

# Repositioning school library committees to advance school library development in South Africa

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## Abstract

*The existence of an effective and apposite governance structure is vital for the survival and functionality of an organisation, including school libraries. School library committees are governance structures indispensable for the establishment, development and maintenance of effective and functional school libraries worldwide. In South Africa, the establishment of school committees including library committees is sanctioned by the South African Schools Act (SASA) Number 84 of 1996. This is a concept paper sharing insights on how school library committees as governance structures could be repositioned to champion, influence and provide strategic direction and guidance for the development of school libraries.*

**Keywords:** School library committee, school library, school library governance, South Africa

## Introduction and background

The compelling argument in today's information and knowledge-based society for school libraries is that they are necessary to encourage learners to develop an

appreciation for reading and lifelong learning by providing resources and activities that support the school curriculum and represent a diverse range of experiences and perspectives (Udoh-IIomechine 2008). Similarly, the evolving learning culture dictates individualised learning, multi-channel and multi-modal learning as well as enhancing the development of cognitive, personal, social, rhetorical and media competencies. There is evidence from the literature that where school libraries are well-resourced and functional, teachers and learners are likely to develop information literacy and media skills indispensable for life-long and independent study (Frantsi, Kolu and Salminen 2002; Hoskins 2006; National Guidelines for School Library and Information Services 2012).

Because of South Africa's segregated past based on the apartheid laws, there are inherent imbalances in the provision of school library facilities and resources resulting in many schools without fully equipped and functional school libraries (Fredericks 1995; Hoskins 2006; Equal Education 2011; Hart 2012; Hart 2013). It seems that twenty years into the new political dispensation, the disparities of the past seem to continue unabated as it has emerged from the literature that only a minority of schools in South Africa have a dynamic, vivacious, viable and functional school library and information service managed by full-time and professionally qualified teacher-librarians (National Education Infrastructure Management System (NEIMS) 2011; Hart 2013). Hart (2013) affirms that the trend in school library development in the country remains largely unchanged because only a few historically advantaged, so-called ex-Model C suburban schools are still well-resourced compared to their counterparts in historically disadvantaged and rural parts of the country. She attributes the anomaly to economic disparities wherein suburban schools are able to supplement their school budgets by levying fees from their largely middle-class parent bodies.

The lack of advancement in school library development can be attributed amongst other things to the finalisation, validation and legislation of a school library policy in South Africa. The indeterminate state of the school library policy cascades from the national level through other spheres of government, such as provincial and local spheres into the schools. Clearly the policy would be an overarching and strategic framework that would inform school library development and practice by providing relevant canons, guidelines and frames. Without such a framework, there is likely to be a stalemate in critical aspects such as school library governance, support, appreciation, prioritisation, positioning, and resource-provisioning. These aspects are interrelated and interdependent.

This paper focuses on school library committees which are sub-committees of school governing bodies mandated by the South African Schools Act of 1996 to perform particular functions (Govender 2007).

## Statement of the problem

According to Govender (2007), a school library committee is part of the school governance structure. Scholars such as Smelt (1998), Pierre (2000) and Mothata (2000) as cited in Govender (2007) reiterate that governance is a complex function that entails controlling and running the school library. School library committees do not function in a vacuum, they function within the school library context which in turn functions with the broader political, social, economic and technological context. This means that one cannot look at the challenges of school library committees without looking at the broader context. It is widely acknowledged that school library development in South Africa is still in its infancy. In this country, school library development remains in the periphery, it is not prioritised as it is not included in the mainstream educational agenda and in national strategic plans. This is evidenced by the development of innumerable school library discussion documents, policy drafts and guidelines that have not been finalised, let alone adopted and implemented (Equal Education 2011; Hart 2013). The downside of this plethora of documents is that they are mere guidelines which are toothless and ambiguous, lacking authority, credibility and a mandate to insist that schools institutionalise not only school library committees (where school libraries exist), but school libraries themselves. For instance, one such document that recognises the importance of providing the appropriate fundamentals necessary for the establishment of functional school libraries is the *National Guidelines for School Library and Information Services* (2012). These fundamentals include amongst others appropriate resources and structures such as school library committees that can drive and champion the cause for school libraries. Although this document and others recognise these fundamentals their lack of authority, as noted above, negatively affects school library establishment, development and sustainability. Thus, the indeterminate policy framework for school libraries in this country is the basis of numerous daunting challenges:

- First, it advances the skewed development of school libraries, thus widening the political and socio-economic disparity.
- Second, it perpetuates arbitrary provision of school libraries by providing no standards, threshold or baseline for school library development in the country.

- Third, the purpose and parameters of responsibility for school library structures such as library committees is unclear or ill-defined.
- Fourth, lack of this organisational structure in schools makes it extremely difficult for many schools to establish an active and vibrant school library system.

Although the situation appears unsatisfactory, one way of addressing the current situation is to develop effective and apposite governance structures, such as school library committees or advisory committees, to drive and champion the cause of school libraries. This is a concept paper sharing insights on how school library committees as governance structures could be repositioned to champion, influence and provide strategic direction and guidance on the development of school libraries.

## School library committees

In South Africa, the establishment of school library committees, as noted above, is sanctioned by the South African Schools Act (SASA) Number 84 of 1996. However, only a few schools which have school libraries have functional school library committees because of skewed school library development in the country. As the majority of schools do not have an active school library system, library committees are critical for establishing different school library models in order to address the inequalities and discrepancies in school library development. It has emerged from the literature that the school library committee, as part of the governance structure, can add value to school libraries by being vision keepers, champions and advocates for these libraries. The thesis of this paper is that school library committees need to be repositioned for them to adopt this proactive and progressive role.

## Rationale for repositioning school library committees

School library committees are a means by which power is devolved to schools. The essence of decentralising power is matched with the notion of a collaborative and inclusive model. The model is based on the conviction that the process of initiating, nurturing and sustaining a school library cannot depend on one person. It requires collaboration wherein a variety of participants act responsibly in their own roles, assuming shared leadership for promoting an agenda that aims to realise the common vision of a school library (Govender 2007; Hughes-Hassel and Wheelock 2001). In the South African context the devolvement could be at provincial,

regional, local or school level. This paper supports school based library committees as these will address the unique and differing needs of schools in the country, although this model can have its limitations. Regardless of the level where school library committees are situated they can spearhead and catapult effective and efficient functioning and running of school libraries. Although there is no legislated school library policy in South Africa to direct and guide schools to effectively constitute school library committees, institutionalisation of such library committees should be undertaken to resuscitate school libraries in all schools.

Ideally, school library committees should be inclusive to uphold the principle of representativeness of the whole school community. The element of inclusivity is critical to ensure that diverse community constituencies have a convergence point where they collectively work to achieve a common goal. This means that their strength comes from being a collective forum that can wield power by drawing on diverse stakeholders. It is widely accepted that school libraries need multiple kinds of assistance to implement and sustain changes (Hughes-Hassel and Wheelock 2001), therefore school library committees provide a vehicle to bring community expertise to the school arena. It is widely acknowledged that an all-inclusive approach is best because it ensures that the library is for everyone and the rules and guidelines are jointly decided.

This paper is based on the premise that since school library committees are locally-rooted structures, they will be in touch with local realities. Given their local orientation, they are likely to generate not only ownership and buy-in from local constituencies, but will also generate lasting solutions that are responsive to local needs. It is widely acknowledged that development initiatives driven from within a community or society have lasting effects. Given that the agenda by government to develop school libraries has not made any significant strides because of competing priorities, the repositioning of school library committees as champions for school library development might be an alternative strategy to address the marginalisation and disempowerment of school libraries. The empowerment of school libraries will position them as local champions who will advocate and lobby support from governmental and non-governmental structures in the country and abroad. This is critical for the enhancement of an improved school library culture. Hughes-Hassel and Wheelock (2001) avow that establishing a strong library advisory committee is like laying the groundwork for a network of community allies and advocates who can work overtime to help sustain a strong library programme. This is a democratic approach that is critical to the establishment, resuscitation and success of school libraries in this country.

## Composition of the school library committee

The South African Schools Act (SASA) Number 84 of 1996 gives School Governing Bodies (SGBs) powers to establish committees at school. It is therefore the responsibility of the SGBs and School Management Teams (SMTs) in each school to establish such a school library committee to cater for the library and information needs of the teachers and learners for curriculum enhancement. A school library committee is a local forum composed of the members of the school community who will take collective responsibility for the school library. However, the library committee should not be too big and it should include people with an inherent interest in supporting the school library. Although the situation of school library committees in South African schools is far from ideal, Table 1 below presents what could be considered the ideal in terms of the stakeholders involved in the school library, and the school library committee, and the assets they could bring to the functioning of both:

Table 1: Stakeholders for school library committees

<b>Stakeholders</b>	<b>Assets they bring</b>
<b>Principal</b>	As the accounting officer of the school's resources, the principal is a key player in the establishment of the school library (Olën and Kruger 1995). Although it is acknowledged that the school principal does not necessarily have to be part of this committee, the conviction is that his or her involvement will have a positive effect.
<b>Heads of Departments (HODs)</b>	Subject heads should cooperate with the library in order to ensure that its range of information resources and services cover the special needs of the subject areas of the department (IFLA/UNESCO School Library Guidelines 2002; Olën and Kruger 1995).
<b>Teacher-librarian</b>	The teacher-librarian should be the specialist in library and information services and therefore his or her inclusion in the committee is automatic. Basically, the teacher-librarian is responsible for professional and administrative tasks such as acquisition, processing, management, access and use of library materials, including marketing, outreach programmes and advocacy initiatives (Gauteng Department of Education 2009; South Africa Department of Basic Education 2012). By virtue of her or his position, the teacher-librarian is a linchpin that offers reality check for new ideas, information literacy and knowledge resources (Hughes-Hassel and Wheelock 2001).
<b>School Governing Body (SGB)</b>	Depending on the size of the school, two or three members

	of the SGB which is a structure that represents the parent wing must also be included in the school library committee. As parents, the SGB members have extensive knowledge of barriers to literacy through experience. Such knowledge will be valuable in the establishment and nurturing of a library culture. The SGB can also play a meaningful role by encouraging parents to form a “friends of the library” group, raise funds and lobby companies or firms to donate funds or equipment for school libraries (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals 2002; IFLA/UNESCO School Library Guidelines 2002; Equal Education 2011).
<b>Learners and members of the learners representative council (LRC)</b>	Learners and members of the learners’ representative council (LRC) can be appointed as library monitors and trained to help teacher-librarians with routine work and take over the ownership of the library (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals 2002; South Africa Department of Basic Education 2012).
<b>Public or community librarian</b>	Public or community libraries have information resources that could support or augment school library resources. The public or community librarian (where they exist in proximity to the school) should be brought into the committee so that he or she can be aware of the real library resource needs of the teachers and learners and to allow bulk loaning of library materials to the teachers to enhance teaching and learning in their respective learning areas.

## Other partners in school library development

Besides the government, other partners also have a significant role to play in school library development and these are outlined in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Roles of other partners in school library development

<b>Other partners</b>	<b>Roles</b>
<b>District-level Library Advisor/ Specialist/ Coordinator</b>	Because these officers have executive, budgetary or personnel authority, their involvement in the school library and its development is crucial. They can, for example, assist with the monitoring and evaluation of the envisaged repositioning of the school library committee agenda. The authors acknowledge that the current disposition of this office does not lend itself to this extended responsibility.
<b>Business and non-Governmental Organisations (NGO’s) (READ, Biblionef, Room to Read, Community HEART and Equal</b>	Community, financial support and resource networks are fundamental to the development and sustainability of school libraries. Activism through campaigns and marches is essential to sensitise the government about the role well-

Education)	resourced functional school libraries can play in progressive, constructivist and resource-thirsty curriculum.
<b>Community-Based Organisations (CBO's)</b>	Usually these organisations have a wealth of knowledge of community issues. Likewise, they have vast experience in advocacy, strategic planning and literacy programmes.
<b>Library and Information Science Academic Departments and University Libraries</b>	These constituencies have extensive expertise in library and information science that they can contribute as part of social responsibility or investment. They can particularly assist with training and continuous professional support for school librarians.
<b>Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) through one of its interest groups that focuses particularly on school libraries, namely, the School Libraries and Youth Services Interest Group (SLYSIG).</b>	The involvement of the professional association is of paramount importance. It will not only ensure continuity and stability but will also act as a standard-bearer for school library development in the country. It can also assist with the monitoring and evaluation of the envisioned repositioning of the school library committee agenda.

## Purposes of the school library committee

A school library committee is part of the management and organisational structure of the school library (National Policy Framework for School Library Standards 1997; Mojapelo and Fourie 2008). According to the School Library Policy of KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education (2003), the school library committee “functions as a sub-committee of the SGB and must be representative of the whole school community including learner representation. The fundamental purpose of the school library committee is to develop a vision for school library media programmes, set professional goals to meet that vision and develop strategies to accomplish identified goals (Olën and Kruger 1995; Mangena 2003).

## Functions and responsibilities of the school library committee

An active, vibrant and dynamic school library system depends on dedicated school library committee members who have a vision to ensure that library resources are purchased to stimulate resource-based teaching and learning (KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education 2003). To achieve its targets, the school library committee should be empowered with appropriate knowledge, skills, attitude, resources and authority to:

*i. Plan*

For an organisation to achieve its aims and objectives effectively and efficiently, planning as the first step in the management process plays an important role (Bates 2007). Planning defines the organisation's objectives or goals, establishes an overall strategy for achieving the goals, and develops a comprehensive hierarchy of plans to integrate and coordinate activities (Robbins and DeCenzo 2005). Planning is also concerned with charting the path the organisation wants to take to get from where it is, to where it wants to be; what is to be done and how it is to be done. The school library committee members are responsible for planning the school library programmes to support and achieve the aims and objectives of the curriculum (Morris, Gillespie and Spirt 1992; Govender 2007). When all organisational members understand where the organisation is going and what they must contribute to reach the objectives, they can begin to coordinate their activities, thereby fostering cooperation and teamwork (Robbins and DeCenzo 2005).

*ii. Delegate*

The school library committee could delegate responsibilities to other people by requesting them to execute tasks and activities for the school library to accomplish its aims and objectives (Mojapelo and Fourie 2008). The delegation should be done in line with a legitimate school library framework.

*iii. Coordinate and integrate*

Coordination and integration is essential to ensure the communication and flow of information in a school library. It is the responsibility of the school library committee to coordinate school library activities during meetings and to ensure that they are implemented and effected to support curriculum delivery (Mojapelo and Fourie 2008).

*iv. Control*

The school library committee is accountable for monitoring and evaluating performance and taking the necessary corrective measures or actions in cases of deviations, irregularities and anomalies from guidelines and objectives as stipulated in the school library policy (Morris, Gillespie and Spirt 1992; Mojapelo and Fourie 2008).

*v. Recruit and appoint staff*

Ideally, the school library committee is responsible for staffing the school library. Its managerial task entails recruiting qualified teacher-librarians and their assistants to manage, run and render services in school libraries effectively and efficiently

(Prostano and Prostano 1999; Govender 2007). In the South African context where the school library sector is not well developed and synchronised it might take a while before school library committees are able to perform the function of recruiting and appointing library staff.

*vi. Direct*

In a school situation, the school library committee is responsible for establishing and fostering harmony amongst the staff members (Morris, Gillespie and Spirt 1992). To encourage communication and negotiation, the school library committee should keep communication channels open, through encouragement, guidance, directives and leading diligently and to strive for the accomplishment of the aims and objectives of a school library (Prostano and Prostano 1999).

In summary, the school library committee should be responsible for leveraging outside support for changes within the school library by:

- Seeking to develop a reservoir of public support;
- Promoting broad-based participation by building relationships that support an inside/outside or inclusive strategy for change;
- Remaining steadfast when negotiating the non-negotiables (National Policy Framework for School Library Standards 1997; Hughes-Hassel and Wheelock 2001; National Guidelines for School Library and Information Services 2012).

## Conclusions and recommendations

The thesis of this paper is that school library committees can revitalise the school library ethos, by bringing significant changes in the school library arena which the current school library structures have not been able to achieve. Clearly, for this to be achieved there needs to be radical changes and a paradigm shift among different sectors such as the school community, government, library and information services, non-governmental organisations (NGO) and other relevant stakeholders as outlined in Tables 1 and 2. The strength of the partnership will be in its inclusive nature that encompasses diverse orientations ranging from executive and strategic to practical ones. As indicated earlier, the inclusion of different stakeholders is critical to ensure buy-in and a sense of ownership that will enforce collective commitment and support for the following:

- Championing, advocating and lobbying different sectors for the recognition of school libraries.
- Finalisation, sanctioning and ratification of a school library policy that supports school library goals.

- Sufficient provision of resources commensurate with developing an effective and functional school library that will encourage intellectual exploration as well as active and life-long learning.

The paper concludes that school library committees as governance structures can be repositioned to make an invaluable contribution to the establishment, development and maintenance of effective and functional school libraries.

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