

## **The Power and Perils of Participant Observation in LIS Research: Reflections on Three South African Studies**

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**Abstract:** The paper reports on three participant observation studies that I have conducted in schools and libraries from the late 1990s. My focus is not on their findings, which have been reported on elsewhere, but on their methodologies. Their common thread is my interest in the role of libraries, school and public, in the information literacy education of school learners. Audits of school facilities have quantified the dire lack of resources and libraries in our schools. My purpose has been to provide evidence from the ground of the impact of their neglect. The first study set out to explore how teachers in an under-resourced primary school in Cape Town were coping with the demands of the new resource-thirsty curriculum. The second study took place several years later in two public libraries in a small rural town with seven local schools, none with a library. The third study in 2015 was of a library in a high school in a township in Cape Town, which is part of a NPO's project for young unemployed school leavers to manage school libraries. Participant observation is rather rare in the LIS research literature and my aim is to demonstrate its power to dig beneath the surface. I also argue that it brings certain risks, practical and ethical.

**Keywords:** Research methodologies, School libraries, Public libraries, South Africa, Participant observation

### **1. Introduction**

The paper reports on three participant observation studies that I have conducted in schools and libraries in my time as an academic at the University of the Western Cape in Cape Town from the late 1990s. The focus is not on their findings, which have been reported on elsewhere (Hart 1999; 2006a;2006b; 2015), but on their methodologies. Their common thread is my interest in the role of libraries, school and public, in the information literacy education of school learners. My purpose in my research over the years has been to provide evidence from the ground to persuade educationists of the need for libraries and

the impact of their neglect on the preparedness of our youth for their post-school lives – in higher education, the workplace, and our young democracy.

It is hard to find any examples of ethnography or participant observation in the South African LIS literature – and it is rather rare in the international LIS research literature. My aim in this paper is to demonstrate its power to dig beneath the surface of a research site and thus to explore its “complex interactions, tacit processes and hidden beliefs and values” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995: 9). I also argue that it brings certain risks, practical and ethical. Its open-endedness, what Creswell calls its “emerging approach” (2007: 37), entails certain risks or perils. Unexpected themes and findings might emerge which call into question the researcher’s preconceptions and which might affect delicate relationships among participants.

## **2. Some background: school libraries in South Africa**

South Africa aspires to join the ranks of the global knowledge economies; yet there are huge backlogs in school libraries. Some years ago Sandy Zinn and I described the situation of school libraries in South Africa as a “conundrum” (Hart & Zinn 2007); and the word still applies. Redress of the disparities of apartheid is claimed to be a central principle of our educational reforms since 1994. But official national audits of school facilities have quantified the ongoing dire lack of resources and libraries in the vast majority of our schools. On the whole it is still true that only the historically advantaged suburban schools have functional libraries, which are funded by the fees they charge to supplement their government allocations, and which certainly contribute to their superior academic performance. In response to recent pressures from civic society activist groups like the NGO Equal Education and the National Council for Library and Information Services, there have been promises to redress the situation; but as yet it is hard to see any serious credible effort to tackle the situation.

The post-apartheid curriculum introduced in 1996, Curriculum 2005, and its revision in 2001, the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) seemed to offer new opportunities for school libraries (Zinn, 2002). Another revision, CAPS, came in 2012 after recognition of the widespread failure of the first two attempts. All three might be described as “library friendly” for two reasons: they recognise the ability to “collect, analyse, organise and critically evaluate information” as a generic cross-curricular outcome; and their documentation promises an ethos that values critical thinking and active discovery learning. Librarians might assume that their emphasis on assessing learning by means of projects and portfolios of work opens the way for resource-based and enquiry learning. The national Department of Education itself has seemed to share this assumption, as De Vries (2002:10) points out in his quotation from a 1997 Department of Education publication explaining Curriculum 2005 to teachers, which stated that “adequate resources [for the new outcomes-based approaches] are essential” and that “adequate provisioning of libraries” was being accelerated.

### **3. The principles of participant observation**

Creswell's definition provides a useful summary of the attributes of qualitative research (2007: 37):

*Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a world view, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to enquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes.*

Wolcott, one of the gurus of ethnography from which participant observation has evolved, summarises its data gathering as *experiencing* (watching and listening), *enquiring* (interviewing), and *examining* (studying materials prepared by others) (1992: 9). He (1994: 12) defines the three tasks of ethnography as:

- i. description, which addresses the question, "What is going on here?". Data consist of observations made by the researcher and/or reported to the researcher by others
- ii. analysis, which addresses the identification of essential features and the systematic description of interrelationships among them - in short how things work or not work
- iii. interpretation, which addresses questions of meanings and contexts such as, "What is to be made of it all?"

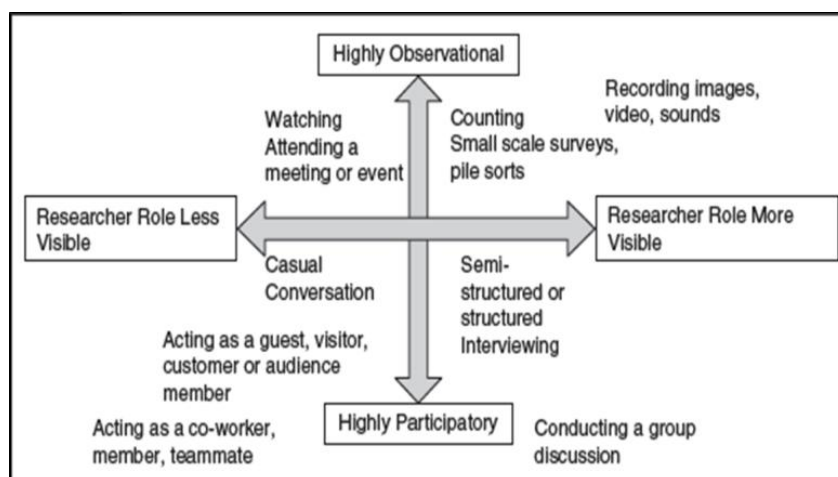
Klein and Myers' discussion of the principles of interpretive research in conducting research in information systems offers a useful framework (1999:77):

- i. The overarching principle of *the hermeneutic circle* means that an understanding of a whole comes from an understanding of its parts and of how they interrelate with one another and with the whole. The iterative process will ensure that the "big picture" is constructed from the issues and themes that emerge from the data gathering.
- ii. *Contextualisation* requires that any research must be grounded in its context; without this, the understanding of what is happening will be limited.
- iii. *Researcher reflexivity* notes that the research does not only have an impact on the research subjects, causing them to see events from an outsider's perspective: it also has an impact on the researcher. The researcher must be prepared to have his or her preconceived notions challenged in the course of the project.
- iv. The openness to *multiple interpretations* implies that it is quite possible for two different interviewees to have different perceptions

about the same event, given their personal histories, and that neither should be considered incorrect.

- v. *Suspicion or scepticism* means that researchers should constantly look beyond the obvious surface detail, and dig deeper to discover the power structures and possible inequalities.

The research method of participant observation can be seen as a continuum with participation and observation as its two poles. Figure 1 reproduces Guest, Namey and Mitchell's diagram (2012) of the continuums in participant observation and its diverse data-gathering methodologies. Participating in the life of the chosen site, rather than dropping in for once-off interviews, is essential to build insight into its world and realities as experienced by its members.



*Figure 1: Participant observation continuums. From Guest, Namey, & Mitchell (2012)*

Each of the three studies described in this paper had a different weighting of participation and observation and all three employed a mix of the methods shown in Figure 1.

#### 4. The three studies

This paper provides just a glimpse of the three studies, extracting only a few strands from the mounds of data in order to illustrate some of the principles of interpretive research that I listed above. Each of the three accounts has its own focus as shown in the section headings. The thread connecting the three studies is my preoccupation with the information literacy education of South African pupils. In accordance with promises of anonymity, all the names of places and people are pseudonyms.

The first study to be described set out to explore how teachers in an under-resourced primary school in Cape Town, Galant Primary (pseudonym), were coping with the demands of the new resource-based curriculum, introduced in 1997, and with its ubiquitous project work. The second study took place several years later in a rural town, Woodsville (pseudonym). It set out to examine how its two public libraries were connecting to the seven local schools, none with a library. The third study in 2015 was of the school library in NSS High School (pseudonym), in a sprawling township on the edge of Cape Town. The library belongs to a project that provides stipends for young unemployed school leavers to act as library managers in about 40 disadvantaged schools. My underlying purpose was to examine the potential of this approach as a solution to the human resources challenges that clearly will confront any future effort to build a school library system across the country.

#### ***Galant Primary study - context and teachers' scripts***

The significance of the geography of Galant Primary, situated in a corner of a township surrounded by major highways and a railway line, became apparent as the field study progressed. The Galant children are cut off from the city by more than their site. Poverty and high crime rates were found to pervade every aspect of school life with more than 60% of the parents unemployed and dependent on government family grants. The sandwiches, distributed throughout the school each morning, are essential as hunger, teachers believe, causes some of the inattentiveness among their pupils. At times teachers would emphasise the special closeness of the community, describing it as an enclave; at other times its more negative ghetto-like qualities would come to the fore. Mr Mitchell, the Grade 3 teacher, claims that few of the children ever go further than the shopping centre in the next suburb. Mr Moosa, the deputy principal, remarks that his pupils know nothing about the world outside the township.

The study belongs perhaps to the genre of classroom ethnography as I spent many hours sitting at the back of a Grade 7 classroom watching as groups were undertaking a science and a history project. The left-hand back corner was reserved for an unstable pool of boys whom I came to label "*the lost ones*". They seemed alienated from the day-to-day activity of the class, arriving late, if at all. Teachers seemed to ignore them as long as they caused no trouble. They did not work cohesively as a group, preferring to drop in on other groups. My plan at the start was to focus exclusively on the Grade 7 project work; but, in keeping with the open-endedness of qualitative research, I soon widened my gaze to include the Grade 1 and 4 classes as the Grade 7 teachers often complained to me that their pupils could not do project work because they had not been taught to read earlier.

My observations of the gaps between what I was seeing in the Grade 7 group work and what the teachers were telling me in their interviews soon alerted me to the need for researcher reflexivity. I had gained entry to the school with the promise that I would be looking at how teachers were managing the emphasis on project work in the new curriculum. I arrived at the school looking forward to seeing progressive teachers at work. In my preliminary interviews they

showed an awareness of the key concepts in Curriculum 2005 with Mr Moosa saying, “OBE [outcomes-based education] - *we are already doing it*”. However in the next few weeks my conceptions shifted. The posters and pamphlets for example that the science teacher had told me she had gathered for her project lay for weeks at the front of the classroom with the teacher making no attempt to mediate their use. She referred to them in an interview, saying:

*“These beautiful transparencies that the school bought and nobody came to ask for that. Most of the animals are on them, but nobody came. And I am not going to just give it to them [without their asking for it]. And they should have come to me say after school or whenever I am free, come and ask me you know. Nobody came to ask. So I thought well maybe they know what they are doing. ... I gave them that bit of freedom, by not keeping tabs on them all the time. ... Just to see what’s in them, what can I get out of them.”*

Already on the first day, I had noted a certain ambivalence about the new curriculum. “Bengu [the Minister of Education] *doesn’t know what it’s like*” - referring to large classes, shortage of resources and also to “*our kind of children*”. Well into the study, one of the Grade 7 teachers told me:

*“Forget what you have been taught at college and take the child the way he is now...The children don’t need it [the new curriculum]. Maybe it will work in a more affluent school but not here in our townships. Children from townships are different - you can’t get away from it.”*

This last reference became familiar in the following weeks and “*our kids*” soon became a unit of meaning or theme in my on-going data analysis. Another theme that surfaced was the conception of information as *something* teachers had to give their pupils, then “get out” from them. Both of these two themes can be seen in this extract:

*“You have to give them a lot of info first, especially our kids. Because our kids are located in this area where there is actually no information. ... So that when we want something from them, we can know that we are going to get something out, because you have given them information, you know...”*

There is not space here to provide more of the data analysis. My purpose has been to show how the combination of iterative interviewing and relatively long-term observation uncovered deeply held beliefs and scripts that I found were filtering teachers’ responses to the demands of the new curriculum, encapsulated in the following refrains:

- i. “We know our people”
- ii. “We have to **give** it all here”
- iii. “We’re already doing it”.

***Woodsville public libraries - different “truths” and power relations***

In common with most South African rural towns, Woodsville still reflects the town planning of the apartheid era – as do its libraries. Woodsville Library is downtown just off the high-street and the other is in Hillside, the so-called black township on its outskirts. After a survey of all the public libraries in its province I chose Woodsville for my six-week long participant observation study as I had been impressed by the two library managers’ accounts of their work with the surrounding schools. On the third day of my visit I was invited to sit in on a library workshop for a school to be run by both librarians at the Hillside library. However, the pupils did not arrive at the appointed time and Naledi Matolo, the Hillside librarian, went up to the school to chase them up. Here follows an extract from the vignette I wrote describing the incident. A vignette is a useful way to structure qualitative reports as they condense observations and point to lines of enquiry. According to Stake, they are “briefly described episodes to illustrate key aspects of the case” (1995: 128).

At last, I see Naledi Matolo picking her way through the crowds. Her shoulders are slumped and, as she reaches Tara Botha, she says bluntly, “They are not coming. The teachers don’t want them to come now.” Tara’s face freezes but she says only, “It’s very disappointing. It’s very disappointing”. I tell Naledi that I am going to the school to introduce myself to the principal and to make appointments for interviews. I refuse her offer to come with me. The previous day’s doubts have resurfaced and I wish to be seen as independent of the two librarians.

In the next few days I chatted with both librarians to explore their thoughts on the failure of the workshop and I interviewed the teacher at the school whose pupils had been expected. Then the following week I brought it up in more formal interviews with the two librarians. My purpose here is to show their different perspectives and also the power of iterative interviewing over once-off interviews.

The day after the incident both librarians laid the blame on the teachers.

*“The problem lies with the teachers. They don’t use the library so they don’t see the importance for the kids. Even if you sacrifice and say I’ll come & fetch them it becomes difficult. You find you don’t get the agreement.” Naledi Matolo*

*“Don’t they [the teachers] know how important it is?” Tara Botha*

But in the later interview some days later Tara Botha seems to lay the blame on her colleague at Hillside, saying:

*“I think she [Naledi Matolo] didn’t want to [have the workshop]. I’m not getting anything from her.”*

But then a few minutes later another possibility emerges when, thinking of the rather formal rules on children leaving school premises in my own province, I hear that she perhaps had assumed too much in her arrangement with the school:

G Hart: *Can you just take classes out of school?*

Tara Botha: *We never have that problem. They just walk down. I always speak to the principal*

G Hart: *Did you speak to the Hillside principal this time.*

Tara Botha: *No*

In the meantime the Hillside teacher had given me his explanation as to why he had not sent his pupils to the library. In this extract from our interview he betrays a certain distrust of the Hillside librarian as a teaching colleague:

*“ I don't think it's wise to send them over there without you every time. First I think, number one, the lady over there needed to have a particular partner in the school to work with. I don't think the people working over there in the library they shouldn't just sit back and expect the, especially the young learners, to use the library. I think learners should know - if the teacher is not there, they do have someone there who is acting as the teacher.”*

Later on he is critical of the inadequacies of the Hillside library saying he prefers to use the down- town library:

*“I go to the library in town because it's better than this one. ....It's got more books. There is here. They don't buy any new books. I already know there won't be anything. So why bother? “*

Naledi Matolo would probably agree with his assessment of her library. She reveals her unhappiness in these words, claiming that it not her fault that her library is underused and that she has been unfairly overlooked:

*“... the community, it's just they are reluctant. They don't want to use the library... Here I am just sitting. It's quiet. They don't use the library so you don't develop that much. ... It's a situation I can't change.”*  
*“I find it unfair. Because my colleagues who are in charge of a library like in Woodsville they were changed to a better level. Why not me? ... Is it because I'm ... at the township? Or because my library's not busy. That's not my fault....”*

### ***NSS High School library Khayelitsha Cape Town – revelations on status***

This third study was conducted in 2015 in one high school library in the sprawling township of Khayelitsha on the outskirts of Cape Town. The library is one of the 40 libraries of the so-called Bringing Life to School Libraries project of the NPO the Bookery. The Bookery raises funds for unemployed school leavers to manage the libraries which it sets up. I chose NSS School as, unlike the other schools, it has a qualified school librarian on its staff, Thandi Sibandla, who however is a full-time senior English teacher and can only drop into the library in the course of her teaching day. The library assistant is Lindi Maropa. I



went into the school hoping to explore the working relationship between these two women, wondering what might be learned from the library assistant project for school library development in South Africa, given the absence of professional posts for librarians in our public schools.

The NSS library is a handsome space – that before the Bookery intervention had fallen into disarray as it never had had a full-time staff member. However within a day or two I was wondering why it was so empty for most of the teaching day. At intervals and after school it is fairly busy with students doing their homework and borrowing books. But in the course of the first week of my study only two teachers brought their classes into the library to work on an assignment. Lindi Maropa, the Bookery library assistant, spent much of her morning in an empty room. In the course of the study, as far as I could see, she was never invited into the teachers' staff room or to their meetings. Early on she revealed her isolation in this telling sentence "*It's quite lonely. It's almost like you're a bit of an outsider.*" Her words underlay my investigation in the following weeks. As in all participant observation research I soon was gathering mountains of data; but the focus here is on what the observation in the library, the iterative interviewing, and a questionnaire survey of the teachers revealed about the observed underuse of the library and the status of Lindi Maropa.

The questionnaire was a convenient tool to explore the attitudes of teachers to the library. Only 16 of the school's 35 teachers chose to complete the questionnaire – 13 of them claiming to have supported the revival of the library in 2010. Bias in favour of the library in the analysis of the questionnaires is thus likely. On being asked why they supported the revival of the library, several refer to the need to improve the reading culture of the school and several talk of access to resources. The issue of resources is returned to frequently in answers to later questions. Three make the point that their learners have no other resources – with one saying "*Most of our learners are from disadvantaged communities (informal settlements); our library is the best place for them to do their school work*". The concern over low literacy is evident in the finding in the next question where almost unanimously all rate their learners' literacy abilities as "weak". Despite their claims of the value of a library in a school and in their teaching, only three respondents report that they have brought a class to the library more than four times so far that year - and eight say they have not brought a class at all.

On being asked how the library could be improved, two responses dominated:

- i. the need for more resources – and for more up to date resources. My own investigation of the contents of the shelves confirmed the need for more appropriate and curriculum -related materials.
- ii. access to the Internet. The library had its four PCs stolen in 2014 and they have not been replaced. The school has internet access in the ICT laboratory and in the administrative offices. Thandi Sibandla has, she says, struggled for years to persuade school management of the need to prioritise connectivity in the library.

It is interesting that, while a few respondents call for a “full-time qualified librarian”, none makes any mention of Lindi Maropa, the Bookery assistant. . The underuse of the library by teachers and the standing of the library in the school are two strong themes running through the interviews with the Bookery assistant and the teacher-librarian. The two had interestingly different perspectives. Here, the teacher librarian, Thandi Sibandla, refers to the prevailing teaching styles – in which the library is something “extra”:

*“Not everybody sees the value because they are too busy in the classroom. For them library is an extra thing. Whereas in reality you should be incorporating it into learning. It’s like the library does its own thing and then the school functions - whereas we should actually work together.”*

In an early interview Lindi Maropa echoes the teachers’ views on the need for more and better resources and for internet access.

*“...for more support from the teachers ..., if we could get the Internet and computers. And get more books that are relevant to learners. Not just only non-fiction, but also fiction. And get more Xhosa books, because it starts in the mother language ...”*

But in a later conversation she suggests another more sensitive factor - Thandi Sibandla’s territorialism. In this extract Lindi claims that some teachers see her and the library as belonging to Thandi and so keep away:

*“Because I am always with her [Thandi], I work with her, and then maybe some teachers don’t like her. So they don’t like the idea of the library because she takes ownership of it, she is very protective of the library. She is very territorial.”*

Thandi is certainly aware of staffroom politics. In her interview she talks of how she uses a senior male teacher as “my ace card” “to go and influence the other guys”. She talks of having to “have to manipulate and beg and grovel and play nice, you know, just to get the library going.”

The case of the NSS library holds many lessons for the Bookery management and for the huge project of building effective school library systems across the country. Perhaps the most important is the awareness it brings that “giving” a library to a school is only the first step.

## **5. Conclusions**

The preceding section, I hope, has proved evidence in support of the power of the participant observation methodology to dig beneath the surface of the three research sites. The researcher immersion in a situation and the “following your nose” approach that goes with participant observation builds rich understanding of a specific context. This then throws light on existing theory and other contexts. Each of the three studies

brought surprises; their progressive and accumulative data analysis led to new understandings and interpretations. I have tried to show the ““ complex interactions, tacit processes and hidden beliefs and values”” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995: 9) that exist in the three research sites – which are probably at play in other contexts and which have to be taken into account in planning effective library and information literacy programmes in South African schools.

However, the paper has also provided evidence of the perils of participant observation – which are inseparable from its strengths. Some of the p/perils are logistical. Participant observation is time-consuming and expensive. I am fortunate that as a university academic I have been able every few years to spend time away from my office routines. Qualitative researchers warn of the mountains of data that are accumulated – much of which might not be relevant to the research problem under investigation. They also warn of the difficulties in writing up qualitative studies... How does one condense a study for a journal article when the descriptions, analyses, and interpretations are so rich and overlaid and nuanced? Stake’s wonderful description of the processes summarises the complexities: “ideas are structured, highlighted, subordinated, connected, embedded in contexts, laced with flavour and doubt” (1994: 240).

But the more significant perils are ethical. These relate to the positioning of the researcher – and the power relations between the researcher as observer and the participants. The role of the researcher - however “native” she might believe she goes - is inevitably based on relationships of control and hierarchy. As Morrison, Gregory & Thibodaux (2015) warn in their article "Goodbye. Thanks for using me", participants might well feel exploited once the researcher has departed. The “complex interactions and tacit processes” being explored often involve sensitive relations – as for example those between the two librarians in Woodsville. A strand of discussion in the literature of participant observation deals with the issue of researcher honesty and disclosure. Ethnography, with its long-term and progressive data collection techniques, might well involve some lies or half-truths. There were for example several ethical challenges in the course of the study at Galant Primary. In the beginning, in order to gain access and acceptance and knowing that many teachers dislike being observed in class and that they often get their classes to “perform” for visitors, I described my research interest rather vaguely as “information literacy and the new curriculum”. This, although not a lie, hid, perhaps, the full truth that the focus was inevitably to be on the teachers’ classroom techniques. In my defence, it has to be said that the need for this sharp focus only became apparent once the project work observation was under way. Punch suggests that researchers be pragmatic and recognise the consequences for the subjects and for themselves when weighing up the pros and cons of total openness:

I base this position on the view that subjects should not be harmed but also the pragmatic perspective that some dissimulation is intrinsic to social life and, therefore, also to fieldwork. ... (1994: 91).

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