Factors Hampering the Provision of References and Information Services in Malawian School Libraries.

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Abstract:

Provision of reference and information services are recognized as critical in promoting reading culture and development of literacy skills for students. In recent years, the Malawi Government has registered a high rate of students accessing primary and secondary education. This development led to inadequate of library space and materials to cater to students. As a result, provision of quality reference and information services remains a big challenge to most school libraries in Malawi. Therefore, the objective of this paper is an attempt to discuss the various factors that hamper the provision of reference and information services in school libraries. It also examines the role of reference and information services to pupils and students. The paper is based on a literature review and author's own experience. The papers concludes by presenting the way forward on how the provision of reference and information services can be improved in school libraries, hence building the requisite foundation of literacy for Malawian citizenry.

Keywords: *Factors hampering the provision of reference and information services, Role of reference and information services, School libraries in Malawi*

Introduction

Over the last 50 years, provision and practices of reference and information service work has expanded and evolved significantly. Hana and Goulding (2003) observed that reference and information services are one of the major services in many types of libraries in general and school libraries in particular. Reference and information services have constantly developed as has the library itself.

According to Dollah (2006:123) reference and information service is defined "as a personal assistance provided to library users seeking information". This comprise information services that involve either finding information on behalf of users, assisting users in finding information, offering instruction in the use of library resources and services, and user guidance in which users are guided to the most appropriate sources (Huling, 2002 cited in Dollah, 2006). Similarly, Bopp and Bunge cited in Hana and Goulding (2003) categorized reference and information service in three areas:

(1). Information Service: this take the form of bibliographic verification, information and referral services, ready reference questions, research questions, information brokering, interlibrary and documentary delivery.

(2). User guidance: This takes the form of reader's advisory services, bibliotheraphy, selective dissemination of information also called current awareness services and term-paper counseling.

(3). One-to-one or group instruction.

There are various reference and information resources that can be kept in a school library and accessed by students. Some of them include dictionaries, manuals, handbooks, almanacs, yearbooks, directories, encyclopedias, indexes, abstracts and atlases, among others.

Role of Reference and Information Services.

According to Iroaganachi and Ilogho (2012) the use of reference and information resources is very beneficial to achieve students' educational outcomes. This is because they contain information that is always authentic, accurate, and more reliable. When students use reference sources, they will find information quickly and efficiently to complete their assignment and do their research. As result, students' academic performance is improved

Furthermore, reference and information services also provide access to background information on a topic and ideas. As a result, they provide significant information regarding the definition of a topic and its background. Therefore, frequent access to reference and information services leads to independent or discovery learning which can further improve the reading culture of students (Iroaganachi & Ilogho, 2012).Therefore, the provision of reference and information services to students lays the foundation upon which literacy skills among primary and secondary students can be built as they advance their career in the education ladder. However, despite the significance role the reference and information services play as noted, in Malawi the situation remains a pipe dream.

School Libraries in Malawi.

Malawi's formal educations system is structured into 8-4-4 in which the students take 8 years of primary education, 4 years of secondary and 4 year of university. In fact, for the last two decades, Malawi has experienced a rapid expansion in its education system. The introduction of free primary education in 1994 resulted in a rise of the primary pupil population. Likewise, progress has also been noted in secondary schools. As of 2008, there were 5, 505 primary

schools, 1,127 Conventional Secondary Schools, and 575 Community Day Secondary schools(CDSS).The majority of which are located in rural areas of the country(Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2008).

Though the government registered a positive increase in access to primary and secondary education in the country over the past two decades, the education sector in Malawi still faces a number of challenges in its quest to improve the quality of education. Prominent among them are lack and inferior physical infrastructures such as school libraries and un-stocked and inadequate library resources, lack of qualified teachers, low staff morale due to low pay and wages and others.

In fact when it comes to school libraries in both primary and secondary schools, there are no established statistics to determine the total number of school libraries that exist in these schools. However, a study by Ng'ambi (2010) reported that most school libraries in the country do not have adequate space and furniture, and they are poorly stocked with collections. These challenges have had over-reaching effects on the delivery and provision of quality reference and information services in various school libraries in the country. Therefore, below is an attempt to discuss some of the factors that hinder the provision of reference and information services in school libraries in Malawi:

Lack of Trained Librarians.
Though Mzuzu University, one of the public universities in the country has been offering degrees and diplomas in librarianship since 2004, most graduates are not employed by the Ministry of Education to work as teacher-librarians. Instead, many school libraries are run by teachers who are non-professionals. Most school managers have also a belief that anyone can volunteer and manage the school library. This lack of qualified personnel and poor perception of school managers on school libraries make the provision of reference and information services to students almost nonexistent.

In addition, where school libraries exist, school librarians do not have adequate time to run the school libraries due to pressure from teaching work, there is no special allowance given to those teachers as a token of appreciation. Furthermore, most librarians who are manning the reference desk are not trained in school library management including on how they can better serve students in providing reference services to meet information needs of students.

Lack of School Library policy and standards.

The Malawi Government does not have policies and standards governing the school libraries, their establishments and management (Ikoja-Odongo, 2008). Due to the absence of these policies, school library development and the provision of reference and information services to students are not taken as priorities. Some classrooms are converted into libraries without considering the ventilation, security of library materials, reading space. As a result, most school libraries that exist in the country especially in primary schools are just store rooms. With the increased enrollment in various primary and secondary schools, most students do not even visit libraries because there are no spaces where consultation to reference and information services can be done. Consequently, students are just taught in a classroom situation without exposing students to various reference sources such atlases, dictionaries, manuals and others materials.

Lack of adequate financial resources.

School libraries need to be adequately funded so that they can be fully operational and attractive. Though the Malawi Government continues to provide funds for buying textbooks and other library materials, the budget allocation has been declining, specifically to primary and secondary schools. For example, the budget allocation to the education sector was reduced from 27% in 1994/1995 to about 14.1% in 2007/2008 (MOEST, 2008). Consequently, most school libraries in the country have been affected negatively leading to inadequate of textbook materials and reference resources such as dictionaries, maps and encyclopedias.

Furthermore, the availability of these material resources does not match the student population. As a result, only recommended books are used by teachers who are the sole providers of information without allowing students to discover their own learning by using libraries to access reference information sources meet their academic needs.

Poor ICT Infrastructure.
The penetration rates of ICT in Malawi remain the lowest on the African Continent due to the country's weak economy (Moyo & Chapota, 2012). As of 2012, the internet and mobile penetration rates in the country were 4.6% and 24% respectively against the 16 million of the total population (Moyo & Chapota, 2012). Since most schools are located in rural areas, access to ICTs such as internet and computers is also almost nonexistent.

The situation has also worsened due to absence of electricity in most schools including school library buildings. Even in urban areas, where computers and internet exist, there are very few and affected by frequent power interruptions. As result, reference work in most school libraries is traditional compared to modern times when most school libraries in the developed world have already shifted to digital reference services. Besides, due to the absence of electricity, sometimes it becomes very difficult for students to visit the libraries during night time to access reference materials.

Poor Organization of Reference Collections and other Resources.

 An effective reference section requires well trained and experienced library personnel to manage reference collections and make them available to students (Ikoja-Odongo, 2008). Due to the lack of qualified personnel and lack of poor funding in school libraries in the country, most reference collections are poorly organized and cannot be accessed and retrieved by students. They are neither catalogued nor classified and sometimes they are just dumped in one place making them almost inaccessible to students (Nabuyanda, 2011).

Poor State of School Libraries

Due to the poor funding of school libraries in the country, most school libraries do not have spacious building to accommodate the students and no adequate furniture such as chairs, tables, bookshelves, and equipments like computers. The problem is more prominent in rural areas where the majority of primary schools and secondary schools are located. As a result, reference and information services are not provided to and accessed by students. This situation became evident when the government introduced the Universal Primary School Education, where the population of students jumped from approximately 2,860,819 in 1994 to 3, 671, 841 by 2009. Likewise, the secondary school population rose from 48,360 in 1994 to 243,838 by 2009(Ng'ambi, 2010).

Irrelevant Reference Collections And Shortage of Local Publishers.

Though donors should be commended for their effort in the provision of textbooks including reference materials in school libraries in the country, most of the collections and reference materials are based on western literature which makes them irrelevant to meet local needs of the students. Furthermore, other experts have blamed donors for donating library materials to school libraries located in urban areas compared to rural areas (Anderson, 2009). This difference has jeopardized the quality of reference and information services in school libraries located in rural areas.

In addition, Malawi like other developing countries does not have a well developed publishing industry due to high cost associated with publishing to produce local content (Nabuyanga, 2011). This situation makes it very difficult to generate enough reference books and other materials which are written in local languages and make them available to students in large quantities. As a result, most reference books available in some school libraries are just donated. They are written in the English language, which sometimes make it difficult for students to use them and understand their contents.

Lack of Information Literacy Skills Among students.
The majority of primary and secondary school students lack basic library skills in use of library resources due to the absence of qualified personnel to teach them library orientation. This has been noted when these student join the tertiary institutions (Ikoja-Odongo, 2008; Jibril, 2008). As a result, when students enter universities they are overwhelmed with a flood of information, and do not know how to identify, locate, evaluate and ethically use reference and information resources and other sources in the library (Ikoja-Odongo, 2008). Besides that, even library staffs who are managing school libraries also do not have adequate library and information handling skills. This lack of knowledge further leads to under-utilization of reference resources by students in the library.

Most schools in Africa, and Malawi in particular, have examination-based curriculum(Ikoja-Odongo, 2008). Due to such situation, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST) only focuses on providing textbooks to schools as reflected in the curriculum. Some teachers are still using out-dated methods of teaching such relying on textbooks and chalkboard instead of them working as facilitators to allow students to discover through self-directed learning. As a result, the relevance of reference materials such dictionaries, maps, almanacs, encyclopedias and others information resources are ignored by policy makers rendering school libraries irrelevant. Furthermore, students are not even allocated time on the timetable when they can go to consult reference and information sources in the library. This is very common in primary schools where teachers are regarded the sole provider of information to pupils.

Conclusion and Way Forward.

Based on the information above, it is evident that provision of reference and information services in school libraries remains a big challenge in Malawi. As a result, there is a need for consultative effort by policy makers to put measure urgently in order to address the situation. Therefore the paper recommends the following as a way forward:

- The government should introduce a special department in the Ministry of Education to oversee the development of school libraries including the provision of reference and information resources.

- School library policy and standards should be developed to govern the development of school libraries and management of reference work and information services.

- Over the past five years, the Malawi Government has been involved in a rural electrification programme; therefore it is imperative this initiative should be extended to even electrify school libraries located in rural areas. This will ensure school libraries procure computers, internets and other ICT gadgets that can be installed and used by students to access digital reference and information resources. Without electricity, this ICT infrastructure development cannot work.

- The government should also consider setting up special funds for developing and rehabilitating school libraries. This will ensure that creation of adequate space and better utilization reference and information services by students.

- The Malawi government should also recruit qualified school librarians or teacher-librarians to staff school libraries and library reading time should be allocated in time tables to allow students use and access reference and information services in school libraries.

- Establishing partnership between public libraries and school libraries in sharing knowledge in management and sharing of information resources including reference collections in school libraries.

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