

# ELECTRONIC BOOKS USAGE AT SCHOOL LIBRARIES IN ZIMBABWE

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## **Abstract**

*The research study was carried out with the aim of assessing the usage of electronic books in school libraries of Zimbabwe. The study sought to ascertain the types of electronic books used at the school libraries in Zimbabwe, their extent of usage and the challenges faced when using the electronic books. Data for the research study was gathered by means of interviews during an annual pre-conference workshop of Zimbabwean school librarians held in the city of Mutare. This study reaffirms findings from past studies that school libraries are embracing the electronic books despite facing various challenges. The study recommends that school librarians be up-skilled to be able to competently promote electronic books usage. Central government is also strongly recommended to put in place a policy on establishment of a library and employ professionally trained school librarians.*

**Keywords:** Electronic books usage, School libraries, Zimbabwe

## **Introduction**

A school library is “an organised collection of study and learning materials aimed at pupils, teachers and other staff alike” (Frantsi, Kolu and Salminen 2002:4). The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) provides an apt definition of a school library which define as: “a school's physical and digital learning space where reading, inquiry, research, thinking, imagination, and creativity are central to students' information journey and to their personal, social, and cultural growth” (IFLA 2015:16). A school library is therefore aimed at supporting the teaching and learning carried out at the school through information sources available in physical format (e.g. books in print) and digital format (e.g. electronic books). Electronic books, sometimes shortened e-books or ebooks, are “electronic versions of print books” (Embong, Noor, Hashim, Ali, and Shaari 2012:1802). Hawkins (2000)

describes e-books as books whose contents are made available in an electronic form. The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) defines an electronic book as “an online version of printed books, accessed via the Internet” (Gold Leaf 2003:17). There is an increasing use of electronic books (e-books) by library patrons world-wide. However, Embong, Noor, Hashim, Ali, and Shaari (2012) acknowledge that adoption of e-books as text books is a new phenomenon for schools in developing countries. The study was aimed at assessing the usage of electronic books at school libraries in Zimbabwe.

### **Research questions**

The objectives of the study were to answer the following research questions:

1. What types of e-books are in use at the school libraries?
2. What is the extent of e-books usage at school libraries in Zimbabwe?
3. What challenges are faced when using the e-books?

### **Literature review**

The increasing prominence of computers and the Internet have dramatically led to the popularity of various technologies one of them being electronic books (Doiron 2011). It is on record that a number of benefits are derived from using electronic books; for instance, Karsenti (2014) points out that there are cognitive, affective, social, and other benefits of using electronic books among students. Karsenti (2014) notes that by using electronic books, students can enjoyably access a variety of titles at one go, share the books among themselves, carry the books around without any negative effect on their health, and schools can significantly reduce costs by adopting electronic books. Electronic books have been found to be beneficial to teachers and school administrators too; with e-books, teachers can easily monitor student's performance and e-books are part of the technologies that enhance the teaching and learning process (Embong, Noor, Hashim, Ali and Shaari 2012). Sawyer (2002:1) also adds that e-books “are cheap to manufacture and easy to store, distribute, update and search”.

There are various technologies required to facilitate access to e-books. Embong, Noor, Hashim, Ali and Shaari (2012) and Gold Leaf (2003) cite that software such as Microsoft Reader, Adobe Acrobat Reader and Adobe Acrobat e-Book Reader are required to enable reading e-books. The authors also point out that gadgets such as personal computers, e-book readers (such as Kindle) are also needed in the e-book reading matrix. Despite the celebrations triggered by the adoption of e-books in schools, the world has not been ignorant of the challenges associated with using e-books. Embong, Noor, Hashim, Ali and Shaari (2012) list the following challenges:

1. Hardware is not capable of storing large capacities
2. Accessing e-books require electricity which may not be readily available as required;
3. Teachers may not competently use e-books in teaching and learning;
4. E-books could not be readily available;
5. Some students prefer print books to e-books;
6. E-books do not offer the same functionalities like highlighting and commenting in text as is the case with print books; and,

7. Some e-books have very strict digital rights management (DRM) that restrict readers from migrating from one medium to another.

Sawyer (2002) also add that e-books are problematic in that some e-books have unattractive formats, downloading may be slow in some cases because of poor connectivity and some e-books' readability is limited to certain technologies some of which maybe expensive. Paton-Ash and Wilmot (2015) further observe that the majority of schools in South Africa do not even have school libraries and cases where there are school libraries, the libraries are peripheral than central to teaching. The authors also lament the absence of national policy to compel school authorities to have libraries at each school.

A study by Marzodi and Papa (2017) confirms that school libraries significantly contribute towards students' potential where school libraries are well-stocked. Therefore, adding electronic books to library collections is very important. However, other studies show that when compared to public and academic libraries, school libraries have been trailing in terms of introducing electronic books (Doiron 2011). However, as Doiron (2011) observe, school libraries are now actively embracing e-books and making deliberate efforts to ensure that they competently provide electronic book facilities as other libraries by acquiring the required technologies and reskilling teacher librarians to effectively deliver following this new development. Rossini, (2012) posits that free based e-books enable school libraries to save cost in their information provision, access and utilization of their library resources. In addition, Macklin (2014) recommends the use of open access electronic books as they provide full text access to current scientific and scholarly information for downloading, reading, copying and printing.

### **Research Methodology**

Data for the study was gathered during an annual conference of Zimbabwean librarians held in the city of Mutare. Eleven school librarians participated in the semi-structured interviews used to gather data for the study. Of the 11 participants, seven librarians were employed by public high schools, two were at private high schools, one came from a public secondary school and one was at a public primary school. Invitations to participate in the interviews was sought during the pre-conference workshop for school librarians and those librarians willing to participate in the study presented themselves to the researchers.

### **Interpretation of Results and Discussion of Findings**

Findings from the 11 participants indicate that eight of them were fully employed as school librarians whilst the remaining three were teachers who doubled up as librarians (teacher librarians). Participants were asked to indicate how long their school libraries had been offering e-books. Four participants indicated that they were not offering access to e-books, three had been offering e-books for longer than four years, two had been offering e-books for a period ranging 1-2 years, and one school library had been providing access to e-books for a year whilst one had introduced e-books in the past six months. The findings confirm Doiron's (2011) assertion that school libraries were

lagging behind in terms of e-books adoption though the uptake is now on the increase just as this study re-affirms.

Of the eight libraries the provided e-books, three of them provided fee-based books whilst six provided access to free books available on open access. This confirms Macklin's (2014) recommendation for the use of open access electronic books as they are equally current, scientific and scholarly as fee-based ones. Participants interviewed were asked to gauge the level of students' interest towards e-books. Contrary to findings from a study by Embong, Noor, Hashim, Ali and Shaari (2012) who indicate that students preferred books in print to e-books, six participants boldly expressed that students using e-books at their libraries were highly interested in using them whilst one participant reported moderate interest and another indicated that students at their library expressed low interest. The findings correspond with Karsenti's (2014) observations that students really enjoyed using e-books. Of those interested in e-books, three participants highlighted that their patrons were particularly interested in fiction books whilst five said their library patrons preferred nonfiction e-books.

As Embong, Noor, Hashim, Ali and Shaari (2012) and Gold Leaf (2003) report in their studies that various devices are used to access e-books, findings from this study show that desktop computers, laptops, tablets and iPads were used to access electronic books at the school libraries in Zimbabwe. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the types of devices provided by the schools to access electronic books at their libraries.

**Table 1: Devices used to access e-books in schools**

Devices	Frequency
Desktop computer	5
Laptop	4
Tablet	3
IPad	1

Challenges faced when accessing electronic books by school libraries in Zimbabwe are not unique but similar to those encountered elsewhere as reported in literature by Embong, Noor, Hashim, Ali and Shaari (2012), Sawyer (2002) and Paton-Ash and Wilmot (2015). Participants interviewed revealed that a number of factors hindered the use of electronic books at their libraries. The hindrances are lack of sufficient e-book reading devices at school and home, high costs of, and limited access to the Internet, non-availability of preferred e-book titles, high costs of acquiring and access e-books, lack of interest on, and awareness about e-books by library patrons. One participant said: "most students prefer physical textbooks" whilst another said: "there is resistance by administration for students to bring mobile devices to use e-books" at their school even though "most children prefer soft copy ... [to] ... hard copy books" as another participant expressed. To avert high costs associated with accessing e-books online, one participant remarked that "our government must be encouraged to reduce charges on ... data usage".

School librarians that were not using e-books were asked to share their experiences on why their schools did not use e-books. The study participants reported that: their school did not have reading devices to access the e-books; there was resistance by school authorities to introduce e-books; and, that the librarians themselves were hesitant to introduce e-books at their schools. They were therefore waiting to see how other libraries perform following their adoption of e-books.

Librarians at the schools where electronic books were not yet in use were asked to share their future plans regarding the introduction of e-book services in the following two years. All the four participants indicated that they were “definitely going to introduce e-books” at their libraries. The findings reaffirm projections made by Doiron (2011) that school libraries are increasingly getting interested in adopting electronic books.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

This study on e-books usage in Zimbabwe reaffirms findings from past studies that school libraries are embracing the e-books despite facing various challenges that include Desktops, laptops, tablets and iPads are commonly used to access e-books at school libraries in Zimbabwe and lack of sufficient e-book reading devices at school and home, high costs, limited e-book titles, high costs of acquiring and access e-books, lack of interest and awareness on e-books hindered usage. It is therefore recommended that school librarians be up-skilled to be able to competently promote e-books and impart skills on e-books usage. Furthermore, central government is strongly recommended to put in place a policy on establishment of a professionally library at each school. It is also recommended that school librarians should take advantage of the proliferation of smart phones as an ideal gadget to access electronic books. Finally, a further study on an effective model for the effective utilisation of electronic books in the country is recommended.

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