Integration of the school library into the curriculum

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Abstract

This article considers strategic approaches for integrating the school library into the taught curriculum. It does this by making a case for such integration at school and then provides a typology of six approaches that were identified in a literature review. The article then provides the findings in this regard from a case study of one peri-urban high school south of Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. Although it is found that the school library is only minimally integrated into the teaching and learning of the curriculum at this school, the authors conclude that these are important scaffolds for further development of school library utilisation at the institution.

Introduction

Much has been written in scholarly literature and policy texts about the importance of the school library for accessing the curriculum but its realisation is still not apparent. Insufficient is known, though, about how this happens on a day-to-day basis in South Africa’s public schools, especially those located in townships. In part, this under-researched field is due to there being few libraries in township schools. To change this in the democratic dispensation since 1994, transformative education policies have yielded an Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) curriculum, which assumes that teachers and learners have access to a rich source of teaching, learning and support resource materials. Thus, in 2003
the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education introduced a school library policy (KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education and Culture 2003) and began a progressive implementation of new libraries in its public schools.

Complementing this policy initiative and endeavouring to breach the gap in knowledge about the curricular use of the school library is a case study of a high school in a working class township on the outskirts of eThekwini, KwaZulu-Natal’s largest city. The high school has more than 1000 learners and 33 teachers, with one teacher being responsible for managing the centralised library collection. The library is functional even though resources are minimal. However, before turning to the findings from this selected school, the authors propose that the ideas underpinning South Africa’s outcomes-based school curriculum present a compelling case for school libraries and, based on a review of literature, a typology of strategies for such integration is formulated.

The curricular case for the school library

South Africa’s Outcomes-Based Education curriculum (South Africa 1998) is understood to be a library-centred curriculum. The basis for this contention is its philosophical and theoretical foundations that are presented here under six points:

- Firstly, the curriculum embraces a philosophy of constructivism, i.e. the process of constructing knowledge – not transmitting, transferring or reproducing it. Constructivism depends largely on the availability and use of quality teaching and learning resources in order for teachers and learners to take part in knowledge construction and thereby interpret the world, making sense of their own environment, and creating ‘new’ knowledge by constructing their own understanding. One implication of this philosophical position is the availability and effective use of a variety of resources.

- Secondly, the curriculum proposes critical outcomes that include learners being able to demonstrate their capability to work with, process and exercise judgement over information. For this to happen learners need their schools to have reservoirs (or libraries) of information resources that are easily and always accessible to them at no cost.

- The curriculum is premised on teachers being in a position to make curriculum decisions and develop learning programmes. Crucial to this role is that teachers have a range of resources that assist with their construction of learning activities and tasks for group work and individual contact with learners. The school library can serve as such a facility.
• The curriculum also advocates an approach to learning that ensures young learners become lifelong learners, possessing knowledge and a repertoire of strategies and literacies for accessing information and finding ways to address their challenges in future situations. To achieve this goal it is vital that learners receive opportunities to interact with numerous and diverse information resources as they develop.

• The curriculum also emphasises a resource-based education where both learners and teachers interact with various information resources for teaching and learning.

• Finally, the Outcomes-Based curriculum moves away from reliance on one prescribed textbook as learners’ primary source of information. Instead, the discourse is of a diversity that is referred to as learning and teaching support materials (LTSMs). Chisholm et al (2000: 52) state that “ideally Learning Support Materials (LSMs) have to include textbooks for each learning programme and other print materials like readers, atlases, dictionaries...teaching equipment such as maps, charts, globes, skeletons...”. Such a wide range of resources has been referred to also as “the complete bank for all learning activities” (Shillington 1995: 75).

Although curriculum policy documents do not explicitly say that the school library is central to teaching and learning the curriculum, the authors argue on the basis of the six points above that it is difficult to conceive of and implement the outcomes-based curriculum without seeing that the school library is a necessary depository for learning and teaching support materials and a critical and nodal point for teaching and learning activities in the school. To extend the proposition that the school library should be an integral part of teaching and learning, a typology of strategic approaches for this, which has been gleaned from a review of relevant literature is presented.

A typology of strategic approaches to integrate school library resources into the curriculum

There are various approaches available for a school to integrate the use of the school library in the taught curriculum. These approaches include an integrated school library programme, inquiry-based projects, teachers and teacher-librarian collaboration, advocacy campaigns, the influence of the school leader, and the school library environment. In this section these six strategic approaches are examined.
The programmatic approach

In the programmatic approach a school library programme or the relevant role players, for how the school library should operate in order to serve teachers and learners well, design a plan of action. The programme should include planning, implementation and evaluation of school library activities. Such plans and activities would cover structured and timetabled visits to the library, times for \textit{ad hoc} visits, events, and so on, as well as the work of the library committee. Lamb and Johnson (2005: 1) state, “The library media program is more than the resources, services and people. It is the \textit{thinking} and \textit{synergy} that occurs when you put all the elements of the learning community together”. Thus, the programmatic approach that involves joint planning with all role players present, builds consensus around the value of the school library to the school community and their mission. Lamb and Johnson (2005: 1) warn that:

\begin{quote}
If your program is rooted in things rather than thoughts and actions, there is a good chance that it won’t be around forever. However, if your program uses its physical space and collections to promote knowledge construction, information fluency and life-long learning, it will thrive regardless of building renovation, cuts in materials budgets and technical innovation.
\end{quote}

Thus, the school library programme that is developed through consensus and shared ideas is a strategy that can lead to an effective integration of the school library into the curriculum.

The project activity approach

The project is an important tool that can help learners explore, discover and apply high intellectual skills. Petty (1993: 208) refers to projects as “big guns in the educator’s arsenal”. This strong expression alerts us to the potential value projects have if used effectively. Part of their distinctive value is the “diligent and systematic enquiry or investigation into a subject in order to discover facts and principles” (Petty 1993: 208). Teachers set a specific question and outcome for learners with an inquiry process that involves making connections, pondering and investigating issues, and then constructing, expressing and reflecting on the answers.

Jackson and Verster (2000: 9) state, “Projects express the intentions and methods of the new curriculum better than most other ways of organising teaching and learning”. They maintain that there is a good match between projects and the critical outcomes sought in the curriculum. This is because
projects demand active learning and interaction with the various information resources that should be found in the school library. However, Shillington (1995) advises that teachers must avoid giving learners a project without prior arrangement with the teacher-librarian or clear guidelines for the task. In addition, the teacher-librarian and teacher ought to work together during the inquiry process to assist learners. Thus, through projects, teachers are incorporating the use of the school library as a central component of learners’ learning activities.

The collegial collaborative approach

In the collegial collaborative approach teachers work together with the teacher-librarian to design learning activities, give guidance, and assess different aspects of the curriculum. An important element in this strategy is defining the role of the teacher, who has specialist knowledge in a particular field, and the teacher-librarian, who has knowledge of the available teaching and learning resources. Collaboration means more than making use of the school library on an *ad hoc* basis. Instead, it involves joint planning, implementing and assessing. The California School Library Association (1997) suggests four steps for teachers and teacher-librarians to make collaboration a reality. These are: brainstorming a curricular unit, developing the unit, working as a community of learners, and assessing the results jointly.

Motile-Overall (2005) validates the collaborative approach because, through participants’ diversity and uniqueness, there is potential for development and growth. However, Montiel-Overall (2005) distinguishes minimal collaboration (when two people work together to maximise their efficiency) from maximal collaboration (when people engage deeply so that there is synergy in the achievement), the latter being a collaboration of the teacher and teacher-librarian that ensures that learners benefit immensely.

Although McGregor (1998) identifies the collaborative approach as a rewarding experience for teachers and teacher-librarians, she recognises that it may be a challenge to achieve co-operation among all the role players. Collegiality may require a compromise of established organisational cultures and practices and giving up some of the territories and domains that teachers and the teacher-librarian have created. Another crucial implication in the collegial collaborative approach is that teacher-librarians have to assume new roles as instructional partners with teachers.

Within the school, hindrances to collaboration include a culture of isolationism, negative attitudes, inadequacies in the teacher-librarian’s knowledge of the curriculum, the teacher’s prior knowledge and experience (McGregor 2003), and
the school environment that may be inappropriate and a liability (Fullan 1993). External forces also may enhance or hinder collaboration (McGregor 2003). For example, policies, procedures and practices developed by district, provincial or national bureaucracies and other institutions such as education centres, public and provincial libraries and even professional associations, may have an influence among the school-based role players in how they relate to each other collegially and collaboratively.

The advocacy campaign approach

A fourth strategy to make the school library integral to teaching and learning involves advocacy for the sort of activities that the school library supports. In this regard Loertscher (2002: 26) argues that “a strong reading programme in an information world is more critical today than ever”. School-wide campaigns that promote reading are examples of such an approach because they compel teachers to draw on and use the school library collection in reading promotion activities. Comprehensive and co-ordinated reading programmes might ensure that teachers and learners become effective users of information that is held in the school library. Advocacy strategies in South Africa’s public schools may be useful for ameliorating the low reading levels evident among primary school learners (Latha 1999).

The leadership approach

The principal is a key person for the success of all school initiatives and activities (Fullan 1993). Through his or her motivation, management and leadership style, he or she provides the lead in establishing and changing the culture of the school, and being the exemplar to the entire school community. The principal’s leadership is also a critical determinant of the collaboration levels among teachers and the teacher-librarian, particularly in teaching and learning matters. In this the school library is contingent on the principal’s leadership, as well as in budgetary and personnel matters. Thus, it is strategic to ensure that the principal understands the mission and potential of the school library and how it can be a critically important component of the school to make qualitative improvements in the teaching and learning programme.

The environmental approach

Stripling and Hughes-Hassell (2003: 73) assert, “plenty of space and attractiveness are the two most important factors in users’ attitudes towards libraries”. They add that school libraries are places of informal gathering, private and quiet studies, through providing homelike surroundings such as
carpets, plants, comfortable furniture, displays and through allowing users to make choices of what to read and write, and giving them control over their environment. In this approach to integrating the school library into the curriculum, attention is paid to ensuring an attractive appearance to the school library, so that it is an environment that is welcoming and a pleasant and rewarding place to be in. The environmental strategy would also include making the operational systems friendly, such as the process for borrowing an item or accessing some special equipment and collections.

The six types of strategies that were identified through a review of literature on school libraries show that there is a wide range of tools available that can be utilised, in tandem or singly, for purposes of integrating the school library into the taught curriculum at schools. To examine and reflect on the strategies in practice at the selected school in KwaZulu-Natal, the empirical component of this study is now discussed.

**Methodology**

The fieldwork, undertaken in 2004, generated data about the curricular use of the school library through questionnaires and interviews. A total of thirty questionnaires were administered: to the principal, deputy principal, two heads of departments, sixteen teachers (teaching five learning areas), and ten learners (two per grade from grades 8 to 12). Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted. These were with the principal, teacher-librarian, two members of the school management team, two teachers and three learners. School documents such as the timetable, learners’ projects, and minutes of staff meetings and the library committee supplemented the data gathered from participants through interviews and questionnaires.

Through these sources questions were asked that sought to illuminate how the school library in a township school was being used for curricular purposes. The data showed that the school management team and teachers employ two particular strategies. In the next section these strategies, their strengths and weaknesses are discussed.

**Research findings**

The two strategies devised at the selected school to enable learners to access the curriculum through greater use of the school library were the structured timetabling of class visits, and project assignments.
Timetabling class visits to the library

Analysis of documents and the responses of teachers as well as learners showed that visits to the library were structured according to the timetable. Learner questionnaire responses confirmed that their visits to the library were by way of a fixed period on the timetable. This timetabled allocation, determined by the school management team, made visiting the library compulsory for all learners. The greatest advantage of this is that all learners are exposed to books and other library material and also received library skills for retrieving these resources if they need them. However, these periods showed a thin linkage between what went on in the classroom and what went on in the library.

In an interview the teacher-librarian explained that there are three main activities during the allocated library periods: teaching library skills, discussing books and supervising independent reading or study. The library skills taught are “just-in-case” and not “just-in-time” since they are not linked to classroom curricular activities.

Although Van Deusen (1993) asserts that flexible scheduling “enhances the connection between classroom activity and library media instruction in the teaching role”, this approach suggests that teachers’ understanding about the role of the school has been established and lesson plans smoothly incorporate integration of the school library into the curriculum. It is a very sophisticated advanced level taking into consideration the low level of school library provision in township schools based on the hypothesis that learners from such schools may be unaccustomed to using a library when they first encounter a school library. Thus, fixed library periods for all classes will be a preliminary boost that may support learners’ subsequent casual visits to the library. Nevertheless, fixed timetable scheduling should be related to the curriculum with the school management team and teacher-librarian planning this in consultation with teachers.

Project work

Although project assignments were not used across the school at the selected township school, individual teachers used this strategy occasionally despite the expectations of OBE. In such cases, project work contributed to learners’ summative year mark, that determines their passing or failing a subject or learning area. Of the various reasons that learners gave for using the school library at the selected township school, project work was the most frequently (44%) mentioned reason. However, learners received little assistance in pursuing the set task and there was no formal programme to help them deal efficiently and effectively with information sourced in the library. This was
evident from a sample of ten marked projects. The ten scripts showed little application of higher order thinking skills such as comparing, analysing and synthesising information. Although most teachers declared in interviews that they taught learners how to deal with information, in the marked projects there were no citations and evidence of knowledge construction, and during interviews teachers revealed that plagiarism in projects was common.

Close examination of project tasks and ten sampled project scripts revealed that teachers had set content questions, which required specific answers. This required learners to respond only to who, what, where and when questions, thus restricting their responses to lower order thinking mainly, knowledge remembering and comprehension. Such questions have single answers that hardly require usage of multiple resources, can easily be copied from a book, which encourages plagiarism, and gives students little scope for constructing knowledge. McKenzie (2005: 2) states, “students cannot be blamed for such smushing. It is a time-honoured school tradition spawned by teachers who assign topical research”. He explains smushing as low grade synthesis. Learners simply transcribe what they find in one or two sources found in the library with or without understanding the information. Only a few diligent learners paraphrase and include their own thoughts.

Open-ended and intriguing questions, such as how and why questions that demand analysis, application, synthesis and evaluation were absent in the sampled projects. Project questions need to be intriguing enough to promote inquiry, which is “a relationship between thinking skills and the content” (Stripling and Hughes-Hassell 2003: 6). Only one question required learners to critically evaluate the topic at hand, but the responses showed little evidence of a critical evaluation.

During interviews teachers and the teacher-librarian were asked about their roles in learners’ project work. Unfortunately, teachers’ rationale for setting project assignments were not well linked to the curriculum because they disclosed that projects were given just for the sake of giving them. Contrary to the OBE approach that requires teachers to engage in planning at various stages namely, developing a Learning Programme, developing a Work Schedule and developing a Lesson Plan taking into consideration the principles underpinning the curriculum, resources available and related policies, teachers indicated that they spent little or no time on planning together before, during and after the project. The consultation was limited to inquiring about the resources available on a certain topic, although this was not done consistently. The teacher-librarian’s intervention was limited to learners’ behaviour in the library; guiding students to relevant resources and issuing required resources for research.
Thus, although the evidence shows that the project is a strategy that compels learners to use the school library, at this township school the strategy was employed on an *ad hoc* basis and was only technically linked to the curriculum. Teachers had not designed project tasks so that learners were challenged to use diverse school library resources and thereby develop their critical thinking and evaluative judgements.

These activities strengthen the integration of the school library into the curriculum but they need to be a whole school approach instead of individual teacher's initiative. The percentages illustrate that more teachers encourage utilisation of the school library than those who do not but each activity needs research on its own to make it credible.

**Conclusion**

Although the authors may agree with Ocholla (2004) that the policy intention in the outcomes-based curriculum, which emphasises resource-based and learner-centred learning, should push learners to being more dependent on school libraries than ever before, the findings revealed that the high school under study was not pursuing enough strategic approaches to achieve this end. Only two fairly isolated and unsupported strategies were in evidence.

Structured timetabled use of the school library is a component that should constitute part of a programmatic approach, but other supporting elements of the approach, such as a plan developed jointly by the relevant role players, were absent. The absence of supporting elements weakens the potential of timetabled visits to be integrated into the curriculum meaningfully and in a sustained way. In addition it is uncertain that merely timetabling class visits is an effective strategy for ensuring that school learners develop regular library use and reading habits that might be sustained for lifelong learning.

Similarly, in the absence of regular collegial collaborative planning and follow-up meetings for teachers and the teacher-librarian, the project approach is underdeveloped and supported so that any well-meant intentions may be negated. The potential of the project approach, thus, is underutilised. This may have an undesirable effect on learners over the long term if they develop negative attitudes to studying and being in a library.

On a more positive note, however, the authors conclude that though there is only evidence of two approaches being applied at this school, these provide important scaffolding points for key role players at the school to begin to leverage other
approaches that would position the school library as a more integral part of the taught curriculum in this school.

References


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