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Mthokozisi Masumbika Ncube
ncubem.masumbika@gmail.com

Stephen Tsekea

Bindura University of Science Education School library, library media centre, academic achievement, performance of pupils, Midlands, Mashonaland Central, stsekea@gmail.com

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The Role of the School Library Media Centre in Academic Achievement within Selected Schools in Midlands and Mashonaland Central, Zimbabwe

By

Mthokozisi Masumbika Ncube
Department of Information Science and Records Management
Zimbabwe Open University
P.O. Box 1810
Gweru

Tel: +263 54 226002/3; Cell: +263 77 387 7781
ncubem@zou.ac.zw / ncubem.masumbika@gmail.com

and
Stephen Tsekea
Department of Library Services
Bindura University of Science Education
Bindura
Cell: +263 77 339 1322
stsekea@gmail.com

Abstract

The role played by school libraries in ensuring academic excellence has been vividly overlooked in most literature, and within Zimbabwe in particular. Therefore, this article looked at the contribution of the school library media centre towards the performance of pupils in selected schools within Midlands and Mashonaland Central provinces between year 2009 and 2014 at a Zimbabwean school setup. The essence of a school library media centre is to provide access to diverse educational and recreational resources to enhance the performance of pupils. However, as schools were ranked every year, schools that had always topped the rankings continued to do so year in and year out. The rankings showed that schools with good grades at Ordinary Level examinations continued to perform well at Advanced Level examinations. Therefore, this qualitative study endeavored to explore the role that was played by libraries in the success of such schools. The study selected schools from Mashonaland Central and Midlands provinces in Zimbabwe that had performed well and those that did not perform well. Data was gathered using from the Zimbabwe Library Association (ZIMLA) members in the two provinces, school librarians, teacher librarians, general teachers and pupils within the selected schools. Questerviews, interviews and observations. Results of the study indicated that schools that had effective school library media centers performed better than their counterparts. The study further found out that the major hindrance that affected the effectiveness of some school libraries in information provision was lack of resources, that is human, financial and material resources. The study hence concluded that school libraries media centers played a significant role in the performance of pupils and thus it was therefore imperative for the libraries to be equipped with adequate resources that would enable their effectiveness. In addition, the study further recommends that various players in the library profession come into play in ensuring that school

libraries within the two provinces are manned by individuals that have the necessary competencies and skills in library management.

Keywords: School library, library media centre, academic achievement, performance of pupils, Midlands, Mashonaland Central

Introduction and Background to the Study

The school library must be the hub that provides information, knowledge and inculcates ideas so that it equips a modern-day pupil with lifelong learning skills. A school library is defined by International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) (2015:16) as a school's physical and digital learning space where reading, inquiry, research, thinking, imagination, and creativity are central to pupils' information-to-knowledge journey, and to their personal, social, and cultural growth. Thus, a school library is a central information centre of the school which supports the academic activities of the school.

The history and role of the library in Zimbabwe has been clearly explained by Made (2000). He notes that libraries in Zimbabwe started to develop after colonialism that is after 1890 with public libraries being at the pioneering phase. School libraries were regarded as a source of supplementing whatever had been acquired in learning in the classroom. There was need for protecting what had been learnt in the classroom with reading in libraries, particularly among the black community. School libraries in Zimbabwe developed with the introduction of missionary schools where several boarding schools according to a survey done in 1955 had a central library (Made, 2000). There are, however, glaring inadequacies relating to the funding of libraries in Zimbabwe. Besides funding, the attitude of teachers and school administrators towards the library has not helped matters, as according to Made (2000), the effectiveness of a school library rests on the attitudes of the teachers towards it. The Beit Circulating Library for schools which was formed in 1943 is regarded as one positive development in the improvement of school libraries in Zimbabwe since it facilitated the movement of books to government primary schools.

While there seems to be no direct legislation that compels schools to have libraries in Zimbabwe, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education is empowered by the National Library and Documentation Services Act (NLDS) to develop school libraries. The role of the school library has, however, been acknowledged by IFLA in its School Library Manifesto where they declared that, "...the school library is essential to every long-term strategy for literacy, education, information provision and economics, social and cultural development...It has been demonstrated that, when librarians and teachers work together, pupils achieve higher levels of literacy, reading, learning, problem-solving and information and communication technology skills." (IFLA, 2000, p. 1). Bikos et al. (2014) also noted that the partnership between teachers and school librarians has a strong positive impact on learning. Evaluation of the school library needs to identify not only what resources are provided and how much they are used, but also how this use is embedded into the wider process of pupils' learning.

According to Lance et al. (2000) several scholars advocating for school libraries have long been convinced of the relationship between strong library media programs and academic achievement. Similarly, Bikos et al. (2014) also conceded that the relationship between school libraries and

learning appears to be a topic of empirical studies, which go back well into the 1950s. According to Oberg (2001) scholars have attempted as early as 1963 to examine in depth the relationship between school library use and academic achievement. The relationship between school libraries and learning is a complex one (Bikos et al., 2014). However, not much has been written on what sort of evidence demonstrate this relationship.

Todd and Kuhlthau (2004) used a qualitative approach where they note the need for involving users in investigating the role of school libraries as they will provide the perceptions of pupils on the difference libraries and librarians made to the curricular achievement, reading interests, and success outside of school. This approach by Todd and Kuhlthau (2004) was noted by Gildersleeves (2005) as of importance in identifying ways in which librarians have been able to improve their positions with schools. Lance et al. (2000) used the quantitative approach where a survey of school library media centres were made, and a correlation analysis of the library media centres facilities and achievements were done. For example, in the study, it was noted that library media centres with larger book collections tended to also have more practical subscriptions, thus exposing their pupils to a wider selection of resources for the curricula use and in turn achieving better results. Pupils that were exposed to the school library media centres scored better in reading test and information seeking skills (Lance et al., 2000). Overall findings by Lance et al. (2000) showed that pupils in middle schools with libraries had 18 percent higher achievement test scores than their counterparts without school libraries. Similarly, Gaver (1995) designated that grades from exam papers of pupils in 271 schools of 13 states were compared, and it was concluded that pupils in schools with central libraries staffed with specialist librarians demonstrated a higher performance. From the findings of Thorne (1967) where a comparison study of high school pupils with libraries was done it was seen that those with library services scored better over time on their reading comprehension exams. According to Bikos et al. (2014) the frequency rate with which pupils borrow books from school libraries is indicative of pupil's bond with studying. In schools with libraries and trained library personnel, pupils tend to read more as they are likely to get more guidance. Furthermore, Bikos et al. (2014) signified that libraries may strengthen the sense of self-esteem, self-confidence, independence, and responsibility in pupils and lead them to better performance.

Broady-Preston and Lobo (2011) posited that the role and function of the school library is closely tied to and contingent on the educational mission of the school or institution. Williams and Wavell (2001) researching on the importance of school libraries in Scotland where there was a statutory requirement to provide libraries found out that the school library has an active and supporting role in achieving educational priorities. However, within the Zimbabwean context, the role of the school library media centres in the achievement of pupils is not that clear cut, particularly within the context of Mashonaland and Midlands provinces as there is lack of literature in that regard. Hence, this prompted the researchers to undertake this study to explore the role played by school library media centres using selected school libraries within the two provinces. As such, the following research questions were crafted: What were the resources found in school media centers in selected schools within Mashonaland and Midlands provinces? Which services were provided by school media centers in selected schools within Mashonaland and Midlands provinces? What was the role of the school media centers in selected schools within Mashonaland and Midlands provinces in the academic achievements of pupils?

Area of Study and Methodology

The study was limited to selected schools from Mashonaland Central and Midlands province in Zimbabwe that had performed well and those that had not performed up to standard. These schools included ten (10) schools in urban Bindura and Gweru respectively. The essence of this study was to focus on the contribution of the school library media centres towards the performance of pupils in the Zimbabwean schools' setup. This study involved Zimbabwe Library Association members, pupils and library staff members, teacher librarians and general teachers. Therefore, the study was qualitative in nature, enabling the generation of rich, detailed data that was concerned with subjective analysis of attitudes, opinions and behavior (Kothari, 2004, p.22). The study employed the multiple case study design, which entailed the researchers studying multiple cases (schools) to understand the differences and the similarities between the cases (Stake, 1995; Baxter and Jack, 2008). A similar study by Thondhlana et al. (2011:73) upon using the same design went on to conveniently sample their student population. Therefore, emulating these authors, this research also conveniently sampled pupils, which entailed using the participants as the researchers came across them within the schools. Expert sampling (a form of purposive sampling technique) was used to select librarians, teacher librarians, general teachers, and ZIMLA members within the provinces, as this type of sampling coincides with the case study design because they both entail conducting in-depth analysis using individuals who have had practical experience and expertise with the problem being studied (Kothari, 2004, p.37).

In addition, since the case study design is exploratory, as such non-probability sampling design was also the most adequate sampling technique (Kothari, 2004, p.39). In addition, the sampling techniques, that is purposive and convenience sampling techniques, are mostly used in qualitative studies (Marczyk, DeMatteo, Festinger, 2005). In data collection, the approach that was used by the researchers accorded with that which was conducted by Sarrafzadeh (2008), who used two phases; with phase one relating to library users, while phase two adhering to the library staff members. According to Sarrafzadeh (2008), phase one consisted of distributing questionnaires. In this research, interviews were used as the first phase in corresponding to pupils. This necessitated administering interviews in order to collect and analyse qualitative data that provided relative information about the pupils in relation to the study. Sarrafzadeh (2008) went on to use the library management as the basis for phase two in his research, which in his study entailed collecting and analysing specific qualitative data through semi-structured in-depth telephone and face-to-face interviews with library and information science professionals. This study used this approach also as the basis for phase two, which involved conducting semi structured interviews with the librarians, teacher librarians, general teachers, and ZIMLA members within the provinces. In addition, the research also used observations, which enable the researchers to ascertain the services which library users received and the resources which they corresponded to. As such the data collection methods that is the interviews and observations are mostly used in qualitative studies. For ethical reasons the specific names of schools remained anonymous in the paper.

Findings and discussions

This section was divided into several sections, with the first section looking at the participants' rate; while the second section focused on the resources in place within the schools that were under study. The third section looked at the services provided by the school media centers; whilst the last section looked at contribution of the library media centres in the academic achievements of pupils.

Number of Participants

The researchers managed to administer a total of thirty-six (36) questerviews. The researchers managed to conduct interviews with nine (9) school librarians, and three (3) general teachers. The study also conducted interviews with five (5) ZIMLA members from both provinces combined.

Resources Provided by the Libraries

In order to find out the contribution of the library (school media center) in the academic achievements of pupils, the researchers had to first find out about the existence of libraries within the selected schools. From the interview findings with the school librarians, teacher librarians and general teachers, the study established that out of the sixteen (16) schools, nine (9) schools had a library media center. Upon further inquiry and analysis, all the schools that had performed well in terms of academic achievements had a school library.

From the research findings, seven of the libraries had a trained librarian running the schools, while the other two revealed that the libraries were staffed by individuals who were not particularly library oriented (thus staffed by either a teacher or other non-teaching staff). For school library media centers to be effective, they should have in place adequate resources, which support the curriculum and other endeavors of their respective schools (National Library of New Zealand, 2016). In this regard, it was imperative for the researchers to find out the specific resources that the libraries facilitated to the pupils and other stakeholders. The study established that all the libraries had books within their respective facilities. In addition, to the above resources, the study also found out that some of the libraries had subscriptions of the daily and weekly newspapers. Besides the newspaper, some of the libraries indicated that they also acquired diverse magazines for use by library users. In that vein, other libraries indicated that they also subscribed to diverse journals, which were provided in hard copy format to augment the book resources. The following was aired by one of the library staff members:

As a library we ensure that all resources that pertain to the informational needs of our clientele are in place. For instance, when it comes to pupils, we are mandated to ensure that all educational endeavors by such patrons are met through the provision of books, journals and other valuable resources. For other stakeholders, like teachers and staff members, we also ensure that there are informational resources, like newspapers and other bulletins to fulfil their information needs.

The other pertinent resources that were found to be used within these schools conformed to computer resources, as some of the school library media centres indicated their use within the library. However, there were variations on the use of computers within the schools, as some of the schools indicated that these computers were only used by staff members. The subsequent was noted by a teacher librarian in one of the schools:

...basically, due to the size of the library, and lack of adequate computers thereof, the library computers are used merely by teachers. If pupils want to undertake any research through such resources, they go through their teachers.

Questerview findings also validated this as some of the pupils highlighted that their teachers undertook research through computers on their behalf. However, other school library media centers indicated that these resources are used by both staff and pupils within the school. The following was noted by one of librarians from the schools:

All libraries resources, including computers are used by any library member. This entails that all teachers and pupils, as teachers are automatically library members, while pupils renew their memberships upon registration.

Information obtained from some schools with libraries revealed that the libraries provided edutainment facilities. In essence, the libraries indicated the provision of diverse gaming facilities, which were viewed to captivate the mind, these included amongst others puzzles, toys, computer games, and blocks. These were noted to be facilities that educate pupils through entertaining activities. The following was noted by one of the librarians:

There are a number of instances where comprehension is so tough for children, also at times pupils lose concentration. As such we have in place a number of edutainment facilities that include puzzles, game based approach and some few simulations through computers. These also act as motivational resources that draw pupils to the library.

In validating this view-point, questerview findings from pupils also revealed that some of the libraries had audio-visual materials for the library users, including films through projection media and television set, and audio playback through audio medium, like amplified podcasts and radios. The above view-point was further expounded by one of the ZIMLA members who highlighted that most school library media centers are moving towards edutainment resources that motivate and stimulate vivid interest on pupils. In essence, the school library media centres had in place varied resources to support the curriculum requirements, edutainment (education through entertainment) and other informational livelihood needs (Scholastic Research and Results, 2008; Mashriqi, 2013).

Services Provided by the Libraries

There were diverse services that the researchers found to be facilitated by the library media centres that were under study. The study found out that most of the libraries opened up the libraries for more than 4 hours per day, while some of the libraries indicated that the library was open for less than 4 hours per day. However, other library media centres noted that they had no fixed opening hours, as they opened the libraries as per the demand of the teachers. However, according to some of the ZIMLA members, the number of hours a school library is open is not as significant as long as the library opens its doors and provide quality resources it offers. The following was aired by one of the members:

Irrespective of the time factor, opening the library to the user community is an essential service that school library media centres are anticipated to provide. In other terms, the most essential service is for a library to open its doors and provide essential services. For instance, a library might only open two hours a day but with adequate resources for all user needs. While another may open eight hours a day but fail to meet a single user need.

In essence, school library media centers are viewed as catalysts for literacy, reading, teaching, and scaffolding inquiry learning, as such are expected to facilitate diverse services to their user communities (National Library of New Zealand, 2016).

Information obtained from some of the library staff members revealed that the other service that was provided by the libraries conformed to planning with teachers on activities that augmented curricular for students. In particular, five librarians indicated that they strategically planned with teachers on different activities and services that enhanced the curricular and learning for pupils. The following illustrates what one librarian noted:

...before the beginning of each term the library is expected to sit down with various teachers to plan and strategize. This would ensure that the library remains relevant to the curriculum needs of

the teachers and pupils respectively. In addition, such meetings feed to our needs assessments reports.

The other essential service that the study found conformed to training. Information obtained from interviews with teacher librarians and librarians revealed that training is an essential service that the libraries offered. In essence, six libraries noted that they provided in-service training to teachers and pupils. This was also validated by some pupils, as one of them noted the following from questerviews:

...per year we undergo training on how to use the library. The librarian teaches us on how to search for information through books, and also on how to search for information through the internet. In addition, we are also taught on how to use other resources in the library

Interview findings from the ZIMLA members also indicated this, as most of them noted that library staff members within schools undertake essential services, which include computer and information literacy to equip pupils on information and document retrieval.

Apart from edutainment resources, the study also found out that the library provided edutainment services. This assertion was confirmed in the study, as seven of the studied libraries revealed that they provided storytelling periods to their respective patrons. From the research findings, the major reason for the conduction of storytelling was to enrich the literacy levels of the pupils, while the other reason was to enhance the cognition and assimilation abilities of the pupils through visualisation. The following was noted by one of the librarians:

Oral tradition has always played a significant role within the African, subsequently Zimbabwe culture. As such we also provide services that promote such cultural practices. For instance, we have story telling sessions within the library to enrich learning in a fun and entertaining manner.

According to Musingafi and Chiwanza (2012) most libraries in Zimbabwe use story telling sessions to renovate to being, folklore and oral communications of the past which are analogous to the electronic media that surpass time and place;

The study further found that the other service provided by the libraries included the assistance of pupils with their homework. In essence, the study found that most of the libraries did not only provided reading space to the pupils to do their homework, but also assisted the pupils with resources and information to do their homework. This was also validated by pupils, as one of them noted the following:

The major service that the library provides is assistance on writing homework. Whenever I get a homework that is difficult to understand, I always relate to the librarian for assistance. The librarian not only breaks down the homework for my understanding, but also provides diverse information on addressing the homework.

This, therefore, entails that libraries play a critical role in providing services that assist pupils in undertaking their school work (Udoh-Ilomechine, 2008).

Due to information overload in this contemporary era, current technologies are challenged in organising and ensuring access to relevant information, as such it is essential for libraries to provide selective dissemination of information to their stakeholders (Ridwan, 2016). In that vein, all of the studied libraries noted that they provided selective dissemination of information to teachers and other relevant stakeholders through customising diverse materials to suit specific needs. The following sentiments were aired by one of the participants in that regard:

Provision of information to specific patrons or user group is an essential aspect in any given library. As such, we undertake diverse strategies to package or repackage informational resources to specific users. For example, when there is new information pertaining to agricultural activities,

we ensure that the agriculture teacher gets access to that information. By so doing we will be selectively disseminating information to a specialist in that particular field of study.

The ZIMLA members also highlighted that it is a must for any given library to customise, personalise and selectively disseminate information to diverse patron user groups. In their view, this ensures that libraries remain relevant in their particular spheres of influence. The following was noted by one of the ZIMLA members:

No matter what type of a library it may be, selective dissemination of information is essential. This ensures that the library remains relevant to its user community by providing resources to address an anticipated informational need. In addition, this is a marketing tool, ensuring that the user community is aware of resources within the library. It is a part of current awareness services that a library performs in its marketing activities endeavours.

In that regard, a study by Nkamnebe, Udem, Nkamnebe (2014) revealed that a library may have in place resources and services, but at the same instance be underutilized due to lack of innovative marketing services, like current awareness services through selective dissemination of information.

The Role of Library in Pupil Performance

School libraries transform pupil's understanding and achievement by providing resources and services that support teaching and learning throughout the school (National Library of New Zealand, 2016). In such a view, from the research participants, the study found out that each and every resources provided by the school libraries have huge bearing on the performance of pupils. The following was noted by one of the librarians:

In their view, the school libraries were a pivotal point for engagement with various reading; ethnic or social activities; access to information, knowledge construction, profound thinking, and active discussions. Henceforth, in their opinion, the resources and services provided by the school libraries augmented the pass rates of pupils.

The ZIMLA members, in that vein, expressed concern on the premise that a number of school libraries in Zimbabwe do not have effective libraries, with some not having libraries at all. In their view, this affected the general performance amongst pupils. One of the ZIMLA members noted that within universities setups, a library is viewed as a backbone. Such that for a university to have a license to operate and have accreditation there has to be a library. According to the individual, schools and universities both have educational mandates, hence a library should be pivotal to schools also.

The other role that the study found was that the libraries improved vocabulary of the pupils. This aspect was not by ten libraries, who indicated that the library has had a significant impact in improving vocabulary of the pupils through providing relevant reading materials, multimedia materials, and also storytelling sessions. In addition, some of the pupils also noted this role. The following was noted by one of the pupils:

The library provides important resources that improve our vocabulary. For example, the library screens diverse television shows in the multimedia corner, with some shows being about vocabulary.

From the research findings, the study found out that most of the libraries extended their opening hours during examination periods. According to the librarians and teacher librarians, this enabled pupils to have ample to time to study; undertake research on their specific fields, where there was access to print and electronic resources, within a safe, secure, and quiet environment that supports study. Some of the pupils that formed the study also noted the essence of the library in examination preparations. One of the pupils highlighted the following:

In terms of examination preparations, the library opens its doors for a longer period to ensure that we have a place to study. In addition, there is a discussion room that pupils can use to discuss for examination. The library also provides past examination question papers that also assist us in the preparation of examinations.

According to some of the ZIMLA members any library has a mandate to have in place institutional repository. Such a repository houses essential documents and researches produced by the institution. In their view, school libraries also are expected to house essential documents and information within their store house (repository), including examination papers for the benefit of their user community.

Conclusions and Way Forward

It can be concluded that pupils and teachers need library resources to thrive. In such a view, there are various resources that could be found within school libraries to enhance the learning experiences of pupils and teachers, these may include among others books, electronic resources, multimedia facilities, and gaming tools. In addition to resources, there are distinct services provided by school libraries, which also play a role in the success of pupils (their performance), such services include assisting teachers teach children, acting as an academic library that backs school programs, and other teaching and learning processes. Henceforth, the school libraries have a bearing on the performance of pupils. Therefore, there is a need for every school in Zimbabwe to have in place a library within its vicinity to support the teaching and learning experiences of pupils and teachers. This would help in elevating the pass rates of pupils such libraries are pivotal to developing 21st century learners (National Library of New Zealand, 2016).

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