Information literacy in practice: engaging public library workers in rural South Africa

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Abstract

Mpumalanga Provincial Library Services offers public library services in a largely rural "new" province that was created in 1996 after the elections of 1994. Many of the libraries are in isolated areas and have to meet the very diverse needs of their communities. This paper reports the results of an information literacy intervention designed for public library workers in this province. The campaign, a first of its kind in Mpumalanga (and South Africa), gave public library workers the opportunity to develop their information literacy skills and to apply them in their libraries. This paper discusses the information and training needs that were identified, the campaigns that were constructed, their progress and the outcomes. From the outset, emphasis was placed on the importance of measuring and evaluating activities throughout their campaigns in order to be able to assess the impact of their interventions. The paper attempts to show what difference even small public libraries with unqualified library workers can make in tackling social exclusion in disadvantaged communities.

Keywords

Information literacy; public libraries; public library staff; training; disadvantaged communities; Mpumulanga Provincial Library Services; South Africa

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Introduction

Public librarians in South Africa are acutely aware of the government's gaze on their reach and operation given the announcement in 2006 by Minister Pallo Jordan that significant extra funding is to be allocated to public libraries (R1bn boost for libraries. 2006), but that they should be able to demonstrate that they "play a critical role in achieving government's overall social and developmental agenda" (South Africa. Department of Arts and Culture. 2006). Many observers have identified problem areas. Hart, for example, points to the depressing consensus that public libraries in Africa (including South Africa) are peripheral to the lives of the majority of the population (2005). Budget cuts, and consequent reduction in services and lowered staff morale are not conducive to remedying the situation which requires both a reorientation of philosophy, and resources for staff training and new programmes. It is expected that the extra funds will set public libraries on a path to invigorate their socio-economic role and bring them closer to raising their visibility and credibility as agents of development. The project in rural Mpumalanga - reported on in this paper - offered us a timely opportunity to incorporate into the planned information literacy campaigns both dimensions of service highlighted by the government: the public library as an agent of development, and measurement of value.

Information literacy in public libraries worldwide

Not much work has been done and reported on information literacy in public libraries. Johnson and Jent reported in 2005 on a bibliographic survey that revealed only three papers dealing with information literacy in public libraries in 2003, and four in 2004. This is in comparison to the 148 papers in 2003 and 159 in 2004 dealing with academic libraries; and the 98 papers in 2003 and 69 in 2004 discussing school libraries (2005: 488). Most of the papers dealing with this topic in pubic libraries in the last decade relate to interventions focused on ICTs (e.g. Newton, Sutton and McConnell 1998, Thompson, 2003; and Wilson, 2003).

Many of the papers that do address information literacy in public libraries concern themselves with young people as the target audience and a number make the point that reading and the development of reading fluency is at the heart of information literacy. Spink's important work *Children as readers* showed how people learn through story (1985), while the study of the Birmingham Bookstart project demonstrated that children who read, perform better at school than those who do not (Ghouri, 1997). Royce's paper is widely referred to (1999):

> It [information literacy] all comes back to reading and the twin thrusts of getting readers hooked early in life and providing plenty of practice …In this Information Age, reading and reading skills will enable users not just to survive but to thrive (Royce 1999).

The theme of reading highlights the relationship that many authors point to in their papers, viz. that of school children in the public library, and the need for partnerships between the school [library] and the public library. Bundy's paper adopts a global perspective in charting the cooperation between school and public libraries in promoting lifelong learning (2002a), noting that the major stumbling block in Australia is the lack of recognition by authorities of the shared responsibility for developing "information enabled young people' (2002b: 99). In South Africa, where there are so few school libraries,

public libraries are heavily used by school students for school assignments. Hart, one of the few researchers in South Africa to investigate information literacy in the public library, notes the heavy use of public libraries by school children and the poor levels of guidance and resources to offer structured information literacy programmes to them (2004). Le Roux and Hendrikz describe the community-school library in Maphotla, South Africa, which embodies an advanced form of partnership between school, provincial library services and local authority where formal service-level agreements secure the service provision to both constituencies (2006). The intervention which is reported in the present paper, developed out of the work by Le Roux and Hendrikz.

It is understandable that school children as a group have received more attention than any other grouping in the public library because of the educational focus of their use of the library which suggests a ready link with information literacy. Skov, describing the status of information literacy education in Danish public libraries, argues that the challenge for public librarians is to set up collaborative arrangements with school teachers and teacher librarians and so share in the "knowledge construction process of school children" (2004). Her paper, outlining a number of joint projects between schools and public libraries, concludes that cooperation is essential, but a delicate process requiring as it does, mutual respect, an appreciation of the different values and a shared vision (2004). Building on a large number of information literacy activities, the Nordic countries have embarked on a project to systematise information literacy strategy in public libraries (Hansen, 2004).

Since the primary task of librarians has not been traditionally viewed as instruction, much of the research has highlighted how they need both the political skills and technical competence to insert themselves credibly into the educational arena. Nutefall points out that a "new area of emerging collaboration is library instruction and especially information literacy" (2001: 312). Her paper, emerging for a research project in the United States, and with an instructional focus on electronic information skills, includes a useful set of guidelines for school/public/academic libraries (2001: 314). Unusually, one of the collaborative projects described by her is one between a public library and a university library in the field of health information provision; generally partnerships would tend to be between schools/school libraries and public libraries. Among the possible barriers to collaboration between schools and public libraries in South Africa are those of lack of understanding by the schools of what libraries can do, librarians' lack of training and also barriers between school and library authorities (Hart, 1998: 36).

The reason that information literacy is not highly visible in UK public libraries is that the government has not stressed its importance, focusing rather on issues like social inclusion. However, Webber suggests that now that the completion of the People's Network[1] is likely to stimulate interest in it (Information literacy: an international state-of-the-art report 2007). Commenting on the impact of the wider accessibility of networked computers in UK public libraries, and the need to raise the profile of information in pubic libraries, O'Beirne foregrounds the need for digital skills for citizens (2006: 44). He points out that there is an imperative for public librarians to accept the inevitability of information literacy as an important component of information provision in a modern public library and the consequent need for staff training to enable them to deliver information literacy programmes. He sets out a plan for developing an online learning

[1] The People's Network is an initiative to assist the public libraries in the UK to get online as part of the government's commitment to providing electronic access to all citizens.

programme for staff in his library, Bradford Libraries, noting that there is no body of research “outlining the use of formal or informal IL programmes in UK public libraries” (2006: 45).

The provision of health information has recently seen a growth in interest among public libraries, no doubt accelerated by the availability of free electronic health information and the concern about the effect of misleading information on the consumer. Ghosh (2006) sees the provision of HIV/AIDS information by public libraries in India, as part of their emerging community mission in a changing networked world facing the challenge of a very serious epidemic. Information literacy, or health education, is an important component of his vision of the public library’s response to HIV/AIDS. A strong theme apparent in his paper and in many other papers addressing the question of consumer health in library (e.g. a single issue of *Library trends*, 2005) is the necessity of partnerships between the public library and health sciences library (2006).

This survey of information literacy interventions in public libraries in the published literature has shown that the need for such activities tend to concentrate around the broad topics of ICTs, children’s literacy, lifelong learning and health information. The report of an information literacy intervention in public libraries in rural South Africa that follows, will attempt to illustrate how these issues surfaced and were interpreted by public library workers in small and impoverished communities.

The situation in Mpumalanga

After the first democratic elections of 1994, the four provinces of South Africa were re-divided into a total of nine. Mpumalanga was one of the five newly established provinces and comprises part of the old Transvaal as well as some of the previous ‘self-governing territories’ and ‘homelands’ (Statistics South Africa 2004:1). Mpumalanga is situated in eastern South Africa, to the north of KwaZulu-Natal and bordering on Swaziland and Mozambique. It constitutes 6.5% of South Africa's land area. It is primarily a rural province and one of the three provinces in South Africa with the highest rates of HIV infection (the other two are KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng) (Avert, 2007).

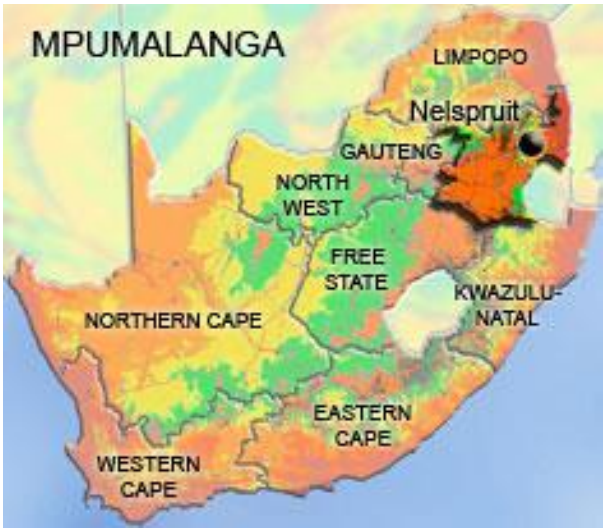

Figure 1. South African provinces.

(Image from: http://www.southafrica.info/ess_info/sa_glance/geography/mpumalanga.htm *Map: Mary Alexander)*

The Mpumalanga population according to the 2001 census was 3 122 990, which is approximately 6,9% of South Africa's total population (Statistics South Africa 2004:2). Literacy rates are the third lowest of the provinces in South Africa (60.7%) and Grade 12 school pass rates at 58.2% in 2003, the lowest in the country (Statistics South Africa 2004:3).

In 1996 when the province was established, public library services and infrastructure were relatively well established in the few urban areas, but in the remote rural areas library services were "either very limited or nonexistent (Le Roux & Hendrikz, 2006:626). Nor was there was funding available for either school or public libraries: public library authorities themselves claimed that 98 new public libraries needed to be established, and schools prioritized the building of new classrooms and not libraries (627).

A recent investigation into the joint use of school and public libraries in remote areas suggested that small, close communities with high levels of illiteracy and exhibiting a "dominant oral tradition, limited resources and a need for information for mere survival" (Le Roux & Hendrikz, 2006: 623) could significantly benefit from school-community-public library partnerships. The development and implementation of such partnerships was tested in a pilot project in which a small new public library in the remote area of Maphotla was able to create meaningful relationships with schools in the area and could demonstrate that partnerships are indeed able to assist in providing for the information needs of such remote communities (Le Roux & Hendrikz, 2006).

The goal of the present project has therefore been to investigate whether the Maphotla experience might be extended to other small rural libraries by encouraging and enskilling library workers to engage meaningfully with their communities, using the public library as a centre and information literacy as a tool.

Funding for the project was obtained from the UNESCO's Information for All Programme in 2006. It aimed to raise awareness of information literacy in the public library service and to achieve this by working with some 30 public library workers in Mpumalanga to improve their information service delivery and raise the profile of the public library. This it proposed to do by engaging two information literacy researchers and practitioners who would conduct workshops and oversee the construction of information literacy campaigns with a group of selected public library workers in Mpumalanga.

Project objectives

1. To introduce the theoretical concept of IL to the Project participants.
2. To provide them with the opportunity of designing a practical information literacy campaign for their library during the introductory workshops.
3. To allow them to implement their information literacy campaigns in their own libraries over a five month period.
4. To provide the opportunity for participants of the Project to learn from each other's practical experience through sharing their experiences and lessons learnt during a follow-up workshop after five months.
5. To measure the impact of information literacy campaigns in the libraries through library user feedback and through monitoring visits by officials from the Provincial Library Service.

6. To identify best practice and spread the lessons learned to other libraries in the province.

Figure 2. Reading is fun.

Our research objectives were to track the participants' perceptions of information over the course of the series of workshops in order to test what sort of growth and development in understanding had taken place. The background to this interest arose from Hart's survey of Mpumalanga public librarians showing that overwhelmingly their conception of their role in information literacy was to show people "how this library works", and teaching people how to find or fetch information (2005: 278).

Selection of participants

One of the key intentions of the project was to engage with public library workers who were interested and enthusiastic and who would be committed to constructing innovative and creative information literacy campaigns in their libraries. This was clearly expressed in the invitation to participate from the Head of the Mpumalanga Department of Culture, Sport and Recreation dated 29 May 2006. The invitation specifically stipulated that the project intended to develop public library workers "in an effort to raise their self-confidence to render better library services with available resources" and deliberately sought highly motivated workers who would undertake to stay the whole course. Prospective participants had to apply in writing, stating the most important needs or demands for information literacy instruction in their libraries, giving reasons why they wished to participate, explaining how and to whom their participation would make a difference.

From these submissions it became clear that those public library workers (none of whom had any professional qualification in librarianship) whose applications succeeded, were in the first place eager to learn and to improve their own skills in order to provide enhanced services to users. Participants interpreted information literacy quite broadly, with two offering the classical interpretation: “Library users need to be taught about the value of information … that after accessing information it must be evaluated and used to take informed decisions in their personal, professional and academic lives”. Two participants defined the information literate person as one who has learned how to learn. A number made an explicit link with literacy and the improvement of reading for pleasure, noting that the print scarce environment was a barrier to reading development. A few made the connection, so visible in the literature, between information literacy and information technology skills, expressing their wish to improve their own network skills. and to impart these skills to members of the community who do not have the opportunity to learn about computers at school or at work.

The numerous broad interpretations were reflected in the more ambitious expressions of the need to make interventions in serious socio-economic problems such as adult illiteracy, adolescent drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, unemployment, crime and homelessness. The campaigns that were eventually planned, grew out of these concerns. The enormous impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on these impoverished rural communities was hardly noted in the submissions, but became more obvious as the planning for the campaigns progressed.

The introductory training workshop which was designed to set the project in motion, was held between 27 and 30 June 2006. The cohort of 28 participants included 20 public librarians from ten Municipalities and one from the Department of Correctional Services. Seven staff members from the Provincial Library Service also attended. The cohort was split into two groups, so that each group spent two days with the facilitators.

The introductory workshop

The workshop was designed to provide an opportunity for gaining an understanding of the role and potential of information literacy education in public libraries. Its specific focus was on how to plan for and implement an information literacy campaign in those public libraries in Mpumalanga where the participants worked.

Figure 3. Library food garden project.

During the first day the participants were introduced to the more conceptual aspects of information literacy and information literacy education, with specific reference to the contribution public libraries can make to users and potential users, and how to foster their effective use of information. Theoretical inputs by the presenters were followed by practical examples and brainstorming sessions. Topics that were discussed included models of information literacy and its links to reading, learning and the curriculum. The Big6 Skills model was introduced and examined for its applicability in the participants' environments.

The second day of the workshop consisted of group work in which participants started to plan and design their own campaigns which they believed would make a difference in their own communities. Each campaign group had at least two participants. During the first planning session, the presenters moved around the groups, helping to refine approaches and advising about strategies. The participants were encouraged to plan their campaigns according to a series of consecutive steps:

1. Decide on a focus. Think of a name for the campaign/project.
2. What are the key aims of the campaign?
3. Decide on your target group.
4. How will you recruit the target group?
5. Will you need partner/s? Who are they and how will you engage them?
6. Objectives. What do you want to happen?
7. Outline chief components of the campaign.

8. What are the resource implications and how will you manage them?
9. What is already available in your library that you can use; what will have to change?
10. How will you publicise your campaign?
11. Outcomes. What will success look like?
12. Key measures. What do you need to measure and record to demonstrate success?
13. How will you monitor progress during the campaign?

Report back sessions enabled all the participants to hear and see all the groups' outputs and they were able to comment constructively and to learn from one another. There was some overlap among the campaign themes that began to emerge, reflecting the concerns that had already been noted in the participants' original applications to join the project and also reflecting the hard realities of living in Mpumalanga: low literacy, poor schooling, high unemployment and a prevalence of HIV/AIDS. Campaigns were mainly focused on their awareness of the social exclusion and the very real needs of the disadvantaged communities in which they worked. Their proposals were clearly intended to address these needs in a number of different interventions which they felt they could own and manage. Entirely incidentally and without prompting, it was remarkable that the proposed campaigns primarily addressed issues that were very similar to those identified in the literature: a need for basic computer literacy, children's literacy, lifelong learning and health information.

During the planning sessions, the participants were encouraged to consider the potential outcomes of their campaigns. The importance of measuring and evaluating activities throughout their campaigns was emphasized so that they would eventually be able to assess the impact of their interventions. The measures that were proposed during this original planning stage were somewhat mechanical and the facilitators gained the impression that such aspects had not been thought of before. Most of the groups responded rather vaguely that *counts* such as of attendees, or meetings or new members would suffice; in only two cases did participants think they would *ask* people involved in their proposed campaigns whether a difference had been made in their lives.

Figure 4. Celebrating Africa.

Phase 2: progress assessment

A follow-up workshop was held on 7 December 2006 to monitor and track progress of the campaigns designed by the participants. Each group was asked to produce a display depicting their programme, together with promotional and other materials such as posters that they were using in the different campaigns. Each group was interviewed by the two facilitators (the presenters from the previous workshop) who explored with them the obstacles and success factors that they had encountered and who offered practical advice on their way forward.

The event also afforded participants the opportunity to consult with staff from the Head Office of Mpumalanga Provincial Library Service, who were able to advise them on materials and other kinds of support available to them. In addition they were able to share experiences and learn from one another. The needs that were identified and addressed in the campaigns, and clearly reflecting the social exclusion of these communities, were:

- HIV/AIDS information and sources of assistance (3 groups)
- Computer skills training to enhance employability (2 groups)
- Career information and advice for school leavers and unemployed youth
- Information literacy in the primary school
- Literacy training for illiterate caregivers and other adults (2 groups)
- Substance abuse awareness among juvenile offenders in prison
- Public library and farm school partnerships – taking the library to the school
- Growing vegetables in the public library grounds in partnership with local schools and NGOs
- Claiming cultural identity by celebrating Africa.

Progress was found to be considerable. The facilitators were impressed by the energy and enthusiasm with which the participants had tackled their campaigns. Some had proceeded in spite of considerable obstacles. The participant from the prison library, for example, had been unable to get permission from the Department of Correctional Services to conduct his proposed lifeskills training course with the help of outside facilitators. So he changed his campaign to focus on drug abuse, which he could manage on his own and did not require bringing in assistance.

While the project facilitators moved around the displays and spent some time talking to each of the participants, the others were asked to reflect on their campaigns by noting down answers to the following three questions:

- Why is this (your campaign) worth doing?
- What difference will it make?
- How will you know that it has made a difference?

These reflections were now very different from the original ‘measures’ that had been proposed to show the difference that they intended to make. Although a few of the as yet less developed campaigns still addressed these differences in terms of an eventual future (e.g. the community *will* use the library more; people *will* read more), there was now much evidence of active involvement in real and energizing activities, which in turn produced real results. Statements like “it was my first time to reach out to the community…”; schools have “already started to enquire about the library” and “I receive thank you letters” were encountered. The groups providing HIV/AIDS information said they now could refer people with actual health problems to appropriate caregivers and clinics.

The group that elected to use the library grounds to teach people to grow their own vegetables could say “the indigent they get tomatoes free”, also that school learners

now know how to prepare seed beds, and that library "membership has grown from 375 to 580." One participant stated that her classes on using email, Windows and the Internet were perceived as "a life changing experience"; another found that the adult members of her literacy class "are punctual and enthusiastic" and "want to do more projects." They all made it clear that their campaigns were making a difference to themselves and the way in which they were doing their jobs as well.

But is it information literacy?

It is quite possible to question whether activities such at these have not moved well away from information literacy into what may loosely be termed the realm of social upliftment. Such an argument immediately returns one to the role of the public library in small and deprived communities. Public libraries have always been intended for the use of the communities they serve and if community needs are very different from those of the 'traditional' public library user, that in no way invalidates public library attempts in assisting with whichever needs they might encounter.

We would therefore like to conclude that we examined the participants' information literacy campaigns as "texts," viewing them as social actions deriving their meaning, shape and form from their understanding of information literacy as they re-construed the concept for their own communities. These texts and their discussion of their campaigns were a means of shaping their own understanding of information literacy and giving it particular meaning. They deviated in quite noticeable ways from the traditionally accepted views of the skills base of information literacy, reflected for example in the Big6 model which was introduced to them in the workshops. By doing so, they created their own frameworks which were more rooted in the socio-economic conditions of their libraries. They foregrounded the social contexts of their interventions by portraying their understanding of the power of information literacy to impact on their own social problems, such as drug abuse, food security and the AIDS pandemic. In our presentation, we had privileged a particular conception of information literacy which was resisted by the participants who generated alternative conceptions which were socially situated in their communities rather than an idealised and normative vision of the library as classroom.

This prevalent view shaped by generally accepted standards has had the effect of individualising information literacy as a set of *competences* at the expense of seeing its practices located in social contexts, an approach encouraged by the New Literacy Studies (for example, Street 1995). Sen's *capabilities* approach, however, seems to offer a more fruitful line of inquiry with respect to information literacy in the public library than the competence approach.

A capability is conceived of what a person is capable of being or doing: "the ability to be well nourished, to avoid escapable morbidity or mortality, to read, write and communicate, to take part in the life of the community, to appear in public without shame" (Sen 1990: 126). Although this approach arises from an economic perspective which has been used, for example, in the development of the Human Development Index, educational theorists have started to explore its applicability to education (cf Saito, 2003). While resources and access to them are important, what is crucial is the opportunity for people to convert the resource into a capability offering "the freedoms … to choose the lives that they have reason to value" (Sen, 1992: 81).

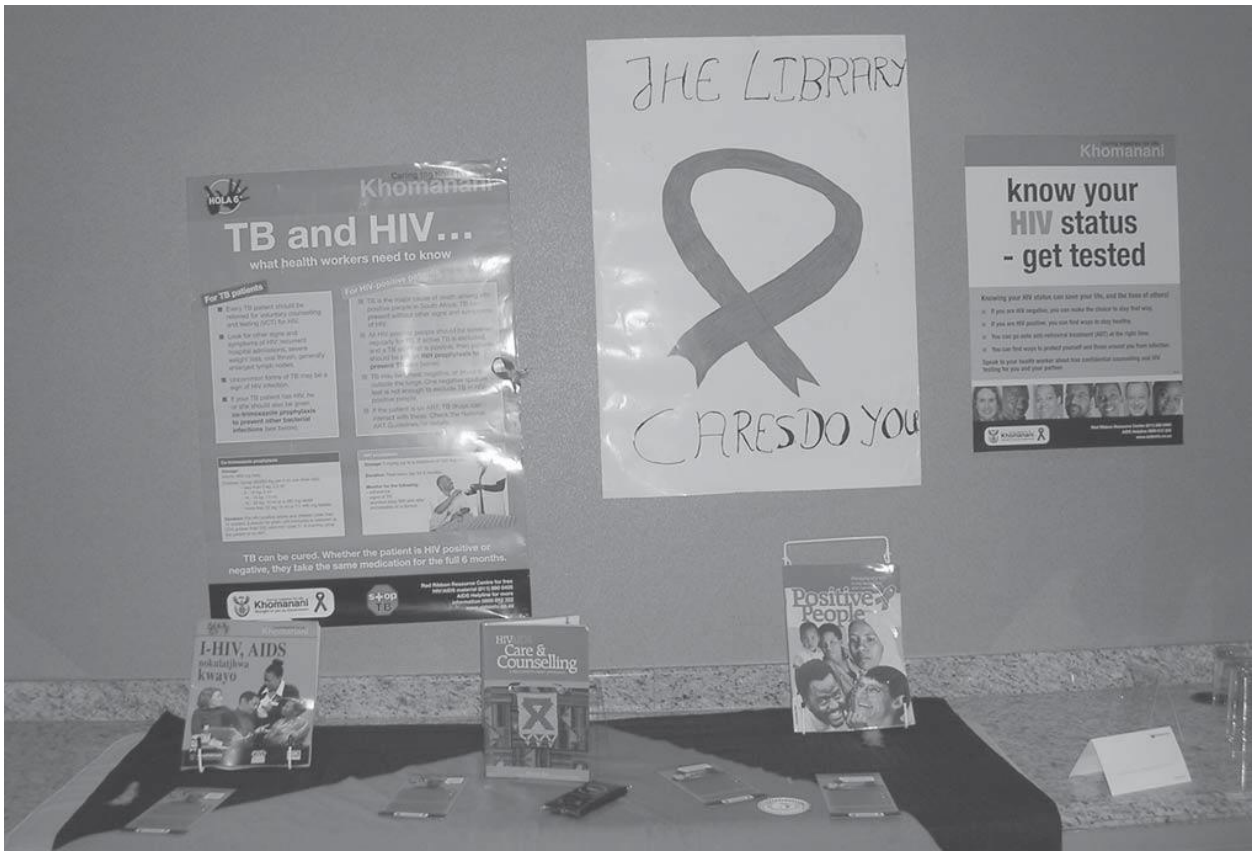

Figure 5. AIDS and the library

This project has encouraged public library workers to engage with what they perceived as the most important needs in their communities and to deal with them by using their libraries as a focus. During the process they discovered the importance of forging partnerships with government and community agencies, at the same time learning important political and communication skills. Their campaigns have attracted new users to the libraries, where they were not only able to obtain practical information about real assistance in their difficult lives, but also where they could learn that such information is freely available and that they could access it by themselves. If the ultimate objective of information literacy is the informed citizen who is able to access appropriate information and engage with it meaningfully, there is no doubt that these public library workers have indeed made a difference in the information literacy of their communities.

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