

EVALUATION REPORT

LIBRARY PRACTICE FOR YOUNG LEARNERS

Developing school library services for primary and secondary schools in disadvantaged areas in South Africa

A JOINT PROJECT BETWEEN LIBRARY AND INFORMATION WORKERS' ORGANISATION (LIWO) IN SOUTH AFRICA AND BILIOTEK I SAMHALLE (BiS) IN SWEDEN

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1. PROJECT BACKGROUND

Library Practice for Young Learners (LPYL) is a two year, North-South project involving an exchange programme between Sweden and South Africa. Its key objective is to concretise best practice ideas and to develop school-based library plans which will improve library services to primary and secondary school learners in disadvantaged areas of South Africa. . The principal approach to achieving this is to develop human resources on the assumption that teacher librarians are important catalysts for changes in the school. The project builds on work already carried out by Sida/BiS in 1995, and coordinates the support of BiS, LIWO and the National Department of Education

A contextual difficulty that cannot be ignored in this project is the contrasting approaches to school libraries. In Sweden, school libraries are integrated into the school programme. In South Africa, school libraries are still auxiliary to the school programme. This difference is key to understanding how participants responded in their plans and evaluation of their experiences in Sweden.

2. PROJECT AIMS

The Project aims, as set out in its Business Plan are to:

- address and highlight the lack of learning resources in disadvantaged communities, specifically to improve these resources to provide support for the new outcomes based education system
- support democratic principles in education and in provision of learning resources
- advocate multicultural principles
- promote life-long learning
- produce 'best practice' teacher-librarians/media advisors through human resource development
- promote equity of access to learning resources for young learners

3. PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The Project objectives include the following:

- the implementation of an exchange programme between primary and secondary schools in Sweden and South Africa over an 18 month period
- to ensure the continuation of relationships with the Swedish partners long after the initial tours have taken place
- to bring together major national and provincial role players and to enable them to work from a common base
- to empower the school librarian, the governing body, provincial representatives and other stakeholders
- to produce a written plan for the improvement of a school library service
- to publish a national, popular document which will include 'best practice' case studies
- to use the project information as success stories

4. EXPECTED OUTPUTS

The project outputs include:

- highlighting problems and solutions to accessing the curriculum in accordance with Curriculum 2005
- library plans for improving resource provision at provincial and school levels
- development of ideas on library resource provision in Sweden and South Africa

5. FOCUS OF EVALUATION REPORT

5.1 Criteria for evaluation

Central to the project was the intensive two week visit to Sweden in which 18 participants were involved in a programme that included common and individual components. It is this programme that is the focus of this evaluation report. The following set of criteria was developed by the project coordinator in conjunction with the National Department of Education:

- the impact of the programme on individuals who participated
- the impact of the programme on institutions engaged in the project
- the impact of the programme on Curriculum 2005

These criteria capture nicely the essence of this project, but there is no easy way to measure them either quantitatively or qualitatively. They nonetheless provide a sharper focus of the project's specific objective of concretising best practice ideas and developing school-based library plans which will improve library services to primary and secondary school learners in disadvantaged areas of South Africa. The achievement of the project's broader aims and objectives are harder to prove anyway.

6. IMPACT ANALYSIS

The method of evaluation that allows one to look at the external, micro-level for the effects of the project is Impact Analysis. It asks, among other things, whether or not the programme made a difference to the participants both in outlook and practice. In brief, impact analysis involves determining the extent to which one set of directed activities affected the state of some objects or phenomenon and determining why they turned out to be this way. One typical question that measures impact is whether, for example, teacher-librarians do things differently as a result of the programme.

Impact measurement uses a range of data gathering strategies that may include structured and semi-structured interviews, performance assessments, observations, documents and questionnaires. The LPYL project and its final evaluation applied several of these instruments to assess impact.

7. TARGET GROUPS

It is necessary in impact studies to specify the level at which the impact is to be measured. There are usually three levels of impact analysis. In this project, Level 1 would be media advisors who having been participants in the programme, would then train teacher librarians. Teacher librarians themselves would be at level 2, who having received training would themselves teach young learners. Young learners would be at level 3. There were three identifiable groups in this project, namely

- senior provincial education department officials
- media advisors/school library coordinators
- teacher-librarians

The first group is not crucial to the impact study because it was not involved in the actual programme, nor was it responsible for generating school library plans and implementing best practice ideas. The second and third groups, although not on the same organisational level, are the key target groups. It is possible to assess separately the impact of the project on their outlook and practice. These two groups are considered at levels 1 and 2 because they participated in the programme. Levels 1 and 2 deal with questions of reach (in this case geographical) such as how many participants there were, as well as questions such as whether they now think and do things differently as a result of their participation.

It is unfortunate that the project cannot assess impact at level 3 which is the young learners, which would ask such questions as what changes in their library use and practices are observable.

8. ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS

A variety of instruments were used to measure impact of the programme. The programme itself included a variety of items related to school libraries. These included talks, presentations, study tours, social and cultural activities, field trips and planning exercises. To assess the impact of this programme, participants were expected to complete evaluation questionnaires and to prepare plans for improvement based on the programme.

The evaluation reports were themselves monitored for validity by two of the project managers who visited the participants. Although the plans were future-oriented, they also provided some insight into the change effected by the programme, and should be taken together with the evaluation questionnaires. Random interviews with the participants by the project evaluator enhanced the reliability of the evaluation questionnaire. The evaluation questionnaires themselves show stages of development and refinement to capture key data.

A clear limitation of course is the possibility of ideal-type responses which require direct observation of what participants are doing to verify them. There are obviously time and cost constraints to collect such data-on-practice. Another limitation is to discover how participants did things before their participation in the programme.

The evaluation questionnaire does ask participants about changes in their practices and about the implementation of ideas and activities since the programme. What appears to be missing from these evaluation reports are questions dealing directly with Curriculum 2005 or how the Swedish model compares with the South African model.

9. ANALYSIS OF DATA

The analysis encompasses individual impact, institutional impact and C2005 impact as the criteria for evaluation. Given the variable and uneven nature of the data, this analysis is admittedly impressionistic. There is, however, a consistent effort to remain objective.

9.1 Teacher Librarians

There were participants from all nine provinces. The strong focus on disadvantaged areas was obvious in that six rural areas were represented, and the remaining three were poorer urban areas. The split between primary and secondary schools was even.

Most teacher librarians indicated that the programme convinced them that much is possible given their difficult circumstances and meagre resources. The motivational impact is evident from the several evaluation reports. Participants refer often to what they learned in Sweden when relating changed outlooks and locally implemented practices. The confidence gained from the programme is also evident in the tone and substantive character of some plans to improve their school libraries. Some of these plans are already at different stages of implementation.

The impact on schools themselves has been uneven. Success is mixed with obstacles that tend to cluster around supportive colleagues, fresh ideas and renewed enthusiasm in the former case, and indifferent principals, staff layoffs and poor school attendance in the latter. What is notable is the wider community impact of the school library. This emerged both as a result of participants educating key community leaders and soliciting community support on the one hand, and the community itself expecting the school library to play an active social role. The catalyst role of the school library has been a dual one - towards stimulating development in other schools, and promoting community life in its immediate vicinity.

There is no sustained discussion of the potential support of the school library for Curriculum 2005 and outcomes based education. The focus is often superficial, for example, restricting itself to information skills as identified in one of the critical cross-field outcome. One possible reason for this absence of a connection with Curriculum 2005 is a lack of deeper understanding of outcomes based education itself. Another possible reason is that the questionnaire is silent on this issue.

9.2 Media advisors

All nine provinces were represented, although there were instances where a regional coordinator, a regional librarian and a Provincial Head of Educational Library and Information Services substituted for media advisors. The unequal number of libraries across provinces and the different structural situation made comparison of the impact on media advisors difficult.

Media advisors benefited most from their first hand experience of the Swedish model. What struck them most was the way in which school libraries are integrated into the curriculum. The change of view of a textbook centred curriculum to a resource centred one was contradicted by a situation where school libraries are auxiliary to the curriculum and where there are few resources. Also noted was the way in which the school library was an 'open place' accessible by all at any time instead of being supervised and shut off to access at certain times.

The workshops (and a conference) conducted by media advisors spread the effects of the programme to several other disadvantaged areas. A closer working relationship with teacher librarians has resulted in some cases and the quality of advice and support has been raised by their participation in the program. There have also been a keener insight into problems in their districts and clear ideas of how these can be resolved, for example, ignorant principals or transport and communication difficulties. It is evident that the main difference generated by the programme is that they have been empowered in their roles, and that they are themselves empowering teacher librarians.

Once again, there is not very much on ways of contributing to Curriculum 2005 and outcomes based education. References tend to focus on passing the responsibility to the Department of National Education. In one case, changes in Departments have left school library services in limbo. Media advisors, however, are often themselves engaged in Curriculum 2005 workshops and are in a position to lobby for a more integral role for school libraries.

10. ACHIEVEMENTS

10.1 BOOKLET

This is clearly the Project's crowning achievement and will prove to be a landmark publication. Even though this booklet is still being distributed and awaits evaluation, it is the rich diversity of ideas and best practices that arose from the project that make it a singularly remarkable achievement. Written in an easy-to-read style, these innovative ways of improving learning resources are presented succinctly with handy tips. The booklet covers oral, print and electronic information sources. Importantly, these booklets have been distributed free of charge to schools in South Africa.

10.2 LIBRARY PLANS

Another output that emerged as result of the programme is the set of library plans prepared by participants. These plans range from fairly ambitious to modest and realistic ones, and are mostly joint efforts of media advisor and teacher librarian. Some plans which aim at improvements at a wider, sometimes provincial level, are often detailed if a little unrealistic. Participants have nonetheless had the opportunity of putting something on paper which with further guidance and/or workshopping can be taken further. Most smaller-scale plans at the level of the school library are already being implemented. Regardless of the ultimate success of the library plans, the programme has provided participants with the confidence and experience of bringing high hopes one step closer to the realm of the possible.

11. IMPLEMENTATION

Without implementation, the library plans will be of little use to improving library practice for young learners, and will frustrate participants. Some participants have mobilised minimal resources to start implementing aspects of their plans. What remains necessary is the need to carefully cost the plans and seek additional funding. The purpose of developing human resources may be defeated if the project ends here. Participants will derive a stronger sense of achievement if they see their plans, or more financially realistic adaptations of them, implemented.

12. PROJECT LIMITATIONS

The project succeeded in stimulating the development of human resources necessary for school learning resources, and the media advisors and teacher librarians have promoted change beyond their own districts and schools. There are, however, some limitations that may be worth noting. First, the absence of a focus on young learners somehow limits the programme's effectiveness. Second, South Africa's auxiliary nature of school libraries in a Curriculum approach that presupposes their integration fails to approach the problem at another level. Third, the project needs to recognize the context in which participants and plans are expected to operate, namely, one of public restructuring in

which there are staff layoffs that leave huge pressure on remaining staff to cope. Finally, the project's focus is on development not redistribution. The disparities may persist.

13. CONCLUSION

This project very successfully achieves its objective of concretising best practice ideas and developing school-based library plans which will improve library services to primary and secondary learners in disadvantaged areas of South Africa. The central programme of the project strongly satisfies the impact analysis criteria of altering the outlook and practice of the participants. The evidence from the questionnaires and plans solidly confirms this.

The project has also contributed indirectly to achieving many other things as set out in the broad aims and objectives in the Business Plan. This plan has guided the development and implementation of the project in a systematic and consistent manner. The Project Group has maintained an impressive record of achievement in coordinating the project and adhering to a time-table that would always be demanding in terms of its scope and depth.

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