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Village Reading Rooms: Book Outreach in Botswana

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Village reading rooms (VRRs) are an extension of Botswana's Public Library Service into rural areas. At its beginning in 1986, the VRR project was closely linked to the adult literacy programme of the Department of Non-Formal Education. The VRRs were intended primarily to serve adult literacy learners and newly literate adults. However, because the VRRs had to be housed at first in existing school buildings, schoolchildren have become the most active and most numerous users. The villages have claimed the VRRs as an important part of community life.

Introduction

The Village Reading Rooms project in Botswana serves as an outreach service for communities far away from the major centres where public libraries are located. Other Botswana National Library Service outreach programmes include the Mobile Libraries and the Book Box Service. There are 24 public libraries, and most of them support one or two of the Reading Rooms. The exception is the Mochudi branch library, which is in the Kgatleng District where the project was piloted. There 20 Village Reading Rooms were first piloted in 1986.

The Village Reading Rooms (VRRs) are a rural library network originally aimed at providing basic reading material to neoliterates who have gone through the Department of Non-Formal Education's Literacy Programme. The service is similar to that of the public library, but on a very small scale. Each VRR starts with a base stock of 600 titles. There is a reference section, a periodicals section that may only be used on the premises, and the normal circulation service. Users may borrow two books at a time for a period of two weeks. The VRRs are also social centres. In most villages, the VRR is the only building with electricity, so many cultural and social activities take place there.

The Architects of the VRR

The idea of Village Reading Rooms was first mooted at the Botswana Library Association's (BLA) Libraries and Literacy Conference held in Kanye, a

southern rural village in Botswana, in 1985. The idea was born out of a perceived need to take library services to the grassroots. The BLA Kanye Conference brought together librarians and literacy personnel to develop a common strategy that could offer the illiterate population the means to become functionally literate. It also was a move to promote maximum use of the Public Library Service. It was fueled by the vision behind the work of the Department of Non-Formal Education (DNFE). The DNFE is the department in the Ministry of Education with responsibility for adult literacy. The DNFE had realized that although it could provide literacy skills to its adult literacy pupils, there would have to be a grassroots library service to sustain these basic literacy skills. In the development of the VRR project, the DNFE worked hand-in-hand with the Department of National Library Service.

Literacy Work in Botswana

Literacy work in Botswana was started by the Department of Community Development under the direction of the Welfare Office in the Department of Education. Unfortunately, most of the initial efforts were nongovernmental, from organizations such as the Botswana Council of Women, the Young Christian Association, and the Lutheran Church of Botswana.

In 1977, the National Commission on Education recommended making literacy education an integral part of the education system. Pilot projects in 1977 and 1978 led to the Literacy Programme being set up in 1980. The pilot projects were evaluated, and the results demonstrated that there was popular demand for their continuation. The Literacy Programme was formally launched in 1981 with the following objectives:

- To eradicate illiteracy and enable an estimated 250,000 illiterate adults and youth (40% of the population between 15 and 45 years of age) to become literate in Setswana and numerics within a period of six years, that is, 1980-1985. (In this group should be included those who had dropped out before completing five years of schooling.)
- To enable the National Literacy Programme participants to apply knowledge in developing their cultural, social, and economic life.
- To enable participants to perform community duties and to exercise the rights and obligations of citizenship.

A number of programmes were put in place, many of them collaborative ventures to ensure that the fight against illiteracy became a national effort. The collaboration between the DNFE and the National Library Service that had given birth to the VRRs also led to the establishment of the Inter-Agency Material Production Committee (IAMPAC). This committee, which cuts across different organizations both nongovernmental and governmental, came together at the invitation of these two departments to develop simplified readers. These readers were widely distributed throughout the public libraries and the Village Reading Rooms. To date, over 40 titles have been published. These are freely distributed to all VRRs, public libraries, and

the Book Box Service. All primary school libraries were sent copies for their library comers. Senior and junior secondary schools received free copies for their libraries.

IAMPAC was to ensure provision of basic functional reading materials in Setswana for the graduates of the literacy programme. The materials were to provide information for life, as well as sustaining the acquired literacy skills. For example, the readers include information on family planning, pregnancy, HIV-AIDS, savings, banking, and small-scale entrepreneurial projects such as poultry farming.

The VRR Structures

One of the issues that needed to be immediately resolved was where the VRRs could be housed. It was not feasible to build structures immediately. That would take time. So it was agreed that, to begin with, they would be housed in the primary schools. Most of the rural primary schools have no electricity, and the VRRs are meant to be used every day after school is over. Therefore, a large classroom was to be selected and provided with solar-panel electricity by the Botswana Technology Centre. The electrification was funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA). (For many years, SIDA supported developmental programmes of the Botswana National Library through provision of funding for books for the VRRs and even for the Book Box). SIDA provided an initial capital of P53.000 (then about US\$12,000) to start the project.

Staffing the VRRs: Literacy Group Leaders

The question of who was to run the Village Reading Rooms and what sort of qualifications were necessary, was answered with the cooperation of DNFE. Their Literacy Group Leaders would run the VRRs on a part-time basis. The rationale here was that if the Literacy Group Leaders were also running the VRRs, they could guide the adult literacy pupils on choice of material related to their studies and interests better than anybody else. The concept of the barefoot librarian was raised at the Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern African Librarians in 1986. The term *barefoot librarian* meant an untrained community person with basic literacy skills who could be trained on the job. Because she or he would be from the community and would have been involved with literacy teaching, such a person would have a much better understanding of the needs of the adult learners than anybody else could have: needs in terms of necessary life skills, and needs in terms of reading and numeracy skills.

When the Village Reading Room project was started, the National Library and the DNFE agreed that the Literacy Group Leaders who were employed and paid honoraria by the DNFE would also be paid by the National Library to work as Readers' Assistants and supervise the Village Reading Rooms. Most of the learners in the literacy project were continually on the move between the villages where they normally live, their lands where their farms

were, and the cattle posts where the animals were herded. This mobility meant that the Literacy Group Leaders could never correctly predict how busy they would be, and the class sizes were fluid. The Literacy Group Leaders, therefore, had the time both to run the VRRs and to monitor the progress of their adult pupils. It also meant that they could receive double honoraria from both the Departments.

According to the Chief Education Officer of the Department of DNFE, "this arrangement worked well until the Botswana National Library Service decided to employ the Readers' Assistants full-time. Consultation on this issue was not done thus causing problems for an arrangement that had worked very well" (Legwaila, 2000). Their full employment as Readers' Assistants took them away from their role as Literacy Group Leaders.

Usage Issues

There were problems of usage of VRRs housed in classrooms. Adult learners who used the VRRs were reluctant to sit in the small classroom chairs alongside the pupils, who took to the VRRs with enthusiasm. Second, the primary school children made noise and ran around with the confidence of ownership, something that the adult learners resented. If the VRR was indeed to be a community facility, it would have to have its own building.

To date there are 67 functioning Village Reading Rooms. The annual development plan had projected the expansion of the service by three every year, but in 2001 this number was to be doubled to six. Of these 67, 26 are still housed in primary schools and 41 are now in independent structures. In most cases, the Village Development Committees have built these structures with drought relief funds, which are provided to be used for income-generating programmes that would enhance the lives of the villagers in face of drought. It is to the credit of most Village Development Committees that they opt to use the funds in projects like building VRR structures. The building project offers employment to unemployed members of the community, who serve as bricklayers, masons, and so forth. Once the building is finished and in use, the question of ownership is never in doubt.

Evaluation of the Service

In 1987, the project piloted in 20 centres in the Kgatleng District was evaluated. It was found that two of the 20 had become nonfunctional. The remaining 18 were evaluated. The fact that the evaluation was done after the project had been in operation for barely six months was cited by the evaluating team of two as a major limitation.

The methodology of the evaluative study included a random selection of four VRRs for an in-depth look. The findings for the use of the VRRs were that patrons went there primarily to find books related to school studies (48%) and to find books for continuing education (46%). A smaller number looked for books related to career or job or for books related to health (Mchombu & Mutanyatta, 1987).

The evaluation showed that the original aim of the VRRs to support the adult literacy project was skewed toward providing material for rural primary schools. The new literacy graduates were still using the facility, as were those in the programme, but the sheer numbers of primary pupils had overwhelmed the intended user profile. Although the Book Box Service was already serving the primary pupils, the fascination of the VRR facility just drew them. So, as more VRRs were opened, several Book Box service points closed. There was no point in their coexistence in the same primary school. The evaluative survey confirmed what had become obvious: that the main users of the service were rural primary and secondary school pupils and not the adult literacy students. Data of membership from four reading rooms support this, as shown in Table 1.

Guidelines for Operation

At the community level, the VRR project is a joint undertaking between the local communities and the National Library Service. The National Library Service provides the staff, stock, and solar panels for electricity; the local community provides the building where the Village Reading Room is located. Guidelines were drawn up for the VRRs at the beginning of the project. They covered the setting up of the VRR, the role of the various stakeholders, and procedures for day-to-day operation. The section on the training and qualifications of the staff specifies that the National Library Service will provide training for Readers' Assistants. Their training covers:

- (i) the role of libraries in relation to literacy;
- (ii) organisation and management of VRR materials;
- (iii) the circulation system used in VRRs;
- (iv) public relations and promotion of the VRR service;
- (v) care and minor repair of books;

Table 1
Use of VRRs

<i>Village</i>	<i>General adults</i>	<i>Primary pupils</i>	<i>Adult literacy students</i>	<i>Primary school teachers</i>	<i>Government officers</i>	<i>Total</i>
Malolwane	58=12%	353=75%	45=10%	8=2%	5=1%	469
Mmathubu-dukwane	9=7%	96=78%	11=10%	3=2%	4=3%	123
Modipane	-	55=48%	54=47%	4=4%	1=1%	114
Oodi	-	81=84%	5=5%	8=8%	2=2%	96
Total	67=8.5%	585=73%	115=14%	23=3%	12=1.5%	802

(Mchombu & Mutanyatta, 1987).

- (vi) rules and regulations for VRRs;
- (vii) operation and recording of the solar power lightning system.

The Guidelines state that in order to become a Readers' Assistant one must have:

- (a) passed standard seven examinations or
- (b) attempted Junior Certificate examinations or
- (c) have experience in literacy work. (Botswana National Library Service, 1987)

Conclusion

One might ask how different the Village Reading Rooms are from ordinary libraries. There is no simple answer. They are rural; they are small, warm, and could even be described as homey. But perhaps what distinguishes the VRRs from other information centres is the clientele. Their sense of ownership and the pride with which they identify with the often small, usually sparse facility that gives them a ticket to the wonderful world of books is a great distinguishing factor. The main objective of the VRR project had been at its inception, and still is, the promotion of reading among rural villagers. Research into the VRR impact on primary and adult readers could yield interesting results.

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