The Impact of School Libraries on Students Life Skills: The Kenyan Perspective

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to examine the importance, implications, and opportunities of the school library in providing information and ideas that are fundamental to functioning successfully in today's information and knowledge-based society. The school library equips students with life-long learning skills and develops their imagination, enabling them to live as responsible citizens. This paper will explore how school libraries enable all members of the school community to become critical thinkers and effective users of information in all formats and media. Further, it will stress the need to link school libraries to the wider library and information network in accordance with the principles in the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto. More specifically, this paper will examine the link between life skills and the school libraries in building cognitive, personal, and interpersonal skills in the background of a developing country like Kenya. It will endeavour to corroborate Douglas (2000) statement that 'every child must become fully competent in reading so as to succeed in school and discharge responsibilities as a dependable citizen of a democratic society'. Students in every field must read in order to keep abreast of what is happening around them. What better way can there be than having well equipped school libraries that are effortlessly accessible? This paper is based on the premise that life skills which represent the psycho-social skills that determine valued behaviour and include for example reflective skills such as problem-solving and critical thinking, personal skills such as self-awareness, and interpersonal skills can be developed through exposure to a variety of media. Reference will be made to a range of research which suggest that practicing life skills leads to qualities such as self-esteem, critical thinking, decision making, sociability and tolerance among others. For purposes of this paper, it is worth noting that UNICEF defines life skills as "a behaviour change or behaviour development approach designed to address a balance of three areas: knowledge, attitude and skills". In Kenya today, the citizens are grappling with a myriad of problems including illiteracy, poverty, HIV/AIDS, displacement, hunger, high inflation levels, domestic violence, and terrorism. This paper will investigate how the school library can, by and large, be used to stem the challenges, and be employed to develop and grow the nation. Indeed, if young people are empowered with life skills, they will be able to make the right choices through situational analysis, critical thinking and informed decision making. Consequently, they avoid risky behaviour, reduce their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS and other vices since life skills are essentially those abilities that help promote mental well-being and competence in young people as they face the realities of life.

Introduction

There has been a significant shift over the last century from manufacturing to emphasizing information and knowledge services. Knowledge itself is growing ever more specialized and expanding exponentially. Information and communication technology is transforming how individuals learn, the nature of how work is conducted, and the meaning of social relationships. Shared decision-making, information sharing, collaboration, innovation, and speed are essential in today's enterprises. Today, much success lies in being able to communicate, share, and use information to solve complex problems. It also entails adapting and innovating in response to new demands and changing circumstances. This is enhanced by the ability to command and expand the power of technology to create new knowledge.

To meet this challenge, schools must be transformed in ways that will enable students to acquire skills in creative thinking, flexible problem solving, collaboration, and innovation that they need to be successful in work and life. The library serves as the nerve centre of all educational institutions and a crucial factor in the educational development of individuals at all levels. It is associated with all forms of education: formal, informal and non-formal. It consists of a collection of books and other materials maintained and managed for reading, consultation, study and research, and organized to provide access to users, with a well-trained staff to provide services to meet the needs of its users. The library, which is the hub of any educational set up, provides information and ideas that are fundamental to functioning successfully in the increasingly information and knowledge-based society. The library is, therefore, able to equip students' imagination, enabling them to live as responsible citizens.

The school library has been variously described as an educational instrument and an indispensable part of every school. This is a true statement of fact because without a library, institutions of learning may not be able to build the true character of the students in their charge. The cooperative relationships between schools and improved library services ultimately provide the youth better access to information, knowledge, and learning. This relationship is an essential ingredient in achieving educational reforms leading to improved student learning. This is corroborated by a statement attributed to a campaign for Wisconsin Libraries, which noted that libraries were 'essential partners in creating educated communities because they provided opportunities for self education, lifelong learning and self improvement,' as well as being 'places of opportunity because they leveled the playing field, making the world of information available to anyone seeking it.'

The importance of school libraries

The importance of school libraries cannot be over-emphasized. The influence and importance of libraries for young people has been extensively discussed as the library is considered as having the most positive effect on young people. According to Fitzgibbons (1989), 'the best library services for children and young adults, are those which will meet their total needs, including education, personal information, recreation, personal interests, and career needs.' The school library has a major and significant role to play in supporting and enhancing educational goals. At a White House conference on school libraries held in June 2002, Laura Bush in her opening remarks underscored the importance of school libraries saying that they 'allow students to ask questions about the world and find the answers'. She went on to say that 'once a child learns to use a library, the doors to learning are always open.' Some researchers have observed that

'School libraries should be pivotal to the 21st century educational experience and the base for a positive attitude by young people towards information skills development, lifelong learning and enhancing life chances.' This is in congruent with the IFLA/UNESCO School Library Manifesto which states that the 'school library provides information and ideas that are fundamental to functioning successfully in today's information and knowledge-based society.' Libraries provide access to reading materials through which school children and youths can gain and improve their literacy skills. They help introduce the use of reading for information, pleasure, passing examinations, and personal growth through lifelong learning. In addition, libraries provide materials that offer more extensive and varied information than classroom study alone. It is worth noting that voluntary reading helps develop reading skills and mastery of language, extends students' knowledge, and assists them in their academic work. Students and youths who read are likely to have background knowledge, familiarity with new topics or subjects, and thus, find learning easier and interesting.

It has been said that the school library equips students with life-long learning skills and develops their imagination, enabling them to live as responsible citizens. As can be seen in the words of Dike (2003):

> 'If we want learners to develop skills for lifelong learning, we must give them opportunities to enquire, to search, to explore, to practice, to solve problems - such as are found in libraries. If we want to introduce them to the world of knowledge and teach them to handle information in many forms, we need the resources of a well-equipped library.'

School libraries are therefore fundamental to the successful acquisition of lifelong skills that enable an individual to fit in society and make a useful contribution. Further, according to IFLA (2000), the school library provides information and ideas that are essential to successful functioning in society and gives students lifelong learning skills, develops their imagination, critical thinking skills, and ability to use information in different media. It can be said that the school library helps students learn to enjoy reading, learning, and using library resources as lifelong habits, and gives them the chance to evaluate and use information. It exposes them to a range of thoughts, opinions, and ideas, and gives them awareness of other cultures.

The school library is a learning laboratory where users interact directly with resources and develop research skills for lifelong learning. The library environment facilitates teamwork, participatory lifelong learning, and cooperation. Its role in voluntary reading and personal development through literature is well-known. According to Correa (1997) the library is 'the place where teachers and students come into contact with "the world", that is, where they acquire the general knowledge which forms the basis for all further learning.'

The Digital Library

Users come to the library in search of information and materials for various purposes. Consequently, the information sources should include non-book media. This is because students are more likely to retain and recall with ease a greater percentage of what they hear, see, and manipulate at the same time. The school library plays a central and important role in bringing together and enabling the intersection of virtual and physical resources, and virtual and physical spaces–providing that common ground to support the development of students'

information-to-knowledge competencies in ethical and safe ways. The school library, with access to information technology to support both information seeking, as well as the tools for engaging with found information to build deep knowledge, is a critical landscape to foster students' appropriate and ethical engagement with diverse information sources, and to be critical and safe users of this. Accordingly, the school library is an important zone of intervention and socialization processes for learning how to function effectively in the complex informational and technological world beyond school. Balance and equity are therefore critical concepts in arguments for school libraries. School libraries have the opportunity to provide not just a balanced collection that can serve the needs of the whole school community, both in print and in digital form (a balance for students to access both written and digital resources), but also to cater for the needs of all these groups, especially those with special needs, and to provide equity of access for the school community to information, resources, equipment, space (for whole class and/or small group teaching and learning) and ICT. Perhaps more importantly, this provides for a common, equitable and stable access to all, regardless of socio-economic status, and regardless of access to information technologies out of school. Sara Kelly Johns, president of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) states that such libraries 'empower students to be critical thinkers, enthusiastic readers, skillful researchers, and ethical users of information.' Further, some scholars affirm that libraries equip students with Life Skills to enable them to 'become fully competent in reading so as to succeed in school and discharge responsibilities as dependable citizens of democratic societies.'

In a paper presented by Todd (2010), the author stated that school libraries are learning laboratories where information, technology, and inquiry come together in a dynamic that resonates with 21st century learners. School libraries are the school's physical and virtual learning commons where inquiry, thinking, imagination, discovery, and creativity are central to students' information-to-knowledge journey, and to their personal, social and cultural growth. School librarians should therefore be able to understand that children of the Millennium generation are consumers and creators in multi-media digital spaces where they download music, games, and movies, create websites, avatars, surveys and videos, and engage in social networking. Librarians know that the world of this young generation is situated at the crossroads of information and communication. They must therefore bring pedagogical order and harmony to a multi-media clutter of information by crafting challenging learning opportunities, in collaboration with classroom teachers and other learning specialists, to help learners use the virtual world, as well as traditional information sources, to prepare for living, working, and life-long learning in the 21st century.

It is interesting to note that the mission of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) (1998) is 'to ensure that students and staff are effective users of ideas and information.' This not only underscores the need to equip the students with appropriate literacy and life skills to enable them make informed decisions, but also identifies seven library media program goals through which the library media specialists support the mission. Among these goals that are designed to support the mission are two important components including: Learning activities that foster in students the abilities to select, retrieve, analyze, evaluate, synthesize, create, and communicate "information in all formats and in all content areas of the curriculum" and "Learning resources" that represent diversity of experiences, opinions, and social and cultural perspectives and to support responsible citizenship in a democracy.

According to the AASL/AECT standards, young people should be able to:

- Access "information efficiently and effectively"
- Evaluate "information critically and competently"
- Use "information accurately and creatively"
- Pursue "information related to personal interests"
- Appreciate "literature and other creative expressions of information"
- Strive "for excellence in information seeking and knowledge generation"
- Contribute "positively to the learning community" and recognize "the importance of information to a democratic society"
- Behave ethically "in regard to information and information technology"
- Participate "effectively in groups to pursue and generate information" (American Association of School Libraries and Association for Educational Communications and Technology (1998).

At this juncture, it is important to pause and reexamine the place of the internet in the school libraries. This is because it is crystal clear that school libraries are much more than books. They are media centres, a learning hub with a full range of print and electronic resources an ideal gathering place for students of all ages and interests to explore and debate ideas. In the cause of gathering information, it is possible to come across information that is both harmful and destructive to students. Consequently, the librarian who must double up as a media specialist must work collaboratively with all teachers, to help students become skilled users of relevant ideas and information, and explore the world through print and electronic media resources. This is imperative because the unguided use of the internet may jeopardize the lives of children and young people and may present a variety of threats including:

- Children and young people inadvertently or deliberately accessing either illegal or inappropriate sexual or violent material – illegal material could involve children or adults.
- Targeting and grooming of students by predatory adults through chat rooms, possibly adults posing as fellow students.
- The abuse of children, in some cases in real time using web cams, in order to provide material for paedophile news groups
- The use of email, instant messaging etc to bully and harass others – this may be more likely to occur between children and young people

School libraries are centres for discovery, inquiry, thinking and creativity. Inquiry in the school library challenges the 21st century learner to be curious, innovative, and creative in academic contexts. The school librarian collaborates with an instructional team of teachers and other learning specialists (such as reading, literacy, special needs and ICT leaders) to help students learn how to think critically, solve problems, make decisions, and be reflective through their engagement with diverse and often conflicting sources of information (Todd, 2006).These are key in accessing and using information for problem solving, decision making and building their knowledge and applying needed information. Breivik and Senn (1998) affirm that in the next century, an 'educated' graduate will no longer be defined as one who has absorbed a certain body of factual information, but as one who knows how to find, evaluate and apply needed information. Without the relevant life skills a number of challenges may impact the use school libraries and information literacy.

Life Skills and School Libraries

An increasingly global world of information demands that students must be taught to seek diverse perspectives, gather and use information ethically, and use social tools responsibly and safely. By equipping the students with Life Skills, they will be able to handle the information they come across responsibly. UNICEF defines Life Skills as 'a behaviour change or behaviour development approach designed to address a balance of three areas: knowledge, attitude and skills.' The World Health Organization (WHO) defines Life skills as 'the abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.' The Ten core Life Skills as laid down by WHO includes: self-awareness, empathy, critical thinking, creative thinking, decision making and problem-solving in addition to effective communication, interpersonal relationships, and coping with stress and emotions. Life Skills include psychosocial competencies and interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathize with others, and cope with managing their lives in a healthy and productive manner.

Essentially, there are two kinds of skills - those related to thinking termed as "thinking skills"; and skills related to dealing with others termed as "social skills". While thinking skills relate to reflection at a personal level, social skills include interpersonal skills and do not necessarily depend on logical thinking. It is the combination of these two types of skills that are needed for achieving assertive behaviour and negotiating effectively. "Emotional" can be perceived as a skill not only in making rational decisions but also in being able to make others agree to one's point of view. To do that, coming to terms with oneself first is important. Thus, self management is an important skill and includes managing/coping with feelings, emotions, stress, and resisting peer and family pressure. This is in concurrence with Cronin (1996) who stated that Life Skills are those skills or tasks that contribute to the successful, independent functioning of an individual in adulthood. Debbie Gachuhi (1999) describes them well in her study: Life Skills foster positive behavior across a range of psycho-social skills, and change behaviours learned early, which may translate into inappropriate behaviour at a later stage of life. Life Skills enable young people to respond to situations requiring decisions which may affect their lives. Such skills are best learned through experiential activities which are learner-centred and designed to help young people gain information, examine attitudes and practice skills. Life Skills promote positive health choices, making informed decisions, practicing healthy behaviour, and recognizing and avoiding risky situations and behaviours. It is clear that schools without libraries minimize the opportunities for students to become discriminating users in a diverse information landscape and to develop the intellectual scaffolds for learning deeply through information. This helps us to see that schools without libraries are at risk of becoming irrelevant.

The host of factors that promote high risk behaviour such as alcoholism, drug abuse and casual relationships are boredom, rebellion, disorientation, peer pressure and curiosity. The psychological push factors such as the inability to tackle emotional pain, conflicts, frustrations and anxieties about the future are often the driving force for high risk behaviour. Exposure to Life Skills is an efficacious tool for empowering the youth to act responsibly, take initiative, and take control. It is based on the assumption that when young people are able to rise above emotional impasses arising from daily conflicts, entangled relationships and peer pressure, they are less likely to resort to anti-social or high-risk behaviours. According to Odunsanya and Amusa (2004) the school library provides an atmosphere for self-education and self-

development of individual students. This of course paves way to the development of life skills that enable them to become responsible members of society equipped with assertion and refusal skills, goal setting, decision making, and coping skills.

Life Skills training focuses on attitudes, values and behavioural change, rather than seeking to provide young people with a body of knowledge about a set of topics. As with literacy, age-appropriate life skills can be incorporated into other areas of study. For example, educators in Rwanda teach life skills as part of courses on conflict resolution, self-awareness, cooperation, and communication. In Zimbabwe, aspects of Life Skills come through HIV/AIDS courses. Other countries may address some aspects of Life Skills through community-based learning. Still others approach Life Skills topics in courses such as health education, education for development, global education, and peace education. While all these have been found to be useful, exposing children and young people to a variety of reading materials in the school library will provide them with vast information on issues that they may not necessarily cover in class.

The World Vision's education strategy seeks to assure that children attain the core skills and abilities they need, to go on to lead a productive and fulfilling life. It aligns with the shared global commitment to the Education-for-All Dakar goal that calls for all children receiving, at a minimum, 'recognized' and 'measurable' levels of reading, basic mathematics, and the most essential life skills. World Vision's Education and Life Skills sector seeks to integrate a child's acquisition of basic reading skills with their acquisition of essential life skills where essential life skills follow UNICEF's categorization of cognitive skills, personal skills, and interpersonal skills. Since the process of acquiring these essential skills and abilities spans all phases of the child development cycle, indicators, tools, and guidance have been developed to monitor progress toward attaining skill levels appropriate to each stage of that development. Students develop skills and attributes that are critical to a person's ability to successfully navigate the world in and out of school, at work and at home: thinking and reasoning skills, personal qualities, skills for managing resources, interpersonal skills, skills for managing information, and skills and knowledge related to systems. Catherine Sheldrick Ross (2000) found that pleasure readers were exposed to what is called 'incidental information acquisition' and that this information had effects on their personalities and their world view.

The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1992) believes that young adolescents seek out opportunities to develop life skills. Hendricks (1996) explains that life skills help an individual to be successful in living a productive and satisfying life. Hamburg (1989) delved further to clarify that when students are equipped with life skills they are able to survive well, live with others, and succeed in a complex society. These go a long way in assisting them develop skills that help youth cope with a changing world full of social pressures. It is important to note that students who are literate and equipped with relevant Life Skills access information efficiently and effectively. This proves that if adolescents are to solve problems of human relations, develop healthy lifestyles, cultivate intellectual curiosity, access the social systems they need, and meet the demands of the workplace, they must be exposed to basic skills for everyday life. Training in interpersonal, decision-making, and coping skills can help students resist pressures from peers, from irresponsible adults, or from the media to engage in high-risk behaviors. It can increase their self-control, help reduce stress and anxiety, and teach them ways to make friends if they are isolated and to assert themselves without resorting to violence. Students can acquire these skills through systematic instruction and practice and through role playing but most especially through the school library where they are likely to unconsciously absorb knowledge. Life-skills training can be a potent force in motivating young adolescents to build healthy lifestyles of enduring significance.

There are a myriad of difficulties in developing countries including: declining living standards, unemployment, deteriorating services, social unrest, poverty, HIV/AIDS, and political instability. Suffice it to say, the situation is often complicated by illiteracy and poor reading habits. Of course this has impacted negatively on the education standards and what would really have been put into the funding of schools to establish libraries is often used in sensitizing the populace on the pandemics. However, it is dawning on some leaders that acquisition of life skills through the main stream curriculum in schools or through wide reading could go a long way in checking the problems at hand. It is interesting to note that Government of Kenya has mandated Ministry of Education to work with the stakeholders, to provide, promote, and coordinate quality lifelong skills training and research for Kenyans' sustainable development and responsible citizenship. While there has been a concerted effort to introduce a Life Skills curriculum in schools this has not succeeded very well because of issues relating to overloading the curriculum.

This scenario is to be found in many sub- Saharan countries where HIV/AIDS facts—and, to a lesser extent, elements of Life Skills education—are integrated throughout the standard curriculum. The resulting curriculum overload and the large number of teachers to be trained render most programs unlikely to be sustained. It has been confirmed that educators have a better chance of succeeding with stand-alone Life Skills programs or a special workshop on sexuality, HIV/AIDS, and related risky behaviors—which includes a Life Skills training component—within a subject like health education or biology, and a well equipped school library. Having seen then how important Life Skills are in enabling individuals to translate knowledge, attitudes, and values into actual abilities— i.e., "what to do and how to do it," we can conclusively say that Life skills are abilities that enable individuals to behave in healthy ways, given the desire, scope, and opportunity to do so. The school library will go a long way in offering opportunities for reading and gathering information that is needed to develop appropriate knowledge skills and attitudes.

Conclusion

In many developing countries today, the government is concerned about the rising level of youth engagement in crime and related vices. While agreeing that it is possible to stem this growing challenge with a well equipped policing strategy, it is becoming clear that education plays a big role in helping the youth become responsible citizens. At a recent meeting of Librarians hosted by the Kenya National Library services, emphasis was made on setting up a policy where all schools would be required to establish well equipped libraries. Although the issue of financial constraints has come into play, the government was tasked to find ways to improve the budgetary allocation in the Free Education programme so as to facilitate the establishment of school libraries. The libraries would be part and parcel of the academic set up and be equipped to play a very important role in helping the school to achieve educational objectives. If we recognize the value and importance of an informal system of education, then the library method of self-education is sure to get its due place. In Europe and other developed countries of the world a greater emphasis is laid on the library method of teaching. The School Library Staff support the use of books and other information services which range from the fictional to documentary, from print to electronic within the four walls of the library as well as outside. This is all done to stimulate the young minds of students and assist them to discover their potential. A lot of assignments are given to the students for which they have to sit and work in the library. This method of teaching makes them skillful and discerning users of library resources and services. This is the ultimate goal of schools in Kenya and other developing countries, and it is

hoped that all governments will realize the central place of school libraries and be at the fore front to establish and develop them.

Suffice it to say that schools without school libraries cannot educate this generation in a way that prepares them for 21st century study and work, and being part of the increasingly digital, global society. Cutting school libraries is not the solution: School libraries, now more than ever, are integral to quality learning and teaching in 21st century schools.

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Elizabeth Koimett is a native of Kenya and has lived in the Capital city of Nairobi since 1997. Before then she taught in various primary and secondary schools in the country. From 1997 to 2008, Elizabeth was based at the Kenya Institute of Education where she was in charge of developing the English Language Curriculum for Primary Schools in Kenya. It was while at the Institute that she began to author textbooks

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