Supporting Information Literacy Skills of Students for a Successful Transition to Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges for Libraries in the Digital Era

Josiline Phiri Chigwada, Bindura University of Science Education, Bindura, Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT

A survey was undertaken on how libraries are supporting information literacy to primary and secondary school students for a successful transition to higher education. Thirty-five librarians were purposively selected and questionnaires were sent and telephone interviews done to understand the opportunities and challenges that are encountered in imparting information literacy skills to students in preparing them for higher education. The results revealed that there are information literacy programmes in group A schools and universities. It was discovered that tertiary institutions do mentorship programmes and train teacher and school librarians on how to offer information literacy sessions. The greatest opportunity was the availability of information communication technologies (ICTs) in most of the schools and the support that is offered by the government towards the use of ICTs in learning. However, the major challenge is there are few online resources that are locally produced. The author recommends the need to produce more local content online for the primary school students.

KEYWORDS

Information Literacy, Research Skills, Ruzivo Digital Learning, Transition to Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the information communication technologies had changed the way learners access materials in schools. Students are now expected to do research online and in order to get the materials that they need, they have to be information literate and possess the research skills that are needed to navigate on the internet. A study to understand how librarians are helping learners to prepare them for higher education was done in 35 libraries so as to see how primary and secondary school learners are able to smoothly move to higher education. Information literacy teaching is prevalent in academic institutions in Zimbabwe whereby the library is actively involved in teaching students how to access and use information resources as pointed out by Kagwiro (2017).

WHAT IS INFORMATION LITERACY?

The American Library Association (ALA, 1989) defines information literacy as the ability to locate, access, search, evaluate and use information in various contexts. The advent of information
communication technologies led to an information overload leading to the need for learners to have information literacy skills in order to navigate the digital world. Learners should be able to identify relevant and reliable information to answer their information needs. In order to accomplish this, information literacy and research skills should be embedded in these youngsters at an early age. Information literacy skills are also regarded as a lifelong learning skill which can be used beyond primary, secondary or tertiary education.

**IL PROGRAMMES IN ZIMBABWEAN SCHOOLS**

There isn't much literature which documents how information literacy is taught in primary and secondary schools in Zimbabwe leading to this study. Most of the studies concentrate on the teaching of information literacy in institutions of higher learning (Kagwiro, 2017; Chisita, 2011; Mugwisi, 2015). Studies from other countries such as Singapore, Namibia, South Africa, Nigeria, China, Australia, and Canada among others (Foo et al., 2013; Foo, 2017; Forgett, 2003; Wang and Liu, 2017; Ogbonna and Eze, 2015; Majid et al., 2016) indicated that information literacy is taught from primary education and there are standards that were put in place by the governing bodies for quality control purposes. Assessment of IL programmes is also done in these schools to ensure that the impact of the programme is known and also to increase student learning and also to strengthen the existing programmes. It is done in the form of knowledge tests and surveys, performance assessments or informal assessments. According to Abilock (2007), Ivanitskaya, DuFord et al. (2008), and Schloman and Gedeon (2007) there are various tests which can be used to assess IL including Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills (SAILS), Tool for Real-time Assessment of Information Literacy (TRAILS) and Research Readiness Self-Assessment (RRSA).

**WHAT IS THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN OFFERING IL?**

According to ALA (2010) reading is a foundational skill for 21st-century learners. Guiding learners to become engaged and effective users of ideas and information and to appreciate literature requires that they develop as strategic readers who can comprehend, analyze, and evaluate text in both print and digital formats. Learners must also have opportunities to read for enjoyment as well as for information. School librarians are in a critical and unique position to partner with other educators to elevate the reading development of the young generation. These young learners should be able to determine authority and accuracy of information with the help of school librarians.

School librarians collaborate with classroom teachers in teaching research skills and the success of any reading promotion and instruction activity is shared by the whole school community and other stakeholders such as publishers and parents. However, in the process, school libraries serve as hubs for information literacy in the schools according to ALA (2010) whereby school librarians play a leadership role in developing and promoting reading strategies. This is because school librarians provide open non-restricted access to a variety of information sources and they do collection development that reflects the curriculum and the different learning needs of the school community. After acquiring the information sources, they organise them to ensure that they can be easily retrieved by the clientele. School librarians partner with classroom teachers, parents, publishers and other literacy people to making reading initiatives so that the learners would enjoy reading. This collaboration would ensure that learners would have reading time and they would develop intellectual behaviours that would be needed for future academic pursuits and lifelong learning. It would also help to stimulate and reinforce a reading culture within the school at the same time making the book pay.

A number of activities can be done to entice learners to attend information literacy sessions even if they are not time tabled. School librarians can create user friendly environments as they interact with learners when they visit the library. They can also participate in delivering annual programmes of oral language activities, writing and reading as well as organising special events that support
information literacy. Such activities that can be done include literature circles, reading parties, buddy reading and reading logs. Learners also enjoy reading challenges and incentives can be given to the winners. Learners can read aloud to groups and then discuss the story so that all of them can share what they have learnt from the stories. This would be a way of creating a reading culture among learners who are information literate and are able to fully maximise the use of a book be it in print or electronic format.

**OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN IMPARTING IL SKILLS IN SCHOOLS**

Tokwe (2013) stated that due to the advent of technologies like laptops and social networking people rarely want to read and learners in schools face serious literacy and comprehension challenges especially in Africa. He added that the illiteracy situation is worse in rural communities in Zimbabwe due to the unavailability of rural school libraries to provide reading materials. The major opportunity that can be used is the presence of school libraries and professional librarians to impart information literacy skills to learners and the efforts of the Zimbabwe Rural School Libraries Trust in the development of school libraries in rural areas. Some universities are also offering mentorship programmes whereby school and teacher librarians are trained how to teach learners to be independent learners in this digital era. The school and teacher librarians would then help the learners when they are doing their researches so that they would be able to identify authentic information to answer their information needs. The role of a school library is elaborated by the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto which states that a school library offers learning services, books and resources that enable all members of the community to become critical thinkers and effective users of information in all formats (Tokwe, 2013).

The major challenge that is experienced by schools in offering information literacy is the focus on information communication technologies rather than information literacy. Jones (2016), for example, stated that the current curriculum for England does not specifically identify information literacy within its subject specifications but some information literacy elements are embedded in ICT. As a result, the teaching of information literacy differs from one school to the other. Another challenge is the lack of local reading materials that suit the different ages of learners from early childhood development (ECD) to secondary school. As a result, overdependence on reading materials from other countries have contributed to the challenges being faced in offering information literacy to learners. Sometimes picture books are expensive, and some schools are not able to buy them. In this digital era, this challenge is coupled by lack of the right infrastructure such as computers, internet connectivity, trained librarians and electricity to enable the learners to gain the much-needed information literacy and research skills.

In order to deal with some of the challenges that are faced, there was the advent of Ruzivo digital learning by Econet in Zimbabwe. Ruzivo Digital is an e-learning platform that was launched in Zimbabwe to target primary and secondary schools with local information that would help the learners in this digital era. According to the website, “Ruzivo digital learning is an online interactive digital learning platform targeted at primary and secondary students in Zimbabwe. All our content is aligned to the Zimbabwean curricula. Grade 4, 5, 6 and 7 Mathematics and Science education content has been endorsed by the ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, Curriculum Development Unit (CDU).” (Ruzivo digital learning, 2016). The subjects that are covered are home economics, mathematics, science, religious and moral education and languages that is, English, isiNdebele and shona. However, the major challenge is that the catch them young concept was also neglected since there is no ECD, and grade 1 to 3 materials on the e-learning platform.

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The study was guided by the following research questions:
1. What is the state of IL programmes in primary and secondary schools in Zimbabwe?
2. What is the role of school librarians in offering information literacy skills?
3. What are academic libraries doing to assist primary and secondary school libraries in offering IL?
4. What are the opportunities and challenges being faced by the school libraries in Zimbabwe in offering IL?

**METHODOLOGY**

Thirty-five librarians were purposively selected to take part in the study. The population comprised of 15 school librarians, 5 teacher librarians and 15 academic librarians. Academic librarians were chosen to provide information on the mentorship programmes that they are doing to assist primary and secondary schools to impart information literacy to the learners. Questionnaires were sent to the respondents and telephone interviews were done as follow ups to collect data on how they are assisting learners to become information literate. The data was analysed using content analysis and arranged thematically for presentation.

**FINDINGS**

The study reviewed that there are no standards governing the offering of information literacy programmes in primary and secondary schools in Zimbabwe. The programmes offered vary from school to school and the official ones are only done in group A schools where assessments are also carried out. For example, one international school offers the Abeka syllabus which involves research skills so that learners are able to find and use information to answer their information needs. The IL programme in these schools is offered by the school librarians and learners are also taught how to acknowledge the various information sources. These group A schools are collaborating with teachers and parents to instill reading skills to the learners from a tender age. They are also allocated time on the timetable and they have well developed and equipped school libraries with training rooms where learners do hands on sessions. The remaining 19 schools only concentrate on library orientation for new learners and would wait for the students to come to the library to borrow books and other reading materials. They do not offer extensive information literacy programmes therefore disadvantaging the learners.

Three academic librarians indicated that they are offering mentorship programmes to school libraries and school and teacher librarians are trained on how to impart the IL skills to learners. The content of the mentorship programmes also differ from one library to the other but include, the internet, search strategies, referencing and citation, plagiarism among other topics. These academic libraries are also working with the school libraries that they are mentoring to develop their collection to ensure that the reading materials are available to the learners.

The results of the study revealed that the major challenges that are faced by school libraries is the absence of infrastructure to properly run these libraries. The school librarians pointed out that they don’t have purpose-built libraries and there are no training rooms to train the students on how to access and use information. Most of them only depends on the few books that are available, and these students would face major challenges when they are enrolled at universities since they are expected to be both computer and information literate. Where the libraries are present, some of these libraries are not manned by professional librarians who have been trained on how to set up and run a library thereby compromising the services that are provided. Some of the school librarians do not understand the concept of information literacy and therefore can’t assist the students when they are looking for information.
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be concluded that it is a good concept to offer IL from primary education level in the present information technology era so that the students would be able to exercise the right choice when handling information. The study revealed that the teaching of information literacy in primary and secondary schools is scarce if not non-existent. The programmes are well established in universities and most students are enrolled without the knowledge of how to access and use information in this digital era. Only international schools are offering IL programmes since they are the ones with libraries that are well developed and also have training rooms for practical sessions. The unavailability of local content on the internet cannot be ignored as one of the factors that is affecting the teaching of information literacy in primary and secondary schools. Therefore, the author recommends that publishers should ensure that books for children in both print and electronic format are available on the market so that libraries are stocked with local books. The presentation of the books that is their cover pages, binding and content should be appealing to the learners to entice them to love reading.

There should be IL integration within the school curriculum to ensure that students are afforded the opportunity to learn how to access and use information in the digital era from a tender age. If it is not possible to do so, collaboration with teachers is needed to make sure that IL sessions are timetabled. The teachers can also set up library time on the timetables so that learners would have an opportunity to visit the library for researching since it is not possible to have the library time allocation in some schools. This would give the learners the zeal to participate and as a result, they will be information literate. Where there are no libraries, teacher librarians can be trained on how to impart research skills to the learners.

Early childhood reading habits should also be nurtured at an early stage to ensure that the kids love to read. Parents should buy books for their kids so that the partnership between publishers, teachers, parents and learners is strengthened. Without this collaboration, the learners will suffer. Even the digital natives should be trained on how to do proper research so that they are able to formulate proper search strategies using Boolean operators, and assess the credibility of a source. This is another area writers and publishers can focus on so that reading materials for primary and secondary students are available.

There is need to prepare information literacy guidelines for primary and secondary schools. In other countries such as Singapore the program involves developing a curriculum framework that can be introduced in specific school subjects where IL competencies can be nurtured. This can be done as part of the information technology or computer lessons that are already in place in different schools. Assessment is important in these IL programmes to ensure that the impact and value of the IL sessions are known. This would provide evidence to support the importance of offering IL to primary and secondary learners for easy transition to higher education.

As Tokwe (2013) pointed out, government involvement in the development of school libraries cannot be ignored. The author recommends the need to ensure that school libraries have sufficient staff, resources and opportunities. Investment in full time professionally trained school librarians who are able to work with publishers to ensure that the needed books and other reading materials are available in schools is important. In addition, the school librarians should involve teachers in developing and evaluating the school library collection, which may help minimise or even eliminate perceptions of the inadequacy of library collection, services and facilities. In addition, there is need for continuous professional development for school and teacher librarians so that they remain relevant in the digital era in imparting information literacy and reading skills to the learners in order to make the book pay in Zimbabwe.
REFERENCES


Josiline Phiri Chigwada is the Sub Librarian responsible for the Reader and Information services at Bindura University of Science Education Library. She has worked in university libraries since September 2006. She holds a Master of Science Degree in Library and Information Science from the National University of Science and Technology – Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. She is a PhD candidate at the University of South Africa. Her research interests are Information Literacy, Digital Literacy, Research data management, Indigenous knowledge systems, Generation X, Y and Z, open access, reference services, marketing library products and services, digital libraries, and the changing role of librarians. She has vast experience in Academic librarianship and her career is centred on academic and special libraries. She has presented in various National and International conferences.