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Life challenges and information needs of children and young adults in Lesotho: lessons from an internet-connected hybrid library

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Abstract

This discussion argues that, never before has the African child and youth been so vulnerable to social deprivation that comprises civil wars, drugs, disease and orphanage as in the 21st century; and to an extent that youth generally have to vie for themselves. The situation has also culminated into the African Union coming up with the African Youth Charter (2006) by which member states committed themselves to relevant policies and care. This paper reports on an enquiry into life challenges of children and youth as traceable from myriad reasons for using the Mafeteng hybrid type of district public library. Key categories of reasons for use of the library are educational, entertainment, adventure/curiosity (pornography, satanism) and solving livelihood challenges such as job seeking and disease cure. Efforts for an internet-connected library provision should not end at that, and assume that all is well. Since it seems use of Internet by children and youth within a library poses advantages and risks, the situation calls for a joint responsibility of all the concerned to ensure guidance which should minimize risks while maximizing benefits to the innocent minds.

Keywords: Youth, life challenges, hybrid library model, internet use, Lesotho

THE NATIONAL LIBRARY SCENE AND THE MAFETENG UNESCO PROJECT

Experience shows that children and youth have been, are and will remain one indispensable sector of focus of a national/public library services in every country. A mere existence of IFLA standing committee on children bears testimony to this assertion. Yet for children and youth, life challenges and their related information needs have not remained the same. Seemingly, such challenges especially as emerging in the 21st century place great demands on relevant library authorities to reflect anew on the what and how kind of library provision at hand, even a suitable type for the future. This is the kind of reflection made upon the Mafeteng public branch library in Lesotho, a country of with a population 1.9 Million in southern Africa.

The Lesotho National Library Service (LNLS), operating from its headquarters based in Maseru, the capital city of Lesotho, superintends the public library network comprising branch libraries which are located in all ten administrative districts of the country. Although they have been established at different intervals between 1976 when LNLS itself was established and 2002 when the tenth branch was inaugurated, the common feature characterizing these branches is that they are professionally very poor and inadequate. For instance, none of the ten branches except the headquarters is headed by a qualified librarian. All the intended library clients within each district have got to travel to towns where their district libraries are located because the latter do not in any way extend their services beyond the virtual library buildings. In general, there exist no community or village libraries that further devolve from the main branch libraries. This general dearth of library services nationally equally affects the majority of primary and secondary schools, which although well-supported by the Government's policy of compulsory primary education, lack school library system persists because there is no law that forces any school authority to provide such a facility. Of importance is that LNLS operates within Lesotho which is part of African Union that adopted the African Youth Charter in 2006. And among other calls, the Charter endorses the need to empower youth, and provide them with "access to information".

The National University of Lesotho (NUL) for its part admits learners from across the country. They enroll as either full-time or part-time students, with both having access to mainly a formal library based on two campuses, namely Roma and Maseru city. During the recess, full-time and part time learners have no adequate library services beyond campus. Part-time learners are the most disadvantaged. This shortcoming by the NUL library service was to be addressed one way or the other. And the NUL library became one of the main participants of the *Project to Provide and Enhance Access to Information to the Lesotho Disadvantaged Communities* (PEALDIC).

Through funding that was made available for a year, the Communications and Information Committee of the National Commission to UNESCO, and, in line with the UNESCO strategy of universal access to information, the project was designed to target the library-disadvantaged communities in three selected areas that include a public library within the semi-urban town of Mafeteng, about 80km south of Maseru city. The objective of PEALDIC was to establish a

network of information resources and knowledge services for the selected disadvantaged communities in Lesotho including the Mafeteng clientele.

Specifically for Mafeteng, the purpose was to

- Purchase computers for, and introduce internet use to the LNLS-managed traditional public library service
- Acquire more print materials such as newspapers; and facilitate integration of print with electronic resources
- Widen up and open doors for public library clients comprising children, youth and young adults; NUL academic learners; business community of Mafeteng, etc
- Provide a lesson for stakeholders to emulate and sustain the advantageous practices

LNLS and NUL active and potential library clients were informed about and invited to this scheme.

The Mafeteng public library got a boost in August, 2011 when it became the first and the only LNLS branch library country-wide that got connected to the internet for free use by the community. The headquarters had had a commercially-available internet café that closed down after operating for ten months in 2008. This unique feature of the Mafeteng branch, its membership and usage increasing, particularly from among children and youth; became a phenomenon that called for this sort of enquiry, to get a glimpse into the type of information needs of the main clients, namely, children, youth and young adults.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The study went through three levels. Firstly an understanding was made of crucial terms, especially as applied the title. Secondly, together with the writer's observations, a brief questionnaire was administered on almost all willing users who entered the library between the period June and July 2012. Out of the 720 respondents, 505 fell within the target age group between 15 and 37. Their responses were presented and analyzed. Finally, findings were discussed with relevant recommendations and conclusions.

For purposes of this enquiry, key terms were selected and defined. And these are as follows:

Life challenges - these are demanding conditions in life, general state of affairs as inviting appropriate attention. Presenting a national Vision 2020, the Prime Minister of Lesotho lamented what may now be seen as exemplary life challenges for all, including youth, namely unemployment, poverty, disease, corruption, nepotism, etc.

Information needs are what are required in order to impart and enrich one's knowledge for a particular purpose.

Children - The term may semantically mean the same with the term 'minors' which, by the African Youth Charter means young people aged 15 to 17 years subject to country's laws.

Young Adults - For purposes of the African Youth Charter, youth or young people shall refer to every person between the ages of 15 and 35 years.

Although three distinct age brackets comprising children, youth and young adults were involved in this discourse, for convenience the term youth will generally be used to encompass all library users who responded to the enquiry, and as aging from 15 to 35 years.

Hybrid Library - In the first place the Cambridge Dictionary (2008) defines the word “hybrid” as

“a noun, a plant or animal that has been produced from two different types of plant and animal, especially to get better characteristics, or anything that is a mixture of two very different things...” p.708.

This is further understood to mean that a hybrid is an outcome of two merged or assimilated breeds or types of a particular living thing. Essentially, it should still be two kinds of plants or two types of animals. The library profession has thus coined or borrowed the term and applied it along the same premise regarding two different types yet of similar nature. In that regard, Law (2014) writes:

“a hybrid library may be described as a physical library in which seamless, integrated access is provided to all the resources available to that library irrespective of medium or location –” p1.

After asserting that ‘although largely confined to Higher Education....,’ Law [2014] concludes that ‘it is likely that the concept will spread to other types of libraries. This is the conceptual framework within which the hybridity of the Mafeteng branch library is anchored; that is, on a mixture of two types of libraries being public and academic which have participated in the PEALDIC project; on all types of resources being printed and electronic; and finally on the provision of unlimited access to all including the young and old. In this way, PEALDIC turned this branch seamless.

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Below are tables 1- 6 that present data as collected from selected group of the Mafeteng branch.

Table 1: Sex of respondents

SEX	No.
Females	310
Males	<u>192</u>
Total	502

Table 2: Age brackets of respondents

AGE BRACKET	No.
15-25	271
21-37	<u>231</u>
Total	502

Table 3: Home areas that respondents came from

HOME AREA	No.
Within Mafeteng town	235
Mafeteng rural areas	155
Beyond Mafeteng district	<u>113</u>
Total	502

Table 4: List of sample occupations that respondents were in, or closer to what they did.

OCCUPATION (one ticked)	No.
Unspecified	3
Unemployed	189
Pupil	65
Full-time student	92
Part-time student	80
Business person	6
Self-employed/farmer	49
Civil servant	<u>13</u>
Total	502

Table 5: Categories of three main reasons for use of the Library

CATEGORY	No.
Entertainment/Social	457
Educational	340
Adventure/curiosity (pornography, satanism)	329
Solving work-related or livelihood challenges such as job seeking and disease cure.	<u>307</u>
Total	1343

Table 6: SUMMARY COMMENTS BY RESPONDENTS (optional)

- My intentions today was to get information for my studies, but I have spent time chatting with friends, so the internet distracted me
- Educational purposes are a priority, and am grateful that internet meets such needs; other reasons such as entertainment are secondary
- Reading library's story books and for as long as I wish keeps me out of boredom
- Library visits nowadays enables me to interact with so many cute guys, even if I relax on the benches outside, and I enjoy the company of my age-mates, especially ever since discovering that I am HIV positive
- I have been able to connect to business that gave me a part-time job
- I once found a PC unclosed, showing pornographic images, I got attracted, copied this webpage which I like very much, but being shy I discreetly watch these images/movies
- I rarely ever visit the library, but I have this week wanted to verify that it is popular and to assess if, as a teacher I may encourage our school pupils to register with it
- Although I am part of the Basotho that are still shocked by a double ritual murder suspect named Mr Lehlohonolo Scott, I am curious to learn more from the internet, about satanism which I believe this murderer is engaged in; that is why I have been searching for related topics
- I rely on this branch library for my part-time studies, especially because my home is far from the University, I take the opportunity to download lots of notes for my class where I work as a primary school teacher
- As a civil servant, I have come here to look for a Government gazette that I wish to refer to and the District Administrator next door has lent me his copy to use within the library if in case the library has no copy of the issue that I am looking for...
- I have lately seen a number of youths coming here, and since I am a loafer, and decided to visit the place too to discover what may be of interest to me

- I am part of a 15-member club that has connected to a Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) is Maseru which assists post-convict youth and we meet at the lawn area to conduct our business
- It was exciting to communicate through an internet with a stranger for about two months. He urged me to cross the border to the neighbouring country so we meet. I borrowed money to travel to the agreed spot, but upon describing to a friend circumstances for requiring money for, I was warned that I might be heading for a human trafficker.
- Lately most PCS are sadly occupied and one should wait for some time to get a free PC.

LESSONS, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Figures in Table 5 and Table 6 are actually telling of the magnitude and types of both life challenges and reasons for use of the branch library by youth. The two tables fundamentally summarize three issues central to the focus of this study. The first is the transformation from a public library to a hybrid model that Mafeteng has become. Of essence is the effect of producing a mixture or a blend of an ordinary public library plus a special as well as an academic-inclined, internet-connected model, such that the characteristics or the quality is better, or a ‘high breed’ and as the concept “hybrid” has been understood. The second issue is the convergence of use by information seekers from a wide spectrum of youth; and the third are the positives versus the negatives learned.

From a public library to a hybrid model

Prior to the 2011 UNESCO’s project, the LNLS public branch library located within a modest building in Mafeteng remained a traditional collection of print materials that attracted insignificant but typical public library users. It remained the same with other branches. The project embraced the participation of the National University library, by collection and clients; thus breaking the barriers of conventional public library type. The results are the increase of users numerically and by location. So is the widening of the scope of use and their reasons through the internet. Then the branch transformed its performance.

By January 2013 the directorate of LNLS issued statistics on membership as shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Registered library members by district Branch Library, January 2013.

Branch	Number of Registered members
Maseru	480
Botha-Buthe	--
Leribe	50
Berea	90
Quthing	110
Mafeteng	9000
Mohale’s hoek	61
Qacha’s nek	100
Thaba Tseka	--
Mokhotlong	100

Mafeteng library has not the LNLS biggest branch by any form of measurement. It is neither the oldest in terms of the time it was established. Yet this phenomenal patronization by clients that surpasses all the districts was proof that the only factor that it has, which other branches lacked was hybridity, that was driven by an internet, electronic resources and allowing all types of clients to use the branch for free. The new feature of the branch ranged from breaking the barriers of a traditional library that had excluded some disadvantaged citizenry.

Of importance to library and other authorities was its most outstanding and obvious attraction as compared to all other branches. Details that begged explanation were what answers these visitors, clients, users and members of the communities and citizens looking for from the Mafeteng branch library, and which they could not get prior to the UNESCO project?

Unpacking information needs of youth by 2014

Information needs of youth that converge in Mafeteng border on myriad life challenges that are comprehensively outlined by the African Charter. Those challenges are not only elucidated by the Charter. It is again clear that these young citizens seek solutions to plight as outlined by the objectives of over 600 NGOs that by 2014 exist in Lesotho through a sort of a (*Letsema*) to assist specifically the vulnerable and orphaned children and youth. Six hundred is a high number for the number of NGOs focusing on the same purpose, and for the Lesotho population of hardly two million. But the figure might be justified, given the challenges. They constitute poverty, unemployment, underemployment, HIV and AIDs affected and infected families, youth-headed households, limited educational opportunities, human trafficking, drug abuse, and several more. And these are not an imagination. They are deciphered from elaborate responses as summarized in Table 6. In addition, Mafeteng library as a physical place, serves as a space for refuge from boredom, frustrations, temptations for mischief, and the like. As operating within the precincts of the District Administrator, there is a symbiotic relationship whereby visitors to one of the two places can gain from the other.

At this stage, the crucial question is whether the library becomes a genuine knowledge-imparting service and a safe profitable or beneficial spot even a sanctuary that can be recommended for the distressed, destitute youth or rather a facility that can worsen the situation to some individuals.

Although the Lesotho Government has a dedicated Ministry of Youth (Gender and Sports), ministerial policies, structures and budgets have not necessarily attracted others sectors such as libraries to assist address relevant life challenges of this category of citizens. Partners of PEALDIC are to be recommended that, even if by coincidence, they have significantly teased out information needs of children, youth and young adults, and as aligned to African Youth Charter.

Recommendation for youth's use of internet-connected hybrid library in Lesotho

In Lesotho, the Mafeteng branch library is a kind of best practice in hybridity that is to be emulated by the rest of LNLS branches or similar cases. It should provide a lesson to library authorities, to library users and organizations relevant to children, youth and young adults. Yet, this recommendation should hasten to count and compare the positives and negatives.

There are genuine benefits which visitors reap from use of the library. Most of school children are seen borrowing easy readers and checking reference materials from the enhanced traditional library; something that supports educational needs of the schooling groups.

The Mafeteng model of a hybrid library was advantageous to all the authorities that were party to the PEALDIC project. NUL library referred its bona fide students who so wished to use the branch. UNESCO advanced its interests at the national level by using the existing library building and providing seamless access to local and global knowledge to the given communities. LNLS too, benefited from the internet and e-resources that were hitherto known almost exclusively to academic library users. Collaboration of all these partners enabled LNLS to unleash its potential at this branch.

Thousands of youth and young adults kept themselves busy in Mafeteng library carrying out their own business as summarized in Table 5. But in that summary as well, on the contrary, is a negative side on use of the branch. Viewing pornography can indeed be entertaining just as listening to or downloading popular music perhaps is. But to young innocent minds 'indecent' preoccupation can be regarded as destructive and destructing, and to an extent whereby most libraries, whether public or academic would hinder through dedicated software. The problem is where the library's leadership and professional skills are as limited as it is in this case.

It is to be regretted that after a year's duration of the project, LNLS has not been able to immediately take over one basic responsibility of funding the internet connectivity, and invariably, patronage is on the decline.

Be that as it may, Mafeteng was a remarkable therapy for the information-needy youth; the branch was the best hybrid library model while it lasted, and lots of unique lessons have been learnt from that performance.

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