# Place, Space and Time: Adult Education Experiences of Learners and Librarians in South African Public Libraries

MARY NASSIMBENI
Centre for Information Literacy, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, South Africa

BEV MAY
Formerly of Cape Town City Libraries, Cape Town, South Africa

Drawing on results of a national survey, this article examines adult education in South African public libraries from the perspective of adult learners and librarians. Quantitative data from 589 libraries from the total sample of 1295 libraries was collected. This was supplemented by qualitative data collected during site visits to eleven libraries selected to cover geographical spread. The activities of the 26.7% of the libraries involved in adult education are analysed with a view to understanding the interventions through the experience and perceptions of the participants, and so arriving at an understanding of the contribution of the libraries' role in the fight against illiteracy which is acknowledged by the South African government as a serious impediment to its development efforts. An attempt is made to assess the extent to which the experiences in the libraries can be said to be particular to the local situation, or whether the lessons learned form part of a broader pattern of adult education policy and practice observed in other parts of the world, especially developing countries. It is concluded that, in spite of the modest scale of the interventions, the impact is sufficiently encouraging to recommend intensifying and spreading initiatives in the public library's drive for social inclusion.

## Introduction

The national agenda of transformation in South Africa has led institutions and organisations in both the public and the private sector to examine the appropriateness of their policies and practices for an emerging democracy committed to the eradication of poverty and inequalities. The library and information services (LIS) community has embarked on an agenda of change, which requires – in many instances – radical realignment of its philosophy recognising the realities of the communities to be served. One of these communities consists of people marginalised because of their poor literacy skills. As a signatory of the Dakar Framework for Action the government has committed itself to the reduction by half of adult illiteracy by 2015 (World Education Forum 2000). The task, however, is not solely that of the government; in South Africa organised labour, industry and NGOs also participate. Among their number, but far less visible, is the public library. Because of the low visibility of the work on adult education in the public library, the researchers embarked on a project to investigate the shape, size and extent of adult education activities in South African public libraries.

## The investigation

There were two phases in the investigation: a questionnaire survey of all public libraries whose purpose was to uncover adult education activity in

Mary Nassimbeni, Centre for Information Literacy, University of Cape Town, Private Bag X3, Rondebosch, 7701, South Africa. Mary.Nassimbeni@uct.ac.za

Bev May, formerly of Cape Town City Libraries, Cape Town, South Africa.

public libraries across a number of dimensions, including the following:

- Numbers of libraries participating in adult education
- Types of programmes and their characteristics
- Learner participation and success rates
- Problems and difficulties encountered
- Reasons for libraries' non-participation in adult education

Of the 1295 questionnaires sent to all public libraries in the nine provinces, 589 (45.5%) were returned. The quantitative data were supplemented in the second phase by qualitative data gathered by the fieldworker during field trips to eleven sites, selected to reflect variations of geographic and demographic spread. This qualitative approach was adopted in order to understand the lived experience of the adult learners, the librarians and the adult education facilitators. The purpose of this paper is to explore the adult education programmes through the lenses of the participants, highlighting critical issues as revealed by an investigation of the librarians' policies and practices. An attempt is made to analyse the extent to which the participants' experiences are singular, shaped by local and historic circumstances, or consistent with patterns observed in other countries, especially in the developing world. The study was framed by the broader problems of illiteracy and poverty in an emerging democracy such as South Africa. The main findings of the survey have been reported in a paper by Nassimbeni and May (2006a), and an analysis of the enabling and constraining factors of adult education in public libraries in a paper by Nassimbeni and May (2006b).

## Illiteracy in South Africa

Aitchison notes that recently the term 'adult basic education and training' (ABET) has all but displaced the term 'literacy' that was current in the 1990 s in South Africa. ABET in this context refers to "education and training provision for people aged 15 and over who are not currently engaged in formal schooling, or in higher education and who have an education level of less than grade 9" (Aitchison 1999, 143). In this paper the term 'adult education', the term more commonly encountered in the literature and one which is grounded on literacy skills, is used as a synonym for ABET.

Estimates of literacy rates in South Africa vary but the figures produced by Aitchison and Harley (2004) are widely used and accepted as author-

itative. They conclude that 32% (or 8.5 million) of the population is functionally illiterate. When these figures are disaggregated using "race" as a variable, the damage and inequities caused by the education system of the previous regime becomes starkly apparent:

- 22.3% of adult black Africans have not received any schooling
- Only 1.4% of whites have received no schooling

These disparities are mirrored in other indicators of inequality leading President Mbeki to characterise South Africa as "two societies": one in which the largely white affluent society (about 13% of the population) lives and prospers. At the other extreme, the other society, consisting of about 53% of the population is characterised by poverty and underdevelopment (SA Country Assistance Strategy. Building a Knowledge Partnership 1999). In this society "half have less than a primary school education, over a third of the children suffer from chronic malnutrition, only a quarter of the households have electricity and running water, and less than a fifth have modern sanitation" (World Bank, 1999). Using the threshold of surviving on a dollar a day, Hall (2006) points out that the percentage of the population living in absolute poverty has risen in 1993 from 4.3 million people (11.5%) to 8.6 million (19.8%) in 2000. In 2004 there was an officially reported unemployment rate of 26.2% (Lehohla 2005), generally taken by analysts to be an underestimate. The unemployment rate for black Africans [1] is 31.3%, coloureds 21.8%, Indians 13.4% and whites 5.4%.

Baatjes *et al.* point out the relationship between poverty and illiteracy: "the maps of illiteracy, poverty and unemployment are beginning to mirror each other" (Baatjes *et al.* 2002, 1, quoted by Rule 2006). These connections are recognised by governments, NGOs and international organisations to the extent that adult education is increasingly being seen as a strategy for poverty reduction (Duke 2004, 17).

## Public libraries and adult education

Adult education was a primary focus in the foundation of the public library in the UK, and also prominent in the USA (Adams *et al.* 2002). There are a number of contemporary accounts of the current situation and the public library's role in

adult education in countries like Australia, the UK, and the USA (cf. Libraries and literacy: 'one of the best systems in the world because everyone can use it' 1995; Hull 1999; De la Peña Cook and Barber 2001). In developing countries, where the rates of illiteracy are much higher, there are a few examples of collaboration between libraries/community centres and the adult education movement and the state, for example in Tanzania, Malawi and Botswana (Sturges and Wallis 1999). The weight of opinion seems to be, however, that as African public libraries are so closely modelled on the Western model, they are disconnected from communities they are to serve, and therefore not fulfilling an effective role (cf. Issak 2000, 21).

In her paper on adult education in developing countries, Torres asserts for the library, among other learning systems, a role in the expanded and renewed vision of adult education which emphasises the centrality of learning rather than teaching (2000, 19). She refers to the concept of the Community Learning Centre (CLC) which typically incorporates a library component in developing regions such as Asia and Latin America. Unesco defines the CLCs – which it promotes – as "local institutions outside the formal education system for villagers or urban areas usually set up and managed by local people to provide learning opportunities for community development and improvement of people's quality of life" (Torres 2000, 87).

## *Findings*

The questionnaire data show that by far the majority of libraries (432 libraries, or 73.3 %) do not participate in any way in adult education, while only 26.7 % (i. e. 157 libraries) do. In the following section the perspectives of the librarians and learners are presented.

### *The librarians: adult education activities*

During the survey it was found that many of the 157 libraries joined in the struggle against illiteracy have achieved a lot in spite of the many resource constraints that they suffer. Many librarians were literacy facilitators themselves, taking responsibility for programme design and some of the teaching. In most instances, however, they acted in a support role, interacting with and assisting the literacy facilitators: offering a venue for teaching, providing

teaching and learning material and encouraging the learners by organising literacy events such as adult learners' week. The question of appropriate training was a consistent issue raised by the librarians, highlighting the need for special approaches and skills, and lamenting the sparse opportunities for participating in learning opportunities. Key barriers to participation by libraries in adult education were identified as resource deficits:

- Human resources: shortages of staff and lack of trained staff;
- Adult education materials: dearth of suitable reading materials for adult learners and neoliterates;
- Lack of funds, or lack of sustained funding.

These barriers are particularly acute in resource-poor environments, such as rural areas which experience greater levels of deprivation than libraries in urban areas. At one of the sites the librarian reported that she had not received new books of any type for five years. The current South African public library finance model relies heavily on factors such as membership and past use. This approach does not factor in community outreach, which therefore attracts little or no funds. In spite of the unfavourable circumstances in which many of the librarians offered their interventions, the site visits revealed that there were many dedicated librarians who offer services and support far above what might be expected of them, to the extent of incurring personal costs to finance special activities. The fieldworker also met a few librarians at one library who walked a number of dusty kilometres every week to visit the learners in the local adult learning centre; their library had no telephone, fax machine or computer so that their means of communication were severely limited.

There was also consensus among participating libraries about their significant concerns:

- How to market and promote the programme;
- How to attract and retain adult learners;
- How to integrate the adult education programmes into the library's work.

Many of the librarians complained of feeling isolated and expressed the wish for contact with libraries in similar situations and for more support from their organisations and related agencies. Few librarians were members of adult education groups. This lack of a regular forum or network in which to discuss common issues, and the uncoordinated and distributed nature of the programmes, impacts

negatively on sustainability and growth and limits the ability of programmes to learn from each other and to share materials. The feeling of isolation was intensified in those libraries where the literacy work was poorly understood or considered marginal to the core purpose of the library. The study by Dutch and Muddiman of the use of information communication technologies (ICTs) in public libraries in the UK shows that successful outreach projects had in common extra staffing support with "community support and facilitation skills" necessary for engaging with disadvantaged communities and individuals (2001, 191).

## *The adult learners*

Because of gaps in the data and inaccurate completion of some of the questionnaires, it was not possible to arrive at an accurate number of learners reached during the three-year period studied in the survey. The calculations that were possible showed that a total of 3122 learners were reached in a three-year period in five of the nine provinces for which the data were supplied. Data from the site visits revealed that the learners heard about the literacy classes in a number of different ways depending on the circumstances. In many instances word of mouth was an important way. Where classes were sponsored by municipal structures the information flow to workers was less haphazard and undertaken in the local authority. In a few instances librarians were proactive and went out into the community, addressing community meetings, talking at schools, and doing house-to-house visits.

The variability of and the gaps in the figures provided by the respondents also made it difficult to calculate the numbers of learners enrolled in the formal national certificate examinations. The success rates calculated are accurate but incomplete; they are based on the number of learners enrolled in six of the nine provinces, and the numbers of successful candidates, viz. 1398, and 1117 respectively (i.e. a success rate of 79.9%). Figures for the other provinces were not available. The figures for participation do not allow a calculation of the rate of attrition, which is a regrettable lacuna. Baatjes and Mathe (2004: 408) point out that the low retention rate is a serious problem in adult education in South Africa identifying poor quality of instruction as a factor associated with the high rate of attrition of 50%.

## *Learners' reasons for participating in the libraries' programmes*

The reasons for the learners' participation emerged during the site visits. Many of the learners cited the hope of employment as the principal motivation, particularly those enrolled in programmes run by local authorities. This is reflected in the high participation in the examination system in those instances. The array of instrumental and economic reasons revealed is very similar to those quoted in many developing countries, viz. the focus on economic outcomes such as gains in earnings through employment or through job mobility. Other reasons cited related to the learners' wish to assist their children at school. Oxenham (2004, 87) points to research that has demonstrated that where literacy education has enabled parents, especially mothers, to take an active interest in their children's education there are strong and long lasting benefits.

A number of learners spoke about their experience of the programme in terms of place, or a "site of social distraction" as Stromquist (1997) has aptly described it. One of the women explained how she found the library to be a safe space where she could relate to others, while escaping from the problems of her home. The view of the library as a sympathetic place was widespread; this is a significant aspect of the libraries' programmes reinforcing the sense that the nature and configuration of the space is an important affective dimension of adult education in encouraging learning and communicative practices. Researchers such as Alfred (2002) have pointed to the importance of socio-cultural contexts for adult education.

There was a far greater demand for English classes and material among the predominantly English second-language speakers who made up the cohort of adult learners in the study. They expressed scant interest in indigenous language material, which was at odds with the observation of many of the librarians who lamented the dearth of this kind of material. The learners' insistence on English can be linked to the employment and career advancement ambitions expressed to the fieldworker by the learners during the classes. It is likely that the preference for English is also associated with favourable attitudes towards English as a language of power and prestige. Although there are eleven official languages in South Africa, English has the

dominant position with respect to the language of government, commerce and education.

## The libraries' programmes

Interviews with learners during the site visits revealed a desire for practical skills to be offered in addition to literacy instruction. At a minority of sites these were incorporated in the portfolio of courses on offer, for example cooking, vegetable gardening and computer skills. Fifty of the 157 participating libraries offer enrichment activities such as visits to cultural institutions and places of natural beauty such as botanical gardens. Research has shown the value of such experiential learning in offering the opportunity for social interaction and informal learning (Stromquist 1997). These activities are important but costly; they are important for the motivation of learners, for teambuilding, for building of trust and for encouraging social communication among the participants. In view of the financial stringency experienced across the sector it is understandable that more of this sort of activity is not offered.

## Impact

The most obvious and visible impact of the libraries' intervention can be seen in the success rate of those learners who took the formal examinations: 79.9% of them passed examinations over the three-year period examined. This is an obvious output measure, and one that could be reasonably proposed as evidence of success of the programme, although it is not possible to disaggregate the libraries' precise contribution to the students' results. In addition to this indicator, the case studies were able to uncover evidence pointing to personal growth or goals achieved by the learners. The data gathered during the site visits allow a more nuanced understanding of the impact on the lives of the learners than mere uptake figures or pass rates. On these occasions they shared their experiences with the fieldworker commenting on how their participation in the adult education programmes not only achieved instrumental objectives, but also led to personal growth. Many of the learners were motivated to participate in the hope that their acquisition of literacy skills, for example, would equip them for employment or render them independent. During the classes at one library the fieldworker observed that many of the learners experienced the programme as a process whereby they could become independent, and be able to follow instructions at work. Previously many of them could not sign their names, or fill in a form at the Post Office, an observation typical of all site visits.

All the librarian and facilitator respondents in the case studies reported an improvement in the learners' self-confidence. This was also witnessed by the fieldworker observing the classes where learners characterised their experience in terms suggesting improved self-confidence and self-esteem. These effects were noted and corroborated by the literacy facilitators and librarians. One adult learner told the fieldworker, "I like to show my certificate to my children". A video made by the Literacy Interest Group of Cape Town City Libraries documents adult learners talking about their experience of having attended an adult education programme in one of the public libraries. [2] Nompiliso Matyeni reflects on how her experience increased her confidence and allowed her to participate more effectively in civic life: "I know now that everyone has a right to say his or her feelings. I see that I can change things. I know that in meetings I, as a woman, have the same right to speak as the men. I have the confidence to question what happens in my organisation and in my community" (Cape Town City Libraries. Literacy Interest Group 1991). The theme of earning respect and finding a voice commonly surfaced during the site visits. This is consistent with global studies which report similar benefits where participants find the confidence to participate in community action (Prins 2005, 71).

As Beder (1999) points out, for evidence of these effects one has to rely on self-reports. He comments that it is difficult to know how lasting these benefits might be, but that if the reports are coupled with expressions of a desire to learn more or expand learning opportunities, then it is reasonable to conclude that there is a link between self confidence and motivation to learn (1999, 78). The many instances of adult learners across all the sites wishing to proceed from basic literacy to classes where practical skills were taught, resonates with the position of many researchers that literacy should be viewed from a broader perspective that recognises the importance of the link between literacy and adult education. The social values of participating in an adult education programme are

possibly just as important as economic benefits, as Papen concludes in her study of two programmes in South Africa: "for black Namibians in Katatura and for black South Africans in townships in Durban, feeling better about oneself may be almost as important as any real changes in terms of income and social positioning" (2005, 15).

## *Conclusions*

The finding of the low numbers of libraries participating in adult education (26.7%) is both paradoxical, and explicable. The paradox lies in the disjuncture between professionally espoused principles of community outreach on the one hand and, on the other, the failure to incorporate adult education as a vital method of achieving social inclusiveness and participating in the struggle against poverty. The inactivity can be explained with reference to the financial background of library cuts, and severe staff shortages which have been amply documented over the last ten years in spite of hopes of having the library recognised as an essential partner in lifelong learning (cf. Issak, 2000). The majority of programmes operate in a policy vacuum as there is no strongly articulated policy position emerging from the LIS sector which recognises the centrality of literacy to well-being and nation-building emphasising the library's role as a partner in its eradication.

Given the relatively low numbers of libraries involved in adult education, and also the relatively low numbers of adult learners participating in the libraries' programmes, it might be concluded that the low visibility of public libraries in adult education is not surprising. However, national and global participation rates of illiterates in adult education are not high. Harley *et al.* calculated that in 1994 in South Africa only about 335,000 adults participated in literacy and adult education programmes (1996, 52). The rate of participation in North America since the 1920 s has been less than 8% (Quigley 2000). Basing his interpretations on the recent survey of literacy in OECD countries, Quigley concludes that citizens in these countries also resist adult education programmes, and that those with the lowest level of education have the highest rates of avoidance of public libraries – 76.48% of those with less than a high school qualification (2000).

It is instructive to compare the results of the South African survey with observations made by McLoughlin and Morris (2004, 38) in their investigation into the role of UK public libraries in adult education. Their study highlighted very similar issues to those identified by South African librarians, viz. training, recruitment of learners and sustainability. Their study revealed another important dimension, not identified specifically in the South African survey, but one that has surfaced in our conclusions, viz. the importance of evaluation. There are likely to be many benefits to systematic evaluation, including sustainability and measures of impact. McLoughlin and Morris note in their review that, in spite of reports of successful initiatives, there are still no guidelines of best practice (2004, 39).

## *The future of adult education in South African public libraries*

The question arises, given the low numbers of participating libraries and the low adult learner participation rates, whether the effort is worth the difficulties experienced by participating libraries. The modest scale of the interventions notwithstanding, evidence from the learners indicated their appreciation of the sympathetic context in which their learning took place. Their responses suggest, moreover, that a focus on economic efficiency might diminish the important space for other values not apparent in measures such as certification, for example the less tangible psychosocial benefits. The moral imperative indicates that the effort is worthwhile, particularly if it is accepted that one of the key policy drivers of public library development in the future will be social inclusion. The burden is likely to be eased in the light of a new development in the macro sphere, and if a number of lessons emerging from the investigation are taken into account.

Since the completion of our investigation, the Minister of Arts and Culture, Dr. Pallo Jordan announced that public libraries would be given an extra R1bn funds over the next three years (1$ = R7.75 1 Euro = R12.19 on 27 May 2008). The allocation represents a more than hundred-fold increase in spending over previous years. In his announcement he noted that "South Africa has a weak reading culture. You are not internationally competitive if you can't read; and this is one way of

stimulating this" (R1bn boost for libraries 2006). This intervention is very necessary to revitalise the country's deteriorating public library system which, instead of expanding to meet needs of previously unserved communities, has been shedding services, service points, and staff and closing libraries in the last decade. His emphasis on the public library's role in growing readers is encouraging for the prospects of adult education in the library.

Hope can also be derived from the Minister of Education having launched a mass literacy campaign in February 2008, following the acknowledgement of weaknesses in the government's previous approach. The campaign includes a plan for materials development and a detailed plan for the training and development of educational staff and volunteers (Pandor 2008). The Minister of Education expressed her confidence during her budget vote debate that the success of the campaign, targeting 4.7 million South Africans denied access to education and training during the apartheid years, would ensure South Africa's reaching its commitment to reduce illiteracy by 50 % by 2015 (McKay 2008).

An understanding and use of the political processes by librarians is very important to advance the agenda of social inclusion. By explicitly aligning the public library's mission with that of the national agenda of lifelong learning, librarians may garner more support from decision makers. This will facilitate integration of adult education into the library's work and promote collective ownership of the programme. The dominant discourse emerging from the participants (learners and librarians) associating literacy acquisition skills with the world of work is consistent with studies elsewhere in the world. However, by connecting more consciously with adult education forums in the country, participating libraries will also be able to follow the debates which have a more nuanced understanding of literacy as a social practice (cf. Prinsloo and Breier 1996). Related debates suggest that a curriculum view of literacy driven by examination requirements is not an adequate approach; rather the programme should reflect how literacy as a social practice is connected to the learners' lives (Papen 2005, 8). However, given the attraction of the certificate to the adult learners in this investigation, which mirrors the findings of two programmes analysed by Papen (2005), it would be a good idea to combine the two approaches, as she was able to do

in her programme in Namibia. Programmes should be demand-driven rather than supply-driven and the approach should be holistic and ideally be based on the more inclusive definition of literacy as a social practice, being "the ability to read and write for purposes and the degree to which individuals feel the need given their individual life contexts and aspirations" (Purcell-Gates and Waterman 2000, 238). More public libraries may then aspire to the picturesque characterisation of her library by one of the adult learners in the study: "The library is everybody's morning star".

## Notes

1. These descriptors are used because official census data is collected according to these categories in order to facilitate affirmative action policies for the previously disadvantaged groups and individuals.
2. The idea of the adult education investigation grew out of the involvement of one of the researchers in the Literacy Interest Group, now disbanded because of restructuring of the public library system in Cape Town, following a reorganisation of local authorities in the new democratic dispensation.

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