

Adult education and literacy provision in South African public libraries

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It is acknowledged that high rates of illiteracy impact negatively on economic and social advancement and that a number of interventions are necessary to remedy the situation. Public libraries are among the agencies providing these interventions but although activities in the Western Cape are reasonably well documented, information about initiatives in other provinces is meagre.

Research therefore into the status of adult education and literacy provision in public libraries in South Africa was undertaken in 2004 by Beverley May of Cape Town City Libraries, commissioned by the Print Industries Cluster Council (PICC) Working Group on Libraries. The research was also supported and assisted by a number of individuals and organisations.

The purpose of the project was to survey, describe and analyse literacy and adult basic education activities with the aim of providing

- an information resource
- a means of identifying areas in particular need
- a way of identifying common areas of difficulty
- examples of successful initiatives and lessons learned by colleagues in the field.

The investigation was conducted by means of a postal survey, complemented by case studies. A questionnaire was developed in consultation with Associate Professor Mary Nassimbeni of the University of Cape Town (who remained as a consultant for the duration of the project). The questionnaire sought statistical and also qualitative information in an effort to build national and provincial profiles of literacy and adult education activities in public libraries and was distributed through the provincial and metropolitan library structures.

Guided by the information supplied in the questionnaire returns a number of sites

throughout South Africa were selected for field visits in an effort to understand the experience of the activities from the perspectives of both the providers and the learners.

So what are the findings in the report which appeared in September 2005 - not very encouraging it seems, as essentially 'by far the majority of libraries in each of the provinces do not participate at all in literacy activities'.

The investigation found that although the survey of public libraries in 1994/95 expressed the view that it is imperative that libraries engage in adult education, support of literacy and adult education is not wide spread in South African public libraries. And in those libraries that do participate, their interventions range from vigorous involvement to the purely passive.

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The lack of resources featured very prominently in the problems identified by the respondents - far outnumbering any other difficulties. The lack of participation by public libraries could be addressed by the allocation of resources to enable them to do so, for example, adequate funds, more staff, appropriate training for staff and appropriate material. However, adequate resources - whether human, financial or material - depend on adult education being identified

as not only a legitimate concern of public libraries but indeed integral to the conceptualisation of a public library.

A major problem was arriving at an accurate figure for the number of learners during the three-year period surveyed because of the variability and gaps in the figures provided by respondents. In addition there is a high rate of attrition amongst learners. The reasons cited by learners for participating in literacy classes were very similar to the instrumental and economic reasons quoted in many developing countries.

Librarians interacted with literacy facilitators or are facilitators themselves. Many offer enrichment activities with a number offering services and support far and above what might be expected of them and out of their own pockets. The issue of appropriate training in the special approaches and skills required for literacy work was frequently raised.

It was apparent that the active literacy programmes derived much of their vibrancy and effectiveness from partnerships, formal and informal, forged with other agencies - nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), literacy organisations, facilitators, target communities, Friends, donors, businesses, and local authorities. It was apparent, too, that communication and promotion were vital - if the work of the library remains hidden no wonder support from outside is not forthcoming.

The impact of the libraries' intervention was seen not only in the success rate of learners who took examinations and passed but also in the personal growth and goals of the learners - motivating them to learn further. Learners testified that their participation in adult education programmes provided them with employment or employment advancement; income generation through practical skills, for example, baking; an opportunity to take part more fully in

their children's school lives; the ability to manage their own affairs, for example, their personal finance as well as the ability to read sacred texts.

The report concludes by asking why so few public libraries are involved in adult education - is it because it is not considered a function of the public library or, if it is considered a service to be offered by a library, it is not considered important and is thus displaced by more urgent demands. The report considers that the public library has a rightful role in development and a moral imperative to join in the struggle against

poverty through engagement with adult education. Therefore those libraries which do persevere are to be commended.

The resource issues which are so critical to viability and success hinge on the less tangible but more complex question of the public library's conception of itself, its purpose, mission and mandate and how these are linked to the goals of social inclusion in an evolving information society. Unambiguous policy direction from library authorities and the library profession would strengthen the confidence and resolve of those already engaged and prompt action by

non-participating libraries, giving them an opportunity to demonstrate relevance of their role in development.

Unfortunately this is unlikely until the fundamental issue of the responsibility for public library provision in terms of funding and governance is resolved.

The report ends on a note of foreboding - libraries are costly, literacy work is costly but both are far less expensive than the consequences and lost opportunities of their neglect.