information literacy and about contemporary approaches to information literacy education?
- What kind of programmes are in place?
- Do public librarians want to take up a role in the information literacy education of school-going youth – at a time when they are experiencing severe budget cuts (Lor, 1999; Hooper & Hooper, 2000)?

- Are librarians able to be teachers?
- Do public libraries have adequate resources to take on this new role?
- Do they have the connections with schools that an enhanced role in information literacy education implies? Is there recognition amongst public library staff and educators in schools that information literacy education is a “shared endeavour” (Bundy, 2002)?

This paper makes no attempt to provide a rigorous account of the research project – hopefully the completed dissertation will do that. Its purpose is to provide a glimpse of the study and to take the opportunity to share some of my findings. The focus in the first part is on public librarians’ conceptions of their role in information literacy education; it then moves to the second phase of the study with a focus on educators’ conceptions of the educational role of the public library. The suggestion is that, paradoxically, shared conceptions contribute to a gulf between the two sectors, which needs to be bridged if the needs of school learners are to be met.

Librarians’ conceptions of information literacy education

It cannot be assumed that Mpumalanga public librarians share the assumptions and perspectives of information literacy theorists or practitioners working in other environments. Therefore, the first phase survey of public libraries in Mpumalanga set out to explore librarians’ conceptions of their role in the curriculum and in information literacy education.

The survey revealed some ambivalence about the increase in school learner use and the resulting new pressures on public library staff. Some welcome the changes, seeing an enhanced educational role for the public library as its “ticket to the future”. However, others express doubt over whether a more active curricular role should be expected of public libraries. Some of these doubts emanate from concern over capacity – their libraries are short of staff and space. Others are more fundamental – the heavy use of the public library by school learners does not fit their conceptions of the social role of a public library and they fear that it jeopardises their services to other groups in the community. A common refrain in the interviews in the first phase was, “We are doing the work of school libraries!”

What this “work” entails became one of the central questions of the study. In their descriptions of information literacy and of the processes of school project work, the Mpumalanga public librarians come across as preoccupied with “the library”. Most of the 57 respondents describe an information literate person as “knowing how to use a library” or “able to use encyclopaedias and other books in the reference section”. Many describe the first step in project work as “asking the librarian” or “knowing where to go in the library”. Given


these perceptions, it is not surprising that the predominant kind of information literacy education is library orientation. It comprises once-off sessions, usually at the beginning of the school year or during South Africa's annual Library Week, which instruct school groups in library layout and procedures – with sometimes some demonstration of the use of reference tools. There seems to be little awareness of the evolution of information literacy education from the “book education” that prevailed in South African schools in the 1980s. Such source-based approaches with classes have been found to be ineffective since students do not transfer what they learn to other situations. Research has shown that the best information literacy education is embedded in the curriculum – when children learn information skills in the context of their real assignments and projects (Todd, 1995a, 1995b; Kuhlthau, 2000; McMillan, 2001). They learn to analyse what information they need and to build new meaning and knowledge from information rather than hunt for the right answer in sources (Kuhlthau, 1993a; 2000).


Of course the challenge for public librarians is that they do not have day-to-day access to the classroom as school librarians might. Clearly then, the relationships between school and public library are crucial to effective information literacy education in public libraries. One of the aims in the second phase, a month-long case study in the two public libraries of the town of Woodsville (a pseudonym), was to examine information literacy education in a public library more closely. In their interviews in the course of the first phase, the librarians in both of the Woodsville libraries had positive attitudes to their work with schools and reported positive relations with their surrounding schools.

An introduction to Woodsville

Before turning to the relations between the Woodsville libraries and their schools, perhaps it is necessary to describe the context of the case study. Woodsville has two libraries – one downtown and one in the historically disadvantaged township of Hillside (pseudonym). The two libraries serve seven schools as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Woodsville Schools & Public Libraries
(The schools and geographic places are given pseudonyms since confidentiality and anonymity were promised)

- G
- A Woodsville Primary
 - B Woodsville High
 - C Mountainview Primary (Independent)
 - D Bergsig Primary
 - E Hillside Primary
 - F Hillside High
 - G Forest Primary (outside town, in forestry area)
- E F F
-  Hillside Library

- B
- C
-  Woodsville Library
- D
- A

Ten years into our democracy, South African rural towns still bear the marks of apartheid land allocation and town planning. Typically, there is the commercial centre surrounded by the historically “white” suburbs – and then on the outskirts, often across a highway or piece of veld, there are the historically “black” townships.

Only one of the schools has a functioning library, Woodsville Primary. However, some might well question the description of this library as “functional” since its “librarian” is in fact a fulltime Grade Four teacher. The library is considered to be her extramural activity and she opens it at intervals and on two afternoons a week for one hour. At present, none of the schools provides Internet access to their students. A few years ago, the two historically advantaged schools in town, having lost their teacher-librarian posts when national teacher/pupil ratios were enforced to redress apartheid era inequalities, closed their libraries. The two principals told me that they had believed that computer rooms with Internet access could replace them. 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*
- GH *Why do you say that?*
- Teacher *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)

My interviews with the schools' educators uncovered some rethinking of this decision. Apparently, their computer rooms are occupied by computer classes for most of the day and Internet connectivity has proved difficult to sustain.

The significance of the virtual absence of school libraries for the Woodsville public libraries is twofold:

- It explains the heavy use of the Woodsville public libraries by school learners.
- It implies that learners are not being taught at school how to use a library and its resources – and perhaps the broader information skills of information literacy.

Another factor became evident in the course of the school visits. Mini-bus taxis transport large numbers of children from rural areas to the schools each day. Immediately, on the close of the school day, they line up outside the schools to take them home to rural areas, where there are no public libraries. These are children who can be assumed to have no Internet access at home and whose parents might well be inadequately educated to support school project work.

A failed information literacy intervention

The vignette that follows describes an incident in Hillside Library. It serves both to describe the Woodsville libraries' approaches to information literacy education and to highlight the question of the connections between public libraries and schools.

Hillside Library, Wednesday 6 October 2004 (names are pseudonyms)

It is the third day of the field study. Together with Tara Botha, the Woodsville Librarian, I am standing outside the library in Hillside, the historically black township to the north of Woodsville. We are waiting for Naledi Matolo, the Hillside Librarian, to return from Hillside Primary School. She has walked up the road to “fetch” some Grade Seven learners. The time arranged for their visit was 8.00am and, when they did not arrive, she left us to see what the problem might be.

The plan is to follow up the instruction on the Library's reference materials which Tara Botha began the day before with a group of ten learners. While Tara engaged with the learners, Naledi Matolo hovered at the back of the group, occasionally being asked to translate Tara's words into SiSwati – the mother tongue of most of the children. Each of these children is today to bring two friends from school to teach them what they learned yesterday. The idea is that, in teaching others, they will reinforce their own learning. It is an approach that Tara Botha tried out the previous term with Bergsig Primary, a school on the opposite side of the town. Two days earlier, on arriving at Woodsville Library, Tara told me that I had come at an “excellent” time since she was to repeat the project in Hillside Library and she was sure it was going to succeed.

The sun is already hot and we are sheltering under the sparse branches of a thorn tree. The dry wind swirls the dust around us. As the minutes pass, I remember the doubt that surfaced in my mind the day before and which I recorded in my field notebook: “Doesn't Tara take a

rather cavalier approach to school routine?” Looking at her watch, Tara mutters, “I knew I should have driven her up there”. I step out to explore the scene in front of us. The sloping square outside the Library is formed at the T junction of three wide streets – the library, the municipal office and clinic buildings inside a fence to the left, the community hall at the top of the hill and a sloping field to the right, where today a marquee is erected for a three-week church mission. Today is pension day, which means that it is also market day. The square is bustling with traders and mini-bus taxis off-loading their passengers. I browse around the makeshift wooden stalls and the wares laid out on the dusty verges – clothes, pots, fruit, vegetables, chickens squashed into wooden crates. At last, I see Naledi picking her way through the crowds and I rejoin Tara. Naledi’s shoulders are slumped and, as she reaches Tara, she says bluntly, “They are not coming. The teachers don’t want them to come now. They will come at 12 o’clock”. Tara’s face freezes but she says only, “It’s very disappointing. It’s very disappointing”. She agrees to come back later and drives off. I tell Naledi that I am going to the school to introduce myself to the principal and to make appointments for interviews. I refuse her offer to come with me. The previous day’s doubts have resurfaced and I wish to be seen as independent of the two librarians.

A group of children did come to the Hillside Library later that day. Each child was given a set of cards with quiz-like questions requiring the use of encyclopaedias, dictionaries, and atlases, examples of which were set out on different tables. One task, for example, was: “Find the meaning of the word ‘quiver’”. I observed a child carefully copy out the full entry including all the standard dictionary information like “verb” and hand it to his tutor, one of the learners from the day before, who were stationed at the tables. The tutor accepted the work without question and he moved on to the next table. The evident difficulties with the adult atlas at another table led me later to examine the reference shelves and to conclude that the library does not have adequate juvenile reference books. At the end, the new group were instructed to bring another set of friends the following day for a session, which Naledi Matolo would run. However, this did not happen – Naledi Matolo reporting, “They [the teachers] are busy with workshops”. And indeed, the whole project petered out almost immediately.

The above incident provoked several questions which came to pre-occupy me in the weeks to come. One set of questions concerns school and public library relationships. Why had the class not turned up? What, in the relationship between the school and the public library, might explain the failure? Had the same information literacy intervention with Bergsig Primary Grade Seven learners been the success Tara claimed? If so, how had it differed from the one planned for Hillside?

Later that week the Woodsville Librarian – disappointed at the failure of the teachers to support her plan – asked me plaintively, “Don’t they **know** how important it is?” My interviews with the principals and educators in the schools aimed at answering her question.

The Woodsville educators’ perceptions of the public library

The Table below provides a summary of the responses to some of the questions I asked 23 Grade Seven and Eight teachers, about 90% of the teachers involved in these grades - trying

to find an answer to her question. The educators appear to acknowledge firmly the role of the public library in the new curriculum; yet they also are revealed as having very little to do with it. The accompanying open-ended questions might throw light on the contradiction evident in these figures.

Question	Yes	No	
Do you think Curriculum 2005 [the South African curriculum introduced in the late 1990s] has increased the use of public libraries by school learners?	22	1	
[In your recent project] did you suggest to you learners that they use the public library?	7	12	
Did you discuss the project with the public library staff before you set it?	2	17	
In planning your class assignments do you ever consult or communicate with the public library staff?	4	19	
Do you think that the public library has a role to play in the educational programme of your school?	21	2	
Who, in your opinion, should teach information skills to school learners?	School 1	Public library 0	Both 20

The educators are unanimous that the new South African curriculum means that children need more resources and more access to libraries than before. They acknowledge, also, the challenges of teaching diverse learners groups who have unequal access to learning resources at home. However, my observations in the course of the case study and my interviews with the public library staff show that such comment need not imply close working relationships with the two public libraries in Woodsville. I found, for example, little evidence of communication between educators and the libraries – despite the regular overtures from the public libraries that their staff reported to me. The public library staff are often caught unawares. The pattern is that a rush of children, all asking for the same information, alerts them to a project and they quickly put materials aside in the “project box” (thus, it must be said, short-circuiting the learning experience of independent information seeking).

Most educators explain their positive reply to the first question in the Table in rather theoretical language, reminiscent of that in the Revised National Curriculum Statement (South Africa. Department of Education, 2002). They thus talk of “independent research”, “learner-centredness”, “facilitating learning”. One of the Hillside Primary educators acknowledges a possible gap between what educators are “supposed to” do and their classroom behaviour, when he says:

*We used to impart knowledge to the kids. These days we engage learners in gathering information. We are **supposed** to. We might not be adjusted yet as educators.*

A later question asks educators to describe their relationship with the Woodsville public libraries. Nine claim to have a “good” relationship. However, three of these nine admit that their knowledge of the library is not direct – they have witnessed the service their children receive or have heard of it from their learners. Eleven reply that they have no relationship or

contact with either library, including six out of the eight respondents in the Hillside schools. Two Hillside High School educators phrase their answer to this question in an ambiguous phrase, “I ignore it”. The word “ignore” seemed to be carefully chosen and perhaps implies a disdain for the library. And indeed, the Hillside teachers’ responses include several critical comments on the mediocrity of Hillside Library, which is clearly perceived to be inferior to down-town Woodsville Library. Their comments also suggest that they do not necessarily see librarians as partners in the educational programme. The words below of a Hillside Primary teacher throw light on the failure of the information literacy intervention that was described earlier. His lack of trust is clear in his comment on the initiative:

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.

Evidence of a certain obtuseness or blankness with regard to libraries might be found in responses to other questions which ask teachers to elaborate on their view of the role of the public library in the educational programme of their school. The nineteen educators who are recorded in the table above as never consulting 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.

The gulf between public library and school is illuminated in the words of one of the Hillside High School teachers, when she refers to a situation that infuriates the public library staff: “If the first person comes – the public library staff pick up which project we’re doing. After the first three or four children, they know and help us and put books aside. They help us.”

As shown in the Table above, twenty-one respondents gave positive responses when asked if they thought the public library had a role in the educational programme of their schools. But a perusal of their accompanying comments reveals rather limited views of the role. Most see it merely in terms of 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. 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. For almost all of the black teachers, their first experience of libraries was at their teacher training colleges, where many of them, in common with their white colleagues, did “Library” – a course intended to teach them how to administer a school library. Only two black respondents remember being told stories by relatives and none of the black respondents were read to by parents, who were, most report, lacking in formal education. Two black teachers report that their parents were school principals but even they had only study books in their homes.

The educators' childhoods might well affect their present reading habits and attitudes to libraries. 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). Almost all the white teachers claim to read as a leisure pursuit; with several having special interests such as biography and adventure. A few of them buy books – at the excellent second-hand book shop in Woodsville or at book shops when they visit larger towns or via the Internet. Otherwise they rely on family gifts and loans. For leisure reading, the black teachers, except for one, read newspapers and magazines. None of the black teachers buys books, unless they are required to for courses. Almost all the black teachers see books in terms of study and self-improvement. One young mother betrays her view of reading as a serious business, when she talks of reading to her four year old daughter, “It's hard to sit her down so that she can concentrate”.

Examination of the educators' descriptions of information literacy and project work throws further light on their views of libraries. As mentioned earlier, Mpumalanga public librarians see use of the library as a crucial attribute of information literacy. However, in answering the same question, none of the educators mention the word “library”. Most talk more generally of knowing how to find information. Of course the comparison is not statistically reliable – the 57 librarians being a sample of Mpumalanga Province's public library staff involved in information literacy education and the 23 Woodsville educators coming from only seven schools in one small town. However, the differences point to an area for further corroborative research.

Moreover, in their responses to the questions that probe their approaches to project work, 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, 1993b). This might explain the under-preparedness of school learners for their information seeking in the Woodsville libraries. Time and again, I observed public library staff struggle to help learners who cannot articulate what they need. They often have to explain assignments to learners – who, because they lack information-seeking strategies and also perhaps because of their weak English, just do not understand what they need to do. It seems that what they **think** they need is a page to copy. This is a topic for another paper.

Conclusion

On the whole, it seems that the answer to the Woodsville Librarian's question, cited earlier, is "No". The Woodsville educators do not seem to understand the importance of the library in the information seeking needs of their learners. However their "obtuseness" must be understood in the light of their constricted views of the demands of school projects and assignments and their conception of the public library as a place where information is "fetched". Information is thus "something" that is stored and given out – rather than the subjective sense-making process that research in cognitive information science and in information literacy has shown it to be (Kuhlthau, 1993b).

Paradoxically, the limited conceptions of the educators might recall those of public librarians, as hinted earlier. There is not the time in this paper to document properly the findings in the first phase of the study on public librarians' conceptions of information literacy. They were found to see their role to be the handing out of information rather than helping children with the cognitive demands of their assignments, although a nascent sense of the inadequacy of their current approaches was identified.

The Woodsville Librarian's question has been shown to beg another one. What is the "it" in her question? The Librarian assumes that the "it" is self-explanatory. Perhaps, her own conceptions of information literacy and information literacy education also require expanding if the real needs of school learners are to be met. I suggest that the limited vision of the public librarians in the study prevents them from seeking out a more dynamic role in addressing the needs of their school users by involving themselves in the earlier phases of project work. The reality is that neither public librarians nor teachers see librarians to be partners in the learning curriculum. How a more dynamic role in the context of the public library might be achieved is again a topic for another paper.

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