Converging paths in the drive for school libraries in democratic South Africa

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Abstract:

The paper examines some recent positive developments on the rocky road of school library advocacy in South Africa - first providing some background on schooling and libraries in post-apartheid South Africa. The road is littered with dashed hopes and broken promises; but there are signs that at last education authorities are translating their polite rhetoric into action. The paper describes the intersecting paths of two initiatives, the LIS Transformation Charter, commissioned in 2008 by the National Council for Library and Information Services (NCLIS), and the One School, One Library One Librarian campaign, launched by the civic action group Equal Education in 2009. Each operates in very different contexts but I argue that the pressures exerted by these two movements, independent of but aware of each other, will drive the fortunes of school librarianship in South Africa.

The paper argues that, in gaining the moral high ground in its confrontations with government, Equal Education has worked to the benefit of the LIS Transformation Charter processes, which after a hiatus of three years were resumed in 2013. In these three years, the Education Department began to work on school libraries - producing school library "guidelines" and in 2013 presenting a 10-year plan of action for school libraries as well as guidelines for cooperation with public libraries. It is open to debate whether these moves are the result of the damaging findings of the 2009 draft of the Charter or of Equal Education's campaigning. The road ahead is still long but certainly looks more promising. Much will depend on the larger LIS sector, which must ensure that the pressure points continue.

Keywords: South Africa, School libraries, Equal Education, LIS Transformation Charter

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Introduction

The paper examines some recent positive developments on the rocky road of school library advocacy in South Africa. The road is littered with dashed hopes and broken promises; but there are signs that at last education authorities are translating their polite rhetoric into action. My purpose is to explore what lies behind these positive shifts – tracing the intersecting paths of two initiatives, *the LIS Transformation Charter,* commissioned in 2008 by the National Council for Library and Information Services (NCLIS), and the *One School, One Library One Librarian* campaign, launched by the civic action group Equal Education in 2009. Each operates in very different contexts but I argue that the pressures exerted by these two movements, independent of but aware of each other, will drive the fortunes of school librarianship in South Africa.

I hope to demonstrate how the different approaches of the two movements have worked together to bring change. The Transformation Charter has been a quiet process of consulting and negotiating of support across LIS sectors; while the Equal Education campaigning has been one of building pressure on policy-makers through civic activism - marches, press releases, and legal action.

Library advocacy in the South African context is especially challenging. The premise that underlies my paper is that advocacy for school libraries is advocacy for quality education and equal opportunity. This belief is the common ground between the two initiatives that are the focus of this paper. But before examining the two movements and their crossing paths, it is necessary to provide some background on schooling and libraries in post-apartheid South Africa.

South African schooling

There is consensus that, despite the high priority given to education in our annual national budget allocations, our school system continues to be the stumbling block in our aspirations both to redress the inequities of our past and to join the ranks of the prosperous knowledge economies. 2014 is the 20-year anniversary of our democracy, and this year's election is the first for the so-called "born-free" generation. But we are still struggling to overcome the heritage of apartheid education in which per capita expenditure varied between R5403 on "white" schools and R1053 on schools in the rural Transkei "homeland." Despite allocating large shares of national expenditure to schooling (20% in 2014), huge backlogs in basic facilities still exist 20 years later. According to the government's 2011 National Education Infrastructure Management System (NEIMS), of the 24,793 schools public schools in the country, over 10,000 still had pit toilets and about 3,000 were without electricity and water (South Africa. Department of Basic Education, 2012).

These infrastructural problems are reflected in the uneven quality of our schools' academic performance. Although it is no longer accurate to talk of "white" schools, the disparities in quality between the historically white sector of schooling and the historically black sector in South Africa are still evident, as shown in the statistic that in 2007 two percent of white school leavers failed the matric examination compared with 39% of blacks. The independent educationist Graeme Bloch claims that 60 to 80% of our schools are dysfunctional (2009:

170). In 2013 Nick Taylor, head of the government's National Education Evaluation and Development Unit, described our literacy levels as a "national disaster" (Jansen, 2013).

School LIS in post-apartheid South Africa

The NEIMS report of 2011, which was mentioned above, makes the fundamental challenge clear: across the country only seven percent of schools have a library "with stock," another 13% have a library room available. Today's library provision retains the inequities of apartheid education. The vast majority of South African school libraries and school librarians exist within schools serving middle class communities, who are able to levy fees and raise funds for "extra" resources and teachers "extra" to the learner/teacher ratios set by the Department of Basic Education (DBE).

To understand today's position, it is necessary to look back at the legislation that marked the demise of apartheid schooling. Disappointingly, the 1994 and 1995 education White Papers included only one mention of school libraries and only in terms of the physical provisioning of school buildings, describing them as an "educationally necessary facility," together with laboratories and workshops (South Africa. Department of Education, 1995: 77). It might be argued that it is this perception of libraries as physical spaces (and perhaps as costly spaces) that has hampered school library advocacy ever since. At the time, Karlsson of the Education Policy Unit at the then University of Natal saw the absence of any mention of the educational role of school libraries in the White Papers as evidence of the failure of the library think-tanks of the early 1990s, which had promised a better climate for libraries. These had been, she suggested, perhaps librarians "talking solely to themselves" (1996: 101).

The South African Schools Act of 1996 is significant for school libraries for two reasons:
- It made no mention of libraries
- It devolved decision-making to schools' governing bodies.

In keeping with the democratisation of education, a school's Governing Body has control over its budget, including the allocation of funds to its library. The Act describes the role of the Governing Body as ensuring "quality education" in the school. Librarians have used this phrase as an argument for the provision of a school library. However, the relationship of education "quality" with "libraries" in the minds of school managers cannot be assumed.

In previous articles I have explored the implications of curriculum reform from the mid 1990s for libraries (for example, Hart & Zinn, 2007). The new learner-centred curriculum that was implemented in 1997, Curriculum 2005, with its emphasis on portfolio work and independent research, promised a more conducive climate for libraries. It was believed that fairer provisioning might redress the unequal distribution of school libraries across advantaged and disadvantaged sectors. Moreover, the recognition of the need for lifelong learners seemed to indicate recognition of the need for information literacy education, accepted, we thought, to be the mission of school librarianship. Yet, there was little understanding of these connections in circles outside librarianship.

Having witnessed the scattering of school library collections in many schools in Cape Town as they lost their librarian posts and library budgets in the late 1990s and the neglect of school libraries by our education authorities, I could argue that school librarianship today is in a weaker position than in 1994. This comment has to be seen against the confusing backdrop of polite rhetoric from policy-makers and politicians. From time to time we have been

encouraged by promising comments on public platforms such as those in 2006 in Parliament from our then Minister of Education in talking in Parliament of the poor academic performance of our schools:

> Anecdotal evidence suggests that the high schools with the worst results are surrounded by primary schools that do not have the resources to teach effectively. It is important to stress that resources does not refer to money; it may refer to teacher competence or to an inadequate or absence of a library. (Pandor, 2006)

For years the LIS profession has tried to persuade policy-makers that libraries are a cost effective way to uplift standards so that *all* South African children leave school ready to contribute to the economy and to our young democracy. Just one example is the submission colleague Sandy Zinn and I, on behalf of the newly formed School Libraries and Youth Services Interest Group of the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA), made in 2000 to the chair of the committee that had just released a report on the failure of Curriculum 2005. The review of Curriculum 2005 came from widespread concern over the problems in implementing the curriculum in the disadvantaged sector of our schooling, which of course, represents the majority of South Africa's schools. In our submission we expressed our disappointment that the absence of libraries had not been considered in the Commission's analysis, contending that school library programmes were necessities and not luxuries. We warned that "Unless government intervenes more forcefully then the present gap between information-rich and information-poor schools will continue to grow."

It was soon apparent that our submission had made no impact as the two major curriculum revisions of the next few years paid no attention to libraries and so, understandably, the attempts by the school library sector to persuade the national Department of Education government to establish policy came to nothing. The South African Constitution of 1996 defines the responsibilities of our spheres of government: central government establishes policy, while the provinces implement it – hence, the importance for school libraries of national policy. The national department, for example, sets the pupil/teacher ratios for the country and sets minimum standards for school infrastructure – both of which are crucial to school libraries. The first attempt at national policy was the National Policy Framework for School Library Standards*,* which came from the unit responsible for school libraries in the Department of Education and which was widely welcomed by the school library sector on its release in 1998. But by 2000 there was concern that it was just gathering dust and that government was paying mere "lip service" to the need for school libraries (LIASA School Libraries and Youth Services Interest Group, 2000). This 1998 draft was followed fruitlessly by three other school library policy "discussion documents" in 2000, 2001 and 2005 – each the outcome of time-consuming nation-wide consultations. There has never been any satisfactory explanation for the failure of the draft policies and by 2005 the school library unit in the national department of education had been dissolved.

The advent of NCLIS

However, by 2005, a new player had arrived on the scene, NCLIS, as legislated for in the NCLIS Act of 2001. The National Council for Library and Information Services offered school library champions a platform to lobby support among colleagues in other LIS sectors.

The early 1990s had been a hopeful time for South African public librarianship. As in all other areas of society, the looming demise of the apartheid government had led to lively debate on what kind of libraries the profession envisaged for the new democracy. Position

papers spelled out a vision for transformation, including a council that would cut across barriers and be a powerful force for library advocacy. However, the optimism of the early 1990s was dampened by the restrictions in public spending which followed South Africa's inclusion in the global market economy (Dick, 2002: 30). Lor, Chairperson of the Transitional Executive Committee of the new professional association, LIASA, contended in a submission to Parliament in 1998 that budget cut-backs were "crippling" libraries (1998). Leach's follow-up survey of provincial public library services confirmed Lor's observations (1998). All but one reported a reduction in their funding, with resulting cuts in materials budgets, staff, and training. Another significant finding for the focus of this paper was the pressure on public libraries to provide educational materials for students who, in the absence of school libraries, were flocking to public libraries to meet the demands of the new resource-thirsty curriculum.

The NCLIS Act of 2001 might perhaps be seen as the beginning of improved fortunes for South African public libraries. The purpose of the Council is:

> to advise the Minister of Arts and Culture and the Minister of Education on matters relating to library and information services in order to support and stimulate the socio-economic, educational, cultural, recreational, scientific research, technological and information development of all communities in the country. The functions of the Council are to develop and coordinate library and information services in the country. (NCLIS, 2005)

One year after its first meeting in 2004, it reported to Parliament on the challenges confronting "over-stretched" and "under-funded" LIS. Significantly for this article, one of the key challenges it focused on was the plight of school libraries, thus in Section 6.5:

> The lack of well-stocked, professionally staffed school libraries results in learners inundating public libraries with requests for information. This exacerbates the problem of under-funded and over-stretched public libraries. The various Education Departments should urgently address the matter.

In its submission to Parliament, NCLIS put forward a new vision for the LIS sector suggesting that it be re-orientated in accordance with a developmental agenda and that political decision-makers and administrators be mobilised to prioritise funding. And, indeed, in 2005 government announced the Community Libraries Conditional Grant of R1 billion to be administered by the Department of Arts and Culture (under which South African public libraries fall). A further grant of R1.8 billion followed in 2012. By 2012 the Conditional Grant had funded 34 new public libraries, upgraded another 229, and provided for 1575 staff contracts (South Africa. Department of Arts & Culture, 2012). It also had provided funds in 2007 for NCLIS to commission the LIS Transformation Charter, which I suggest might well be the turning point for South African school libraries.

School librarianship in the LIS Transformation Charter

Post-apartheid South Africa has had a number of charters across different sectors, inspired by the 1955 Freedom Charter, the statement of core beliefs at the heart of our democracy, and part of the drive towards redress of injustices. I was invited to join the Charter's team some months after it had begun its work, initially with the specific brief to write the chapter on school LIS.

The production of the LIS Charter has been unexpectedly slow. It has comprised two phases, with a break of three years between the two. However, what appeared to be a hiatus from 2010 to 2013, in which what we believed was the finalised Charter disappeared from our sight into government bureaucracies, was a period of huge significance for school librarianship, as will be explained below. It brought some new travellers to the road and some shifts in the political environment that necessitated some radical rethinking by the Charter Team that assembled again in 2013.

In the first phase, various iterations of the Charter were presented at meetings across the country for comment. In 2009 Draft 6 was accepted at a national summit by the professional LIS community as the final draft, which then was submitted by NCLIS to the two government ministers responsible for LIS, the Ministers of Education and of Arts and Culture. The Ministers received and accepted the draft before it was sent to Parliament for discussion by Portfolio Committees, a necessary step prior to submission to Cabinet for endorsement. Once the draft was handed over, NCLIS relied on political interventions to secure the Charter as an item on the government agenda, a difficult task in the election year of 2009. The post-election Cabinet re-shuffle brought in new Ministers of Education and of Arts and Culture, who could be assumed to have no prior knowledge of the Charter processes.

The longest chapter in Draft 6, separated out from the discussions of the other sub-sectors, was devoted to the problems in the provision of school libraries – a sign that at last school libraries were being prioritised. The chapter documented the deteriorating position of school libraries and the lack of leadership by the national Department with the confusing series of policy drafts and the closing of its school library unit. Pragmatically, it stopped short of demanding a centralised school library for every school; rather, it outlined a number of interim models that might help meet the urgent information and reading needs of school learners. However, in the absence of other explanations, it seems likely that this discomfiting highlighting of the neglect of school LIS by the national Education Department was the stumbling block in the way of final government approval of the Charter and might explain its disappearance from view between 2010 and 2013.

Nonetheless, in this period the so-called Draft 6 was widely circulated by means of the web sites of the National Library of South Africa and the Department of Arts and Culture. One immediate positive outcome for public libraries was the gazetting of the Public Library and Information Services Bill in 2010, which was informed by the Charter's recommendations. But, more importantly for school librarianship, in 2008/9 it caught the attention of the young NGO, Equal Education, which will be discussed in the next section.

In 2013 the two new Cabinet Ministers (of Arts and Culture and of the newly named Basic Education Department) requested a meeting with the Charter's chairperson and some of the technical team. The chapter on school libraries had prompted the call for the meeting. It was apparent that the highly visible civic action by Equal Education, in its campaign for school libraries from 2009, including a series of marches by thousands of school children and widely publicised court actions over the alleged string of "broken promises" from 2012, had put pressure on government to address the dire school library situation as documented in Draft 6.

The meeting with the Ministers confirmed that Draft 6 was not acceptable to government and so the Charter team reassembled to update Draft 6 and incorporate some positive developments of the hiatus years. Those that concerned school libraries were:

- The National Guidelines for School Library and Information Services of 2012 (South Africa. Department of Basic Education, 2012). They fall short of policy but they offer a vision of the educational role of school libraries that can call government to account;
- The admission in its briefing to Parliament in August 2013 by DBE that it had neglected LIS (South Africa. Department of Basic Education, 2013a). The briefing went on to outline its plans to remedy the situation. It has asked Treasury for R700 million to fund the first phase – and will bid for further funding for the following 10 years;
- The DBE's Norms and Standards for Schools Infrastructure (South Africa. Department of Basic Education, 2013b), which accept a library/media centre as a core area in every South African school. They give a timeline of 10 years for the establishment of school library infrastructure; but they make no provision for library staffing or library materials. These regulations are the result of the legal action that Equal Education and its allies took against the Ministry of Education, which I will return to in the next section. LIASA joined Equal Education in making submissions on the various drafts of the regulations - commenting on their limited vision of a library and on the contradictions between their wording and the School LIS Guidelines that had come from the same department (Library & Information Association of South Africa, 2013).
- The promise of better coordinated services to school pupils in the guidelines for cooperation between DBE and the Department of Arts and Culture that were released in 2013.

At the meeting with the Charter team that preceded the second phase, the two Ministers tabled an interim solution to the demands for school libraries in all schools. They argued that, in the light of the unaffordability of these demands in the short or medium term, the solution should be in shared responsibility for the provision of services to young people. They pointed to the potential for joint use school/public LIS, for example, through the positioning of new public libraries close to schools. The challenge in the second phase of the Charter was to incorporate the thinking of the Ministers without compromising the principles of school librarianship. A fuller account of the final LIS Transformation Charter is given in the paper colleague Mary Nassimbeni and I have submitted to IFLA's Library Theory and Research Section.

Equal Education

The mission of Equal Education is "quality and equal education … through analysis and activism" (Equal Education, 2012: 4). Its annual reports give insight into the shifts in direction since the NGO began in 2008. In 2008 it was a group of young activists working to improve schools' infrastructure, such as broken windows, in the Cape Town township of Khayelitsha. But its 2008 report revealed the following intentions:

- to become the leading voice of education policy in South Africa
- to transfer its gaze beyond specific localised problems towards broader systemic issues.

Already in 2008 school libraries were emerging as its systemic issue. In 2008, before I joined the LIS Transformation Charter team, I was invited to run workshops with Equal Education members, in which we explored why they thought schools should have libraries and how they saw the contribution of libraries in equalising their opportunities.

The 2009 annual report had the slogan of the campaign for school libraries, *One School, One Library, One Librarian*, prominently displayed on its cover. Equal Education's growing interest in school libraries had been nurtured by the fact that only five of the 54 schools in Khayelitsha had libraries, by the complaints from its young members about their problems in accessing resources for their school work, and by the prevailing low literacy levels. Between 2009 and 2012:

- It organised peaceful marches to Parliament of over 100,000 people;
- 5000 people took part in a fast for school libraries;
- 65,000 people signed a petition for a library and a librarian in every school;
- 100 distinguished national and international figures added their signatures to George Bizos's open letter in 2010 to President Jacob Zuma calling for a library and librarian in every school;
- Its Bookery project collected over 100,000 books and opened 20 new school libraries (more, as it points out, than the Western Cape Education Department);
- It trained over 500 community leaders;

By 2012 it had a national stage and could claim that "the impact of EE is reflected in the fact that education is today the most talked about problem in South Africa" (2012: 21).

To rebut claims that libraries are unaffordable luxuries, it commissioned research in the cost of a national school library system (Equal Education, 2011). This document, as well as its various memoranda to government, contains several references to Draft 6 of the LIS Transformation Charter. Its evidence-based activism and shrewd use of the media have put school libraries on the map as never before. Searching questions have been asked of the Minister of Education in Parliament on the meaning of a "functional" school library (Motshekga, 2010); and interesting debates have been provoked on the merits of school libraries versus other facilities like proper toilets (for example, Spaull, 2013).

However, in 2011 Equal Education broadened its gaze again to campaign for decent infrastructure rather than libraries alone. In 2007 the SA Schools Act had been amended to empower the Minister of Education to draw up regulations on norms and standards for school infrastructure. Her failure to do so by 2011 became the centre of an acrimonious legal struggle. In its court papers, the NGO listed 20 promises that had been broken by the Department and the Department retaliated with what Equal Education called "racist insults". A perusal of online sources uncovers the huge support from civic society groups for Equal Education's court cases.

Intersecting paths

Perhaps it is not important to assign credit for the positive shifts since 2009 to either Draft 6 of the Charter *or* to Equal Education. Realistically, it is likely that the positive actions by government between 2009 and 2013 were triggered by Equal Education's high profile campaigns rather than by the Charter. Indeed, the final Charter acknowledges the impact of the civic activism of the NGO. However, I would argue that the fortuitous crossing of the two movements is what created the improved climate for school librarianship. Draft 6 informed the Equal Education campaigning from 2009, as evidenced in several allusions to it in its documents. Moreover, the final Charter, with its recommendations and action plans and its

connections to government departments and the LIS profession via NCLIS, offers a route for government to respond to Equal Education's demands, perhaps without losing face.

At the time of writing there has been no further news of the 10 year plan for school LIS. The risk is that the likely change in Ministers after our recent elections might again hinder action. Much will depend on the activism of NCLIS.

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