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A Malawian school library: culture, literacy and reader development

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Abstract

Purpose: This project aimed to investigate the success and suitability of a Western-donated school library in furthering the aims of literacy and reader development in Malawi.

Methodology: A qualitative, case study approach was taken using extensive interviews with school teachers and a library assistant at a primary school in Malawi.

Findings: Contrary to a common discourse that libraries are of limited value in a predominately oral culture, the research revealed a valuable role in providing sources for sharing knowledge from young readers to the non-literate. Limitations of the library under study included insufficient attention to reader development and inappropriateness of materials for the local context.

Practical Implications: The work reveals important shortcomings in furthering global literacy targets through current practice in African primary school libraries supported by international donors and nongovernmental organisations. Recommendations to improve impact are given.

Originality: This research is original in representing the voices of school teachers in the debate over the suitability of libraries to the African context and in evaluating the overseas book donation model currently practiced in many locations.

Keywords: Africa, library, literacy, reader development, Malawi, school

Paper type: Research Paper

Introduction

Education, Literacy and Book Donation

Education and literacy have been seen to play such a central role in international development and in tackling global poverty that they have become part of international targets and are central to the mandates of major international organisations. Education is directly relevant to two of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) established in 2000 at the United Nations, intended to provide a common focus and agreed targets for developing countries, in partnership with donor nations, to improve living standards and reduce poverty 2015. Goal 2 aims to "Ensur(e) that all children are able to complete primary education" in addition to achieving literacy in 15-24 year olds. Goal 3 aims to "Promote gender equality and empower women" which includes literacy levels and numbers of women in education (UNDP, 2005).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has recognised literacy in a broad sense as a fundamental human right and sees it having a range of economic, political and social benefits to the individual (UNESCO, 2005). Within their remit to promote literacy, UNESCO has recognised the role played by the school library and has stated that it should ideally provide services to all members of the school, promote reading and also serve the local community (UNESCO, 2000).

While many have welcomed the move to the focus on hard targets for education represented by the MDGs, some have pointed out adverse affects of the push for universal primary schooling in Africa, including increasing dependence on donors and lack of planning and resources available for post-basic education (Hayman, 2007). African scholars have raised concerns over educational approaches which transfer institutions and methods wholesale from a Western to an African context without adjustment for local culture, language and politics (Dei, 2005)

This latter strain of criticism of educational approaches is situated in a larger debate around the framing of development as modernisation. Here, a broad brush economic growth model and a focus on technology is criticised as too mechanistic and detached from individual rights and capacities (Melkote & Steeves, 2001; Chambers and Conway, 1991). A similarly simplistic "bottom line" approach to education may underplay African realities such as top-down reform affecting teachers' capacity to deliver curriculum (Banya, 1997). Those that have urged a more integrative, human-centred approach to development and poverty reduction have seen literacy as one important capability achieved through an empowering education, within a wider framework that should by definition be matched to local context and conditions (Anand and Sen, 1997).

For most people in sub-Saharan Africa, primary school provides the first opportunity to acquire literacy skills. However, due to economic difficulties, and the lack of a significant indigenous publishing industry, there are rarely the resources available to enable schools to create a literate environment. These difficulties have unfortunately been further exacerbated by the increase in school attendance numbers due to the drive for universal education under the MDGs (UNESCO, 2004, p.22). Pupil to teacher ratios are typically very high and the few government text books that may have been provided to schools commonly have to be shared between six or more pupils at a time (Makotsi, 2004, p.6).

A common way that NGOs and donors have traditionally attempted to address this lack of resources is through the donation of surplus Western books and educational material. According to Otike (1993) book donation comes in two forms, the solicited and the unsolicited. The solicited approach requires that the librarian present a case for a specific need to the donor, which the donor then endeavors to meet. In contrast the recipients of unsolicited donations do not have prior knowledge of the material they are receiving. Otike (1993, p.12) states that, due to a lack of consultation with the recipients, unsolicited donations largely "comprise the materials that libraries would least wish to receive" yet as this type of donation is the easiest to obtain it is the most common. Unsolicited donations are the easiest to obtain because donors who provide solicited material generally insist on proof that the resources will be used effectively before assistance is secured. This requires skill and patience from the requester because impact and effectiveness are difficult to measure and competition for the resources is great. Unsolicited donations rarely have these provisos attached. There is concern that where the unsolicited book donation approach is used, professional needs

assessments are seldom undertaken and continuing monitoring and evaluation procedures, with active community participation, are rarely implemented (Krolak, 2005). The result is the provision of information services that are based upon assumptions and not on actual needs.

Since the 1960s there has been much scrutiny of library aid; the tone of which has changed little. However, many of the theories and conclusions presented by the literature have been arrived at via desk-based research and there is a distinct lack of first hand data available. Furthermore, while much current research focuses on how information and communication technologies (ICT) can facilitate access to information in developing countries, lack of electricity, computer access and internet connection (World Economic Forum, 2009) still mean that book donation still has a large role to play, and current practice should be evaluated.

The purpose of this paper is to report the findings of a research project that was designed, using a largely qualitative approach, to investigate library aid from the recipient's perspective. The intention was to inform future practice and research so that library aid donors can be better informed about the people they are serving and can adapt their services accordingly.

The research questions posed in the study were:
- Does reading have a role to play in a traditionally oral culture?
- How relevant is donated book stock to library users?
- How is library stock used, and in light of this, what impact does it have?
- How is reader development supported?

Before presenting the methods and findings of the primary research conducted in Malawi, we shall present key ideas from the available literature which suggests that cultural traits, language barriers and teaching methods are all major obstacles that need to be tackled if there is any hope of addressing the low levels of literacy in sub-Saharan Africa.

Culture and literacy

It is often stated that sub-Saharan Africa lacks a reading culture (Totemeyer, 1994, Sturges and Neill, 1998, Rosenberg, 2003, Krolak, 2005) and, although the implementation of the Millennium Development Goal to provide universal access to primary education for all has provided a generation of sub-Saharan African children with more of an opportunity to become literate than ever before, commentators still lament the fact that access to education and reading material alone will not develop a reading culture. Totemeyer (1994, p.413), suggests that this is because sub-Saharan Africa's oral culture renders reading redundant — people stop reading once they complete their schooling as they "derive more pleasure from the oral and performing arts." As most adults in sub-Saharan Africa are non-literate they do not read at home, and if reading does not take place at home then a reading culture will not develop. The non-literate majority affect the literate minority and as such oral modes of communication remain prevalent.

Sturges and Neill (1998, p.68) posit that the act of reading is not only superfluous to oral traditions but it is in discord with traditional values. In oral traditions trusted sources of information are community chiefs and not the written word in a foreign book. What is more, "both the content of

the books and the solitude required to read them conflict with traditional values, making them at once less comprehensible and less acceptable" (Sturges and Neill, 1998, p.150).

Totemeyer (1994, p.416) observes that African university students do not take notes whilst attending lectures but they meet as a group afterwards and:

> "Sometimes sit throughout the night, reconstructing by means of collective memory, the whole speech, discussing and internalising it until they feel satisfied they have grasped it in full".

She also says that important information communicated only in print that is not validated to students orally, with eye contact, is often misunderstood, indicating that despite being taught to be "eye" people, African students prefer to be "ear" people as this mode is more natural to them.

These conclusions regarding cultural preferences and traits feature throughout the discourse on libraries and literacy in sub-Saharan Africa and suggest a limited role or cultural ceiling for reading. However, in one of the few qualitative studies assessing the information needs of a rural sub-Saharan African community, Sturges and Chimseu (1996) contradict these claims. They observe that print material is widely valued and that some traits of an oral culture actually facilitate access to the written word. For example it is "shared by the literate (often school children) with the non-literate." These contradictions were also observed by a South African initiative called Born to Read (Mtshweni, 2003, p.9) which encouraged mothers to become library members and read with their children. The mothers, who were non-literate, were encouraged to tell a story by looking at the pictures in books that were given to them. It is claimed that this was welcomed as it promoted traditional storytelling. Instead of the reading culture being stifled by an oral tradition where some may say it had no place, the mothers could identify similarities of storytelling in their own culture with the storytelling using books, thus enabling them to use their experience to introduce their children to reading in a way that they were comfortable with. By gaining an understanding of the local culture and what was important to the participants it was possible to take an approach that exploited synergies between oral and literate cultures.

Language

In sub-Saharan Africa, Western books donated by NGOs and 80 per cent of new titles from Africa are in ex-colonial languages, particularly English and French, despite the fact that less than five per cent of the continent's population is regarded as being fluent in either of them (Sturges and Neill, 1998, p.26). In sub-Saharan Africa, children mainly begin their preschool and early school lives communicating only in their local language. When they reach higher classes they are taught in languages such as English or French, which to them, although they are their country's official languages, are essentially foreign languages.

An extensive study of bilingual literacy and teaching practices in Malawi and Zambia, using multiple research methods, was carried out by Williams (1998) for the Department for International

Development (DFID) and it concluded that students in Malawi do not read English well enough to be able to use it to learn in other subjects (Williams, 1998, p.58). This is of serious concern if the only books that the children have access to are written in English. Where efforts have been made throughout Africa to introduce localised language materials to address this problem, Zeleza (2002, p.5) claims that, thanks to the "international supremacy of the English language and the processes of globalisation, indigenous language publishing remains precarious".

Teaching

The way in which literacy is taught has an impact on a child's attitude towards reading. This is illustrated by Elley (1992) who analysed the reading literacy scores of 210,059 students, aged nine and 14, from 9,073 schools across 32 national systems of education, alongside background questionnaires the children completed about their reading at home and at school, and questionnaires filled in by the teachers about themselves and their teaching. He found that in high-scoring countries reading was seen as a pleasant and imaginative activity whereas in low-scoring countries "reading is perceived as hard work that requires a lot of disciplined effort" (Elley, 1992, p.89). It is clear from Elley's findings that the approach taken to reading within the school curriculum impacts on literacy success, and that the modes of teaching that result in higher literacy scores are those that foster positive attitudes towards reading.

Many commentators lament the fact that teachers in sub-Saharan Africa do not have the knowledge or experience to encourage reader development so that when they are given access to books, the resources are not used to their full potential. Williams (1998, p.14) observed reading classes in primary schools in Malawi and Zambia and found that:

> The predominant (...) method of teaching of reading is the drilling of words and sentences through repetition (...) [which] devotes minimum attention to meaning (...) it was intended for English speaking children in the USA and UK (...) to reinforce structural patterns rather than attend to the meaning (...) it is no guarantee of understanding and at worst is simply a performance which masks a lack of real competence.

According to Sturges and Neill (1998, p.163), it is hard to convince teachers in sub-Saharan African schools the value of libraries due not only to a previous lack of access to books, but also to the difficulty of persuading teachers to use teaching methods other than the ones with which they are familiar. Unfortunately, it seems that often the teacher's attitudes are counterproductive to the development of a reading culture.

In the available literature, however, the voice of the teachers is distinctly lacking. As the general consensus is that teaching methods and attitudes have a pivotal role to play in the development of a reading culture, one of the vital questions the research project aimed to investigate is how the teachers use books when they are available, their approach to reader development and the reasons behind this. It was hoped that by engaging the teachers in dialogue, new ideas would emerge on how reader development can be adapted to their situation.

Reader Development

Improvements in literacy cannot be addressed without actively supporting reader development. There are many examples of authors highlighting the perceived lack of a reading culture but very few examples of the application of reader development programmes or of their evaluation or investigation. Reader development focuses on fostering a reading habit by developing positive attitudes towards reading, which in turn creates positive attitudes towards the development of reading skills. Rosenberg (2003, p.4, citing Forrest, 2001) refers to the definition used by Rachel Van Riel, "a director of one of the UK's first reader development agencies", who describes it as "active intervention to open up reading choices, increase readers' enjoyment and offer opportunities for people to share their reading experiences". Rosenberg (2003, p.4) expands on this by saying:

> "It sells the reading experience and what it can do for you (…) recognizing that reading has a crucial role to play in creating independent learners, underpinning literacy skills and educational attainment, and helping people understand themselves and others better. It starts with librarians introducing very young babies to books and carries on throughout the ages".

The few qualitative studies that have been undertaken, and reader development initiatives that have been implemented, suggest that reader development activity in sub-Saharan Africa is necessary if these barriers to the growth of a reading culture are to be addressed. However, according to Rosenberg (2003, p.iv), "although reader development has dramatically increased in recent years, it is not yet regarded as a core aspect of service provision in libraries in developing countries."
There is some evidence that larger organizations are starting to address this problem such as the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. They used the Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern African Librarians (SCECSAL) which meets every two years and "is key to library networking in Africa" (Rosenberg, 2003, p.v), as "an opportunity to raise the profile of reader development in Africa" (Rosenberg, 2003, p.v). African reader development initiatives were showcased with the aim of allowing librarians from many different countries to obtain new ideas. Reports about these reader development initiatives were collated by Rosenberg (2003) into a collection of ten examples from seven different African countries. This is a pioneering attempt to evaluate and share reader development projects in sub-Saharan Africa. Commonalities occur in the reports featured that allowed for the following conclusions to be drawn regarding reader development in sub-Saharan Africa:

- Few libraries have established reader development policies. Initiatives are largely one-off events and are not integrated into the library's agenda and services.
- Reader development is rarely treated as a collective effort.
- There is an evident need for training in reader development. Librarians and teachers often do not have the skills necessary, despite it often being assumed otherwise on account of their positions.
- Monitoring and evaluation of reader development activity in sub-Saharan Africa is lacking, making it difficult to establish whether a particular activity has impacted on reading habits

and abilities. Rosenberg, (2003, p.ix) notes that accounts usually concentrate on describing the various activities that took place and the numbers of people attending, with tangible outcomes rarely being analysed.

- Librarians are often working in isolation. Africa is a vast continent making it difficult for librarians to network and share their successes in relation to reader development initiatives.

Reader development is vital to the growth of a reading culture but it is an area that is rarely discussed in the literature, therefore, the current research sought to investigate "what reader development support do the children receive at a rural sub-Saharan African school?"

Context for the research

Malawi was already on its way to attaining the goal of a free primary education for all before the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were agreed in 2000, as its government had abolished primary school education fees in 1994 (UNDP, 2003, p.4), however there were not the materials to support the increase of student numbers that this resulted in. A small non-governmental organisation (NGO) based in Bristol, United Kingdom (UK) is attempting to address this need for educational material by shipping unsolicited donated English material to schools in Malawi and setting up libraries.

The NGO have to date installed a library at one secondary school and one primary school in rural Malawi with the intention of setting up more in the future. Since its installation they have funded a library assistant, selected by them, to work in the library at the primary school. The library assistant has received no training and has not completed secondary education himself. He was employed following a friendship he developed with the NGO's founder. The teachers and library assistant at the school had no knowledge of the stock selection before it reached them.

The NGO rely on book donations from Western publishers, British schools that donate surplus or unwanted stock, and other private donations. The stock selection policy is informal and the recipient schools are left to run the library as they see fit.

Malawi is culturally and economically representative of many sub-Saharan African countries. It is landlocked, has few natural resources, is one of the least developed countries in the world, and despite its rich cultural diversity, has an oral culture that features many similarities to other sub-Saharan African societies. Malawi used to be an English protectorate and its official language is English despite its people predominantly speaking Chichewa, their local language, as a first language. The NGO installed a library in rural Malawi at Cape Maclear Primary School in 2005.

Methodology

Research was conducted at Cape Maclear Primary School in Malawi, over a three week period in November 2008 and multiple methods were used.

Semi-structured interviews with the teachers and the library assistant were analyzed alongside internal documentation collected, which included exam statistics and diary-like reports written by the library assistant since the library was installed. A largely participatory approach in the form of semi-structured interviews was considered the most appropriate method to use as this "enhanced the opportunity to reveal aspects of social worlds that are important to the participants that might not otherwise cross the mind of the unacquainted researcher" (Bryman, 2001, p.280), thus allowing the researcher to establish the opinions and needs of the library users in depth.

The interviews began with library usage questions, which gathered data personal to the interviewee, such as their own library usage and views of the library provision. The questions then became more general, referring to the wider culture of Malawi. The final question asked what the interviewee would do to change the library. This featured at the end in the hope that all of the previous questions had led the interviewee to think in depth about many aspects of the library, its relevance and aspects of the Malawian culture, thus instigating a more detailed answer to this final question.

12 teachers including the head teacher were interviewed as was the library assistant. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim then analysed, alongside the internal documents that had been collected, using NVivo software.

Findings

Role of reading – culture and literacy

The research found that as it is often only school children who have access to the information in books and newspapers due to a lack of external resources, coupled with adult illiteracy; this has led to a change in the traditional flow of information. Information no longer just flows from the elders to the children but it also flows the other way. This contests Sturges and Neill's (1998) suggestion that the one trusted source of information in an oral culture is the village chief rather than the written word and supports the findings of Sturges and Chimseu's (1996) earlier qualitative study which found that print material is widely trusted, with information being "shared by the literate (often school children) with the non-literate." The books provide children with access to information which they then share with their parents. The sharing of information from books between the literate and non-literate encourages readers and turns the typically lone activity into a social one. As observed by Mtshweni (2003) and Sturges and Chimseu (1996), the traits and attitudes of an oral culture do not necessarily stand in discord with the act of reading.

Malawians cannot afford to travel to learn about other countries and cultures, books are one of the few ways they can access this knowledge. This is seen as extremely important because access to knowledge about the world is considered to have the potential to change Malawians' behaviour, culture and to improve their standard of living. The teachers see Western visitors and the countries they come from as economically successful, so by imitating an economically successful culture they hope to achieve economic stability also.

The findings also indicated that the community members with an interest in reading are predominantly the newly literate, such as the recent school leavers and secondary school pupils,

who frequently request to use the books.

The role of reading is very much seen as educational and in contrast to Sturges and Neill's (1998) suggestion to the contrary, the teachers say the attitudes of the community towards reading are positive. Books are associated with knowledge and wealth and to be seen with one gives prestige so some members of the community request to use the library books even if they cannot read.

These positive attitudes towards reading and education in Malawian society are credited to the stance of the current government as this teacher explains:

> "In previous years the government introduced adult literacy schools so that they know reading [and] writing but...ten years ago...[literacy levels] went down again, [but] now [they are] coming up again. [literacy levels decreased because] the government didn't encourage it, because ten/five years ago the government was not a party to education...was not all that interested. But as of now, with the new president, he is encouraging it now and I hope that in five, a few years coming I hope we've evolved. [Adult literacy classes are happening] again, here in Chembe village where we are."

He relates how this has had a direct impact on his own community:

> "Our life depends in the lake because it is where we get fish...we get money after selling the fish. Because of this our old parents didn't write, they were busy catching fish in the lake, so most of them didn't go to school...but now people...are sending their pupils to learn here...It is also encouraging parents to send their people because they are seeing now, some children, they are working after school....they are getting money...so...when they see what is happening...they are sending their pupils here."

For those interested in the development of a reading culture in Malawi, this encouragement from the parents is an exciting finding if Krolak (2005, p.4) is correct in her claim that "the desire to support the literacy acquisition of their children is a strong motivation for illiterate adults to become literate". She suggests that this should be seen as an opportunity to reach the adults through family literacy programs, especially as school children are more likely to be successful at school if they come from literate or semi-literate homes.

The current, more democratic government has not only affected attitudes towards education but has also affected the way people share information. For example, children can now share the information they have learnt at school with their older, non-literate relations, as previously mentioned. When asked whether there would be problems with youngsters teaching elders this teacher laughed and said:

> "In the past the children were not allowed to ask some questions to their parents or...to suggest something, they said if you talk to your parent...you are not polite enough to talk. Now through this democracy...the people [are] understanding the importance of discussing with the children, they are free now. Yah, we are liberated."

The findings indicate that reading does have a role to play in an oral culture; the barriers which stand in the way of a reading culture taking root are poverty and lack of education rather than cultural influences.

Library Usage, Teaching and Reader Development

No library usage statistics were available. However, semi-structured interviews allowed for qualitative data to be collected that provided an overview of reader development activity at the school by establishing, not only how the library is used, but also why it was used in this way.

The data revealed that most of the teachers do not take the library books into the classroom but they get information from the books which they then add to their lessons. They have to act as intermediaries because the language barriers that the children face render the books inaccessible.

This need for mediation contradicts high expectations expressed by the teachers that, through the independent reading of the library books, the children will obtain knowledge that they cannot access in class due to the large student numbers and a lack of individual attention from the teachers as is discussed next.

The teachers have such high expectations of the libraries ability to facilitate independent learning because they recognise that it provides the children with the opportunity to utilise the books in a way they have never could before:

> "Children..understand by seeing, touching, feeling... this library have really helped this school. They have really improved... in their reading and learning capacity.....We had not enough materials from the government so some of the children have never...seen a book or taken a book to read...just...reading or hearing the teacher, so in having a library, they go in to the library, they take a book, they see the picture, they read the words...In so doing they add more knowledge to what they have been taught in class."

The teachers claim that this alone has improved the childrens' reading, writing and exam results.

As the teachers are over-stretched it is seen as the child's role to go and independently seek information to solve problems they may be having in class. However, there was little evidence in the findings to indicate that children are actively being taught independent research skills. Furthermore, children at this school are only allowed access to the books from standard 5 onwards; the age of standard 4 students can range from nine to sixteen so it is possible that a child can be as old as sixteen before having any access to the books, and at least as old as nine. As the books are written in English and the children do not begin to get taught in English until these later grades it is seen as pointless to be giving them access to books they cannot understand. However, it is not just the younger children who have problems with language barriers; the older children face difficulties also:

> "Even these guys who are in the elder class not most of them they can understand English very well. Not most of them they can understand these bombastic words

that are found in the books so they always come and ask me, "Please interpret this for us." (library assistant)

Four of the teachers "sometimes" take the children to the library during the school day so they so they can compare between their classroom learning and what is in the books and then ask the children to share their reading in class. As the classes are so big and the library so small they have to take it in turns:

> "We have to take a certain number of children at a time to go in the library. They read, from there they go out, then another number go in the library. That is how we have arranged it because the library is small yeah."

This is both impractical and time consuming. The class sizes often reach 100 but there is only room for ten pupils at a time in the library.

Although these teachers encourage their children to use the library and share their reading in class, the sole focus is on education with no consideration of reader enjoyment.

 The rest of the teachers do not take children to the library because they either see it as the library assistant's job, they are fearful the books will get stolen or it is impractical due to the size of the library compared with the large class sizes.

This study indicates that Sturges and Neill's (1998, p.163) suggestion that teachers in Africa are hard to convince of the value of libraries is incorrect, the teachers do see the value of the library, indeed, they almost see it as a substitute teacher.

> ".....because a teacher can't teach each and everything from the class...the classes are very large classes, you can't control them so that one [the child] who have found difficulty...they have to go in the library."

All of the teachers think it is important to encourage the older children to go to the library if they have problems with their studies, to practice reading, and to expand their knowledge, but this approach is dependent on the child's initiative to act on this advice and on the library assistant's support once they are in the library. The children do not have access to books in the classroom, nor are they given consistent, regular library time during the school day, yet they are still expected to be independent learners. This is further compounded by the fact that they are unlikely to be able to read English well enough to be able to use it to learn in other subjects.

Of further concern is the library assistant's observation, which corroborates Williams (1998) findings, that the teaching methods used in the classroom focus on learning by rote but neglect to establish and ensure understanding. He notices that the children are good at memorising information read to them from books but observes that when asked to explain what they have read, using their first language Chichewa, they are unable to do so. In response he decides to award prizes to those;

> "Who are able to read and explain what he/she has read from the book, I think this can be the best way of making them the best readers."

Despite receiving no training and having not completed secondary school himself, the library assistant does much of the reading, library and book promotion work. He talks to students during assemblies and gatherings, explaining how using the books can help them in their exams and later in life:

> "I does encourage the children to come in by telling them the books that I have discovered in the library...I always tell them "look at this book"... Also with the teachers, I do the same...and they say "oh we are teaching this in the class" so they take them and show them to the kids and the kids are also advised from the class by the teachers that "this book you see, can be found in the library. So go there and have some more information.""

He helps the students to understand the books by explaining the meanings of words and "topics they do not understand". Because of this his role is developing and he feels he is increasingly being seen as an educator by the children:

> "Things have been great...because of how I treat them [the children] in the library because I sometimes act as a teacher, most of the time when I meet them in the village they usually call me "library teacher" all the time."

Only two of the teachers read for pleasure, in contrast however, the library assistant frequently mentioned leisure and the fun aspects of the library in his reports and interview, expressing a different attitude towards reading:

> "Children come to the library because of the funny games and pictures, as you know kids are very much attracted to the pictures and they learn through that they always have great fun."

Sturges and Neill (1998, p.163) state that teachers persist in using teaching methods that are unfavourable to reader development, even when they have access to a library, because they are not used to teaching with books or they are reluctant to use teaching methods other than the ones with which they are familiar. This study suggests that these views are too simplistic; the library assistant and many of the teachers have positive attitudes and longed to give students more opportunity, however, very large classes and language barriers result in them not having the time to spend with individual or small groups of children to ensure understanding and development.

Discussion

The findings suggest that book donations and enthusiasm from the stakeholders is not sufficient; professional support is also vital. Reader development programmes are needed, alongside the provision of relevant books, in order for the books to improve education standards and to be used to their full potential.

Experience from the case study suggests that donors, working alongside governments, must work with information professionals and education experts to develop innovative reader development programmes that utilize the traits of the community to engage everyone in reading. For example, in this study it was revealed that:

- Education and knowledge are associated with wealth, therefore to be seen with a book gives one prestige. The donors should ask "how can we harness this interest and nurture it?"
- Information from books gets shared orally from the literate to the non-literate. The sharing of stories and the experience of reading is a prime factor of reader development. How can this highly sociable trait of an oral culture be used to engage more people in reading and facilitate involvement of non-literate community members? The new enthusiasm from parents due to government influence could be harnessed to help develop a reading culture but it would need community participation and relevant resources.
- New literates were a theme throughout the findings. New literates can slip back into illiteracy if they do not have access to reading materials post-school. This section of the community should not be overlooked by library providers. Reader development should be a lifelong, continuous process. The evident interest in learning about the outside world shown in this study and the desire for continued education is an ideal basis on which to encourage people to read.
- The teachers and library assistant place great emphasis on the value of independent study, an important aspect of reader development, yet the current situation does not enable the children to utilize the library in this way. How can the teachers and library assistant be supported in developing the children's independent study skills? Library aid projects should consider training to be as essential as the provision of relevant books; training is necessary to help the teachers and the library assistant to use the resources that are already available to them more effectively.

Experience from this study suggests that Western donors must not make assumptions about the community they wish to assist. Thorough consultation with all stakeholders is crucial if inaccurate presumptions that undermine the aims of a project are to be avoided. This case study has shown that consultation with the library aid recipients can reveal important aspects that the external donor may not have otherwise considered; aspects that will be crucial in informing the direction that a library project should take and how a service can be made relevant and effective. Therefore, as project evaluation using both qualitative and quantitative data is still lacking in the area of library aid, this study suggests that this must be addressed.

Future research

Further research is recommended in the following areas:
- The few reader development programmes that have been researched and evaluated illustrate that if managed, directed and supported appropriately cultural traits can actually facilitate access to the written word. Reader development activity in sub-Saharan Africa is a new and emerging area that requires more evaluation and research without which resources will not be used to their full potential.
- Language barriers were a constant theme in this study. It is suggested that research be carried out regarding how this can be addressed. Zeleza (2002) reports that the supremacy of the English language hinders the success of local language publishing, if this is the case perhaps donors should look towards providing material used specifically for teaching English as a foreign language rather than just providing material printed in the English language.

- In this study the teachers and library assistant spoke for the children and the community. A repeat of this study, extended to collecting first-hand data from these library stakeholders, is recommended to provide a more comprehensive picture.
- No librarians, teachers, education or development experts were employed by the NGO featured in this study. It is recommended that research be carried out to establish whether this is endemic and if so, why? Philanthropic endeavours can have a vital role to play in international development. However, they must be subjected to quality insurance measures and regulation if they are to be directed effectively and appropriately. The NGO central to this study was formed on good intentions and philanthropy. However a lack of consultation with professionals and the library users, a lack of consideration of the specialist training needed for the library assistant and no evaluation of their service in the five years since its installation, has limited the library's potential to serve its purpose despite the high expectations of the teachers

Conclusion

One of the teachers interviewed for this study said:

> "I think in Malawi it is the song of the government, they decide that in every part and every learning area there must be a librarian, but the libraries must grow because it is a matter of encouraging a child to read....now a library is most important to our lifespan of our learning, really...Yes this is a very serious matter."

With the agreement of the Millennium Development Goals, the emphasis placed on education and libraries by African governments such as Malawi's, and the subsequent increase in school enrolment numbers, the time is ripe for library professionals to become involved in the development process. However, as librarians and libraries in the UK still continue to fight for funding and recognition it is likely that, as is evident in this case study, trained staff and professionals are overlooked in the consultation process by UK based NGOs and development agencies. This is lamentable because libraries are the ideal way to fill the resource gap and the library profession could play a vital role in helping Malawi and other developing countries towards education and access to information. The library world must advocate its profession and its position on the international stage in order to fulfil this role. Opportunities for improved networking (virtual or real) between African and Western library professionals and teachers should be sought, to allow for the sharing of experience and approaches to reader development. Certainly, any short term financial savings that NGOs and development agencies make by not employing or consulting library professionals must only be a false economy if the resources that are shipped overseas at great cost are not properly planned and directed and do not fulfil their potential.

Just as a modernisation philosophy applied to development in general can underplay the importance of human capabilities and contexts, the book donation model when not matched to need and supported with capacity building falls short in its ability to contribute to global priorities for human development. Libraries need to be integrated into teaching more tightly and this may mean adaptation of materials but also adaptation of teaching styles and use of resources.

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