

Multiple Research Methods as a Way to Explore the Longitudinal Impact of the Rural Village Library in Africa

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Abstract: This paper will focus on the body of qualitative and quantitative research conducted since 2004 to explore the impact of several rural libraries in Uganda and Burkina Faso, in Africa. This longitudinal study is ongoing, and outcomes are currently being used to support the development of a rural village library framework in Uganda, and perhaps elsewhere on the continent, as well as generate support for these village libraries in Africa. Areas being studied include impact of the libraries on student academic achievement, impact on teaching, impact on local literacy practices, impact on mother/child literacy practices, impact on learning readiness of young children, and impact on local economic development. Various approaches were used to gather data including psychological measures, focus groups, participant observation, ethnographic interviews, and questionnaires.

Keywords: Uganda, Burkina Faso, rural libraries, literacy, reading culture, qualitative approaches, quantitative approaches.

1. Introduction and Theoretical Framework

This multifaceted longitudinal research study, which began in 2004, focuses mainly on a rural village library in Kitengesa, Uganda, and the exploration, through qualitative and quantitative approaches, of the impact of the library on the village residents. There are six interrelated areas where library impact is explored: student academic achievement, teachers and teaching, local literacy practices, mother/child literacy practices, learning readiness of young children, and local economic development. This research has also been extended to a group of five village libraries in Burkina Faso.

Rural village or community libraries have existed in Africa for many years, most notably since the late 1960s, and have been documented by researchers such as Rosenberg (1993), Mostert (1998), Stilwell (1989, 1991), Alemna (1995) and Sturges (1998). These small, one-room libraries operate in areas without electricity, paved roads or running water, and they serve rural communities who have no other access to reading materials. The development of these libraries grew out of the need to bypass the traditional public library in Africa – an institution built on colonialist principles and not concerned at all with serving the needs of the majority of the continent’s population. Stilwell (1989, 264) writes “the needs of the colonized were subservient, if considered at all.” The author goes on to carefully cite the numerous means by which the colonizers’ attempted to prevent Africans from utilizing the public libraries. At present, the public library in Africa suffers from profound underfunding and out-of-date collections. Furthermore, these libraries are often located in the urban areas, as is the case in Uganda and Burkina Faso, whereas most of the populations live in rural areas. For these reasons, the public library is not used by a majority of the people in these countries. The rural village library, where they exist, are the only alternative means of providing reading and information materials for rural peoples. In many areas, these rural village libraries also serve as a school library in the villages, simply because there is no other such resource.

2. Statement of the Broader Problem

Regardless of age, reading is an important developmental and social cultural factor, that is not possible without access to reading materials. Literacy practices and the development of a “reading culture” play a key role in childhood development, later student learning, scholastic success, civic engagement, and sustainability. Research also suggests that literacy plays a key role in psychological and emotional development of younger children (Richner and Nicolopoulou, 2001); and specifically that “family literacy environment” is positively correlated with a number of academic measures, including maternal literacy levels and education (Christian, Morrison, and Bryant, 501, 1998). Thus, lack of access to reading materials and associated educational activities creates multiple challenges with long term implications. The matter is further compounded by several factors such as poverty, lack of access to healthcare, terrible living conditions, unstable civic and democratic environments, and lack of financial resources.

3. Regional Context for the Study

Uganda

Uganda has a total population of more than 32 million people (UNICEF, 2010). The adult literacy rate for adult males is 71 percent, for adult females it is 53 percent. As of 2009, the life expectancy was age 53 (UNICEF, 2010). Seventy-eight percent of males in the relevant age group attend primary school, and 79 percent of females. For secondary school attendance, that number drops dramatically. According to the Ugandan Bureau of Statistics (2009), there were

65,045 secondary school teachers, and 3149 secondary schools. The literacy rate for young adults is 71 percent (UNESCO, 2008). Only 18 percent of girls and 20 percent of boys are enrolled in secondary school, and the secondary school pupil: teacher ratio is 18:1 (UBOS, 2009). Secondary school students (ages 13-17) are most vulnerable, and are a key population for a portion of the research.

Lifespan and overall quality of life are affected by the number of residents living with HIV (1.2 million), and by other illnesses such as malaria. As of 2009, 1.2 million children ages 0-17 years were orphaned by AIDS (UNICEF, 2009). Living conditions are also an important consideration - as of 2008, only 12 percent of the population was urbanized. Forty-nine percent of those living in rural areas have access to adequate sanitation facilities, and 64 percent access to improved drinking water (UNICEF, 2009).

Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso, with a population of 16.3 million people (US Department of State, 2010), is a small west African country near Ghana. Formerly known as Upper Volta, the country gained its independence from France in 1960. Burkina Faso is surrounded by Ghana, Niger, Cote D'Ivoire, Togo, Benin and Mali. The country ranks 161 (out of 169 countries) on the human development index (measured by one's ability to live a long and healthy life, be educated and have a decent standard of living) – this represents one of the lowest human development rates in all of Africa (Human Development Reports, 2010), with 52 per cent of the population currently living below the poverty line (UN Data, 2008). Literacy rates in Burkina Faso are low, only 23 per cent of males 15 years and older are literate, while a mere 13 per cent of females are literate (UNICEF, 2008). The student to teacher ratio is an appalling 49:1. Compared to the total population of the primary school age group, about 53 per cent of students are enrolled in primary school. Secondary school total gross enrollment is 12 per cent (World Bank, 2008a). Only 6 per cent of the rural population has access to improved sanitation, and 72 per cent access to improved water sources (UNICEF, 2008).

4. Review of the Key Literature

4.1 The Rural Village/Community Library

The idea of the community library/community information center has existed in Africa for more than 35 years. As early as 1968, according to Rosenberg (1993, 29), the concept of rural information centers was being discussed by professionals and others in Africa who recognized the need for access to information by rural peoples. The need was seen as being important, and as a result, projects such as the Village Reading Rooms in Botswana, the Osu-initiated libraries in Ghana and the village libraries in Tanzania were founded. Sturges (1994, 277) highlights several other rural community-based projects in Africa that provide users with reading services, including the reading rooms in Tanzania and Botswana (local rooms in homes or churches that provide a place for people to sit and read); the book distribution services in Mali; the Bulawayo

Home Project in Zimbabwe (an individual's home is used as a gathering place to read and exchange information/materials) and the 23 school/community libraries in rural Zimbabwe set up as part of the Rural Libraries and Resources Development Programme. These libraries are organized and managed by local organizations such as churches, schools or community groups, and have very close ties to the community. They rely on donations from supporters to operate, as opposed to funding from the government. A number of scholars (Rosenberg, 1993; Mostert, 1998; Alemna, 1995; Stilwell, 1989) have examined the history, operation and management of the rural community library, as well as its importance in a part of the world where access to information is limited, and illiteracy a roadblock to utilizing the information that is available.

Library scholars such as Kempson (1986, 188) define rural community libraries by developing guidelines for their creation and operation. Kempson lists three guidelines that should be considered:

1. Community information services should not solely be based on the provision of printed materials, as many rural users are not used to utilizing printed materials, because so little of it exists in the community.
2. Community information services of any type should be rooted in the community and for the most part, facilitated by members of that community.
3. The services should be a channel for transferring information both to and from the local community.

Mostert points out the pitfalls of ignoring guidelines such as those advanced by Kempson. The author suggests that the "passive" services provided by public libraries were geared towards the middle class and those who were literate, and excluded the newly literate and those who could not read or write. The author advances that community libraries, when established by the communities themselves, might be more successful than the traditional public library. Community library services, he urges, should not be imposed from outside the community, nor should they be based solely on the Western concept of the library (Mostert, 1998, 76). The Kitengesa Community Library, which serves as the home base for this study, in rural Uganda is one such example of a working rural community and school library.

4.2 The State of the School Library

School and public libraries in Burkina Faso and Uganda and their impact cannot fairly be compared to the same in the West. There are glaring inadequacies related to financial support, management, collections, space, training, and staff that have been presented by researchers such as Banjo (1998) and Rosenberg (1994). Sturges (2001) addresses the shortcomings of the public library system in former African British colonies, stating (with regard to Uganda), "since the

1970s the national library services have failed to attract significant numbers of users and have mostly stagnated from the lack of funds” (Sturges, 2001, 38).

School libraries in Uganda and Burkina Faso operate within an environment where the struggle to eradicate illiteracy is ongoing. There are libraries on the continent of Africa, however, IFLA estimates that there are only about 5.5 million registered library users on the continent out of a population of 27 million (compared with 77 million users in North America) (IFLA, 2003, 14). An even larger problem has to do with access to reading materials. The public libraries in Africa, especially those in the Sub-Saharan region, are based on a Western model with outdated and irrelevant collections, mostly in English. Furthermore, these collections are print-based, and ignore the oral culture and practices of many African countries. In their work, “The Quiet Struggle: Information and Libraries for the People of Africa,” authors Sturges and Neill state that “the public library was an implant which African governments have virtually never financed to levels at which it could function effectively...Its resources are generally pathetic and not at all nourishing for the minds of the few adult users” (1998, 146).

The dire lack of public libraries places even more pressure on school libraries to provide reading materials for students. School libraries have the potential to play an important role in Africa and elsewhere in the world because they can introduce a culture of reading to children very early, and provide access to reading materials within a familiar context. A number of scholars have addressed the need for the creation and support of school libraries in the developing world. Magara and Nyumba specifically cite the need for school libraries in order to support “child-centered” teaching and develop a “culture of reading” (2004, 315). More than 30 years ago, De Perez (1971) made one of the most compelling arguments for creating school libraries. The author stated that providing school libraries “is one of the most effective means to renovate education,” because school libraries are valid for all levels of education, they have functioned well in other countries with varying types of educational systems, they make more materials available to teachers and students than can normally be provided by the school, and at a much cheaper cost, and they encounter less resistance than other methods of educational reform such as curriculum change (De Perez, 1971, 38).

While there have been few major studies on the relationship between rural village libraries and academic achievement in sub-Saharan Africa, Bristow (1992) and Lutaaya (1999) both provide evidence that access to books and other reading material as part of the curriculum enhances student learning (Bristow, 1992, 75). The implications for these outcomes in underdeveloped area schools are many, and if students are to benefit fully from learning, access to books and other resources should be the norm, not the exception, as is currently the case in many rural areas.

4.3 Kitengesa Community Library Profile

Kitengesa is a rural village in Southeastern Uganda. It is a small community, and up until 2004 there was no running water or electricity. To date such utilities are still limited. Masaka is the closest town, located about 3 kilometers away on a dirt road. The village shares the name of a nearby trading centre, and has several primary and secondary schools in the area. The majority of the community members are farmers, and there are a large number of small children orphaned as result of the AIDS epidemic. Much of the population can read, as access to education has existed for quite some time in the community. Some residents can read in English, but most read in the local language of Luganda. In 1997, the Ugandan government instituted free universal primary education, which increased the numbers of those now able to read. However, access to reading materials is still minimal, and the challenge remains providing reading materials for the newly literate.

In 1999, Emmanuel Mawanda, the headmaster of the Kitengesa Comprehensive Secondary School, began a collaboration with Professor Kate Parry, an English professor from Hunter College in New York City and part-time resident of Kitengesa. Volunteers began to lend reading material to students of the school out of a small box of 161 books, and in 2001, a one-room library was built on the grounds of the Kitengesa Comprehensive Secondary School, funded primarily with a grant from the UN One Percent for Development Fund. In 2004, another grant from the UN One Percent for Development Fund allowed for the purchase of solar panels to provide limited lighting in the library after sunset. The library is the only building in the village to have electricity, and users can now read during the evening hours.

The purpose-built library seats about 35 users and has a collection of 2000 books, as well as subscriptions to a variety of daily newspapers. Library membership is free for students and teachers, and community members are asked to pay \$1.00 per year in order to check out books. The library is maintained by a small staff which includes two librarians and student library aides. Funding for the library comes exclusively from individual donations and grants - there is no government support provided for the library.

In addition to providing access to reading material, the librarians also provide literacy instruction to those in community who seek to improve their reading/writing skills, or learn how to read and write for the first time.

4.4 Burkina Faso Libraries Profile

The five community libraries in Burkina Faso offer community members the opportunity to gain access to a variety of reading materials. The collections are small, like most village libraries, and are made up of materials relevant to the users and in the local language(s). The collection sizes have grown consistently and as of 2011, range from under 1,000 to 4,000 books. A nominal fee is charged, on a sliding scale, to become a member and charge out books, although any village member can use the libraries to read. In 2007, the five libraries

collectively had more than 37,000 visits, and close to 10,000 book check-outs, and the number of new members ranged from 86 at the smaller library in Sara, to 235 at the larger, more popular library in Bereba.

5. Overview of Key Findings (Uganda only)

Due to space restrictions, a few key preliminary findings are presented from the Uganda study only.

5.1 Scholastic Impact Study

Principle Investigator: Valeda Dent

Method/ Data Gathering: Surveys, questionnaires, participant observation, ethnographic interviews, school/grade data

Five research questions guided this area of study: Do students with a school library read more? Do students make good use of the library? Do students recognize the importance of having the library? Do students use the library materials for other than class-related work? Are there any noticeable differences between the grades of students with the library at their school, and those without? To explore this area, researchers visited two different schools in the Masaka District, Uganda, and collected information on student rank and student grades, gathered feedback from focus groups and surveys, and conducted extensive observation. Information from the library at a third school was also used for the sake of comparison.

Grades from non-standardized tests and class rank information were collected for 85 students (ages 13-20), 6 focus groups were conducted, 85 questionnaires were distributed and collected from students, 5 school administrators and 3 library staff were interviewed, and approximately 10 hours of observation was done.

Findings revealed that older students at Kitengesa Comprehensive Secondary School visit the library more often, whereas younger students seem to check out more items but spend less overall time in the library. The majority of students at Kitengesa use the library for reasons other than schoolwork. The analysis suggests that students at Kitengesa Comprehensive Secondary School had higher overall averages than their counterparts at Masaka High School, which does not have a library.

5.2 Local Economic Development

Principle Investigator: Valeda Dent

Method/ Data Gathering: Questionnaires, participant observation, and ethnographic interviews

Skrzeszewski and Cubberley (1997) suggest that “library services can be vital to economic growth” (324) in rural areas. Muyeed’s (1982) indicators for rural development were incorporated for the sake of analysis. Muyeed (1982) astutely observes that “adult literacy has little appeal to the rural poor in developing

countries as a means of liberating the mind. It must find a more direct appeal through liberating the poor from the pangs of hunger and poverty” (235).

The connection between rural libraries and small scale economic development must begin with a closer look at the impact of these libraries on their communities in general. Much of the measurable impact has to do with improved literacy practices, the provision of non-formal educational activities, and support of what is often a fledgling reading culture. Dent and Yannotta (2005) demonstrated that these libraries have a real benefit to users in terms of access to reading materials, literacy programming, and non-formal educational activities. Blaug (1966) indicates that “the world map of illiteracy does, of course, correspond rather closely with the world map of poverty” (399).

Abdul Muyeed describes nine indicators for rural development (Muyeed, 1982, 231). Muyeed’s indicators highlight the importance not only of income generation, but also of employment, increased access to education and better healthcare. Muyeed’s indicators of rural development are:

- 1) The rate of increase in income gained by the rural poor
- 2) The rate of increase in productivity of the small-scale farms
- 3) The degree of increased participation in decentralized administration and planning
- 4) The rate of improvement in nutritional status among the rural poor
- 5) The rate of increase in availability of employment
- 6) The rate of increase in the acquisition of functional literacy
- 7) The proportion of increase in the budget allocation to education at all levels
- 8) The degree of social demand for education services in the rural areas
- 9) The rate of improvement in the availability of social, health, recreational and other services to the rural poor

The Nyendo Reading Group in Kitengesa is an example of local efforts to promote literacy and connect literacy with better business gains. In 2003, a library member and local school teacher from the Kitengesa Comprehensive Secondary School began checking out books from the Kitengesa Community Library, and taking them to the nearby village of Nyendo located about fifteen miles away from the library. The group has a diverse membership, made up of men, women and small business owners. Group members read on their own during the week, and request specific reading material for the following week. The business owners read to improve their literacy and English skills, in order to be more effective traders and communicators. One group member was able to travel to different parts of Africa (Nairobi and Kenya) to participate in trading activities and improve her business.

When interviewed as part of a research study in 2005, all of the members stated that they had little or no English reading/writing skills before joining the reading group (Dent and Yannotta, 2005). After attending the reading group for a period of time, members reported that they could read in English and Luganda to varying degrees. The members also reported that they read in their spare time, and 66 percent said they have reading material on hand at work to read when business is slow. A few members also said they read to their children, or would do so in the future.

The Nyendo Reading Group intersects with two of Muyeed's indicators: the increase of functional literacy, and the degree of social demand for educational services (1982, 231). Although the literacy of the Nyendo group members has not to date been measured in any formal way, self-reports from the members suggest that their reading skills have improved and had an impact on their ability to trade. Connected to this is the desire of group members to continue participating in this informal literacy instruction, which can be seen as a demand for (informal) educational services.

The Library Literacy Instruction program at Kitengesa is another example of local efforts to increase literacy and the resulting potential economic benefits to villagers. Beginning in 2005, the librarian at the Kitengesa Community Library began holding informal literacy classes in the library. One young woman, interested in starting her own business after moving to the village from a more urban area, was able to attend poultry farming workshops after learning to read and write her name. As a result, she was able to start her own poultry business, with more than 200 chickens. She sells the eggs and meat to local merchants at hotel and food outlets, which generates income for her family. The library's literacy program aligns with three of Muyeed's indicators: the importance of the increase of functional literacy (the young woman learning to read and write her name in order to support her entrepreneurship), the degree of social demand for educational services (the commitment of the literacy group members to participate in the instruction over the course of a year), and the increase in income by the local poor (the income generated by the young woman's poultry business).

5.3 Learning Readiness – An intergenerational study

Principle Investigator: Geoff Goodman

Co-principle Investigator: Valeda Dent

Method/ Data Gathering: Psychological measures, focus groups, ethnographic interviews

This study (in progress) was designed to test an intergenerational model of the mediational pathways of adult library usage on the development of a reading culture, improved literacy, and children's learning readiness following the establishment of a rural village library. Specifically, it is believed that adult patterns of library usage will positively impact the development of a reading culture, and support the development of enhanced literacy patterns among these

adults, which in turn will predict their young children's development of learning readiness skills.

As part of the study, each mother completed an hour-long, semi-structured interview designed by the researchers. These interviews sought to establish the extent of the mothers' reading habits, content of reading materials, motivation for reading, frequency of library use, and assess certain demographic characteristics and cumulative social-contextual risk (including health indicators). Interviews were videotaped and transcribed for coding purposes.

Children completed five tasks that collectively measured readiness to learn:

1. The Marble-in-the-Hole Game
2. Pictorial Curiosity Task
3. The Box Mazes
4. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-IV
5. The Attachment Story-Completion Task

Preliminary findings suggest that the health of the primary caregivers' was positively correlated with learning readiness. Social-contextual risk was also positively correlated with the level of exposure to the library.

5.4 Reading Culture Development

Co-principle Investigator: Valeda Dent

Co-principle Investigator: Lauren Yannotta

Method/Data Gathering: Surveys, questionnaires, participant observation, and ethnographic interviews

At Kitengesa, focus group interviews revealed that boys spend more hours reading per week than girls. However, girls check out significantly more books than boys. Students with a school library read aloud to others in their family more often than those students without a library, this is important as reading aloud is a key indicator of reading culture development. Library users spent on average 10.1 hours per week reading non-school related materials; leisure reading is another key indicator of reading culture development. The data also revealed that Kitengesa students who visited the library more often had higher class ranks than those who did not visit the library as much; this was a pattern that was repeated across all four secondary school grades.

6. Conclusion

The major areas of focus for this longitudinal study are each important in terms of reading culture and lifelong literacy skill development in the rural African villages that have been identified. It is hoped that the results will provide a better understanding of the role of access to reading materials, targeted literacy and reading programs, and the connection to literacy. It is also the goal to generate outcomes that might be generalizable to other similar rural settings. There are additional areas that are also relevant for exploration, including the

connection between literacy, reading practices, and the emotional, psychological, and health-related well-being of both child and adult users. In addition, the benefits associated with rural village libraries and their impact over time will be highlighted and disseminated in scholarly, not-for-profit, research, and professional environments, with the intent of generating communities of discourse, international interest, and support.

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