Breakdown in the system of learner support materials supply in Northern Province, South Africa

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In this paper we draw on research conducted on the system of supply of learner support materials (LSMs) in Region 2 of the Northern Province of South Africa. The study used a qualitative methodology where a case study design was adopted. Purposive sampling was used in the selection of five schools. Three methods of data collection were used, namely: interview, observation and documentation. It was found that the system of supply of learner support materials in the Northern Province was in a chaotic state. For example, books were not delivered in time, or not delivered at all, there were wrong deliveries, and a lot of wastage on unused materials.

Introduction

One of the most intractable problems in the South African education is the problem of the delivery of textbooks or, more broadly, learning materials (Report of the Review Committee on Curriculum 2005, 2000; Karlsson & McPherson, 1999). These are manifested in a number of ways. Amongst problems encountered are: lack of timely delivery of learner support materials (LSMs) to schools, delivery of learner materials that have not been ordered, storage of learner support materials that were supposed to be currently in use and corruption by some of the education officials who sell these materials to the unsuspecting public (Northern Review, 1999).

This paper is meant to contribute to knowledge on how learning materials are delivered to schools. This is done by reporting on an empirical study that was conducted in Region 2 of Northern Province, South Africa, on the delivery of textbooks (as part of learner support materials) to schools. Learner support materials refer to tools such as textbooks, writing pads, exercise books, stationery, etc. that assist learners to make maximum use of teaching and learning time. The focus on the textbooks in particular, is informed by the fact that they are central to the teaching of the subject matter (Boulanger, 1981; Mbangwana, 1998). Further, the area where the study was conducted was pestered by the problem of lack of delivery of textbooks. The report will be done by first indicating the methodology that was used, second presenting the results, and third discussing the results.

Questions addressed by the study were:
- Are learner support materials (LSMs) delivered efficiently?
- Are learner support materials (LSMs) delivered in time?
- Are learner support materials (LSMs) delivered to the correct places?

The issues raised above show that the system of delivery of learner support materials is compounded with problems. Some of these problems are highlighted by other studies for example, Jansen and Christie (1999) found that in South Africa LSMs were developed and translated into official languages in time but only reached schools between April and June of each year. Papo, Cele and Comney (1999) found that LSMs were kept in the principal's offices and never reached the classrooms. In another study by Potenza and Monyokolo (1999) it was found that teachers did not use learner support materials because they thought it was too time-consuming to use them. This situation is regrettable because learner support materials are vital in the education of the learner. Many studies regard adequate learning support materials as essential to the effective running of an education system, and in particular, textbooks and stationery. They have been found to be the effective way to improve classroom practice (Themane, 1997; Taylor and Vinjevold, 1999). This is in line with the findings by Boulanger (1981) and Mbangwana (1998) who found that teachers relied more heavily on textbooks in their teachings. This is also clearly explained in the Report of the Review Committee on Curriculum 2005 (2000:62) which states that:

The DOE regards adequate learning support materials as essential to the effective running of an education system and asserts that these materials are an integral part of curriculum development and a means of promoting both good teaching and learning. Unfortunately, it would appear from our literature search that very few studies have focused on the issue of LSM (Jenks, 1972; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore & Ouston,1979; Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis & Ecob, 1988; Braimoth & Moletsane 1998). These studies, however, have focused more on the importance of learner support materials, than on how such are distributed and delivered to schools.

Further, it appears there has been little empirical research on the system of delivery of learner support materials internationally and in South Africa. Among the studies that have come closest to investigating this issue, is the one done by Caldwell (in Beare & Lowe,1993), which has looked at different models of how schools can handle resources. The study argues for the decentralised system where each school takes responsibility for managing its own resources. The other is that of Vinjevold (Taylor & Vinjevold,1999:164) which argues that in South Africa, despite the ambitious commitment to the provision of high quality and progressive learning materials, schools do not receive the materials they need. It was this problem of the system of delivery of learner support materials that this study investigated.

Method

Since we wanted to gain an insightful description of the system of book supply to schools in Northern Province, and to listen to those who are involved telling their experiences from their perspectives, a qualitative approach was adopted. And in order to gain in-depth understanding of the phenomenon, a case study design was used.

Sampling

The study used a convenient or purposive sampling. This is a kind of sampling where the researcher selects respondents or sites guided by certain factors. In this case the researchers were guided by among other factors by accessibility and proximity of the schools. This kind of sampling is suitable for this type of research because focus was on the schools that experience the problem of delivery of learner support materials. Five schools were used as the setting. The schools have been designated school A, B, C, D and E. This was done to keep the anonymity of the schools which participated in the study, as agreed with the participants. The schools are situated in different areas of Region 2 in Northern Province.

The following are the features of these schools: They are public schools situated in rural areas of the Northern Province (on average the schools are in a radius of 50 km from Pietersburg). Their catchment areas are settlements which are rural and predominantly inherited by people who are below middle income class. They comprise Grades 8 to 12. There is easy access to the yards since there are no security personnel at the gates.

Schools A, D and E are easily accessible by road, but schools B and C are very difficult to reach by car. In as far as the effectiveness of management in terms of a plan to request books, there appeared to be none except in schools A and E. For example, the three schools (B, C and D) did not have any plan for the subsequent years.

There was no systematic procedure in the selection of the schools. Due to time constraints, the schools selected were basically those that did not give us problems in terms of access and because of their proximity to our place of work. That is why Region 2 was preferred. We acknowledge, however, that this might have influenced the results of the research.

The choice of the schools was also informed by the location of the schools from Pietersburg. The nearest school to Pietersburg is 40 km whilst the furthest is 101 km. The differences in the distances were meant to reveal patterns in terms of the problems which the schools are experiencing concerning the delivery of books. The focus was also on predominantly black schools because that is where problems seemed to be most severe.

Data collection

Three methods of data collection were used. They were: Observation, Interviewing and Documents. The choice of three methods was informed by a need to triangulate data so that all sides of the truth could be obtained. For example, where interviews had left some information, the observation method or documents supplemented and verified the data. The use of the three methods helped us gain a broad and an insightful picture of the situation.

Observation

Storerooms were visited to observe the way in which books have been stored. Surprisingly, authorities at the schools were very keen to show us where books have been stored. This may be due to the fact that they also seemed not to know what to do, especially with books that they did not use. We observed packs and packs of useable books stored in dilapidated storerooms. Through this observation, we were able to see that there was inefficient usage, as confirmed by teachers, of books in these schools.

Interviewing

To elicit data from the views of the stakeholders (principals, teachers, learners, parents and area managers) about problems experienced with the delivery of books, semi-structured interviews were used.

The reason for choosing semi-structured interviews was because we were able to introduce the topic and guide the discussion by asking questions we regarded as relevant.

Selection of interviewees
People selected for interviews were:10 teachers, 5 principals, 25 learners, 5 parents, 1 Area Manager in the Department of Education, and 3 managers of the bookshops involved in the supply of books. These were selected as follows: a) teachers selected were only those who were responsible for making requisitions for books because these were in a better position to give insightful explanations, b) learners were selected on the basis of one representation from each class because we wanted to gain a holistic view of the problem across the grades, and further because they are the recipients of the books, c) parents selected (one in each school) were those who served on the School Governing Body (SGB) because according the arrangement in the schools they are the ones who monitor the delivery of books, d) Area Managers in the Department of Education were chosen because they were the senior officials of the Department responsible and accountable for requisitions, e) principals were selected because they are the accounting officials at the school level, and f) managers of bookshops selected were those who participated in the tendering process. This included both those who lost and won the tenders. This was done in order to gain different views on the matter.

We had intended to interview officials in the Book Unit of the Department of Education (Northern Province), but formalities of negotiating access did not allow us. We were referred to the Superintendent General but due to time constraints, and the fact that he was not on duty at the time, we did not manage to do that. By intending to interview these we wanted to gain the Department's perspective on the issue.

The interviews
The interviewees were encouraged to say anything that they thought would help in trying to understand problems involved in the system of delivery of books in Northern Province. The interviews were conducted in both English and Northern Sotho. The latter was used to those who did not understand English, for example, parents and learners. Most of the interviews were tape-recorded after permission had been granted by the respondents.

Time-scale of the interviews
Visits to schools started from 8 June 1999 and ended on 24 June 1999. During this time, a total of 49 interviews were conducted covering 5 schools, an area office and two bookshops, in Mankweng, Pietersburg, Bochum and Zebediela areas.

Documents

Documents consulted were:
*   Forms which are used by the schools to control books taken from the storerooms.
*   Requisitions sent to the circuit offices.
*   Forms which are signed when delivery is made.

We would have liked to consult a policy document on the provision of books to the schools by the Department of Education, but education officials telephonically informed us that the document is not for public scrutiny. Nevertheless, principals made such other related documents available to us.

These documents helped us to form an idea of the way in which books in the storerooms are controlled, and as to what happens when books are delivered.

Ethical consideration

Ethical issues were taken into consideration during the research process. No interviewee was coerced into participating in this project. Furthermore, permission was sought from the respondents as to whether they could be tape-recorded or not. They were also assured that their identities and the settings would not be revealed. Hence the use of designation like school A, B, C, D and E.

Results

Data generated through interviews were analysed by looking at responses of each respondent in schools A, B, C, D and E. The responses have been outlined in Table 1. Data from book suppliers in Northern Province have been outlined in Table 2.

As indicated earlier, a total of 49 interviews were conducted. The length of the interviews was on average twenty minutes. Hence, interview transcripts were as long as five to six pages per transcript. And due to the length of the transcripts, it was not possible to include all the items in this article.

As Miles and Huberman (1984:56) and Dey (1983:42-44), indicate, after a mass of data have been collected, categories have to be generated and data categorised. In this research, data generated through interviews were classified into categories generated from research questions and responses from the interviews (as reflected in Tables 1 and 2). This was done following Themane and Mabasa's advice (1999) on tensions and biases in qualitative data analysis.

Discussion

The supply of LSMs to schools is undoubtedly beset by myriad of problems that need urgent attention if the government is to save the tax

Table 1 Responses of the participants in schools A, B, C, D and E

		School				
Themes	Respondent	A	B	C	D	E
Shortage of books	Teacher	Yes there is.	Yes there is.	Yes there is.	Yes there is.	Yes there is.
	Learner	Yes there is .	Yes there is.	Yes there is.	Yes there is.	Yes there is.
	Principal	Yes there is.	Yes there is.	Yes there is.	Yes there is.	Yes there is.
	Parent	Yes there is.	Yes there is.	Yes there is.	Yes there is.	Yes there is.
Deliveries of books	Teacher	Not made in time.	No delivery of books.	Not made in time.	Not made in time.	Not made in time.
	Learner	Not made in time.	Not made in time.	Not made in time.	Not made in time.	Not made in time
	Principal	Not made in time.	No delivery of books.	Not made in time.	Not made in time.	Not made in time.
	Parent	Not sure.	No delivery of books.	Not made in time.	Not made in time.	Not made in time.
Storage of books	Teacher	Stored safe.	Stored safe	Stored safe.	Stored safe	Not safe.
	Learner	Stored but not safe.	Stored but not safe.	Stored safe	Not safe.	Stored safe.
	Principal	Stored but not safe.	Stored safe	Stored safe.	Stored safe	Stored safe.
	Parent	Stored but not safe.	Stored safe.	Stored safe.	Not sure	Not sure.
Delivery of incorrect books	Teacher	Yes.	No.	No.	Yes.	Yes.
	Learner	Yes.	No.	Yes.	Not sure.	Yes.
	Principal	Yes.	No.	Yes.	No.	Not sure.
	Parent	Yes.	Not sure.	Yes.	Not sure.	Yes.
Recording of books	Teacher	Yes,	Yes.	Yes,	Yes.	Yes.
	Learner	Yes, books are recorded.	Yes, books are recorded.	Yes, books are recorded.	Yes, books are recorded.	Yes, books are recorded.
	Principal	Yes, books are recorded.	Yes, books are recorded.	Yes, books are recorded.	Yes, books are recorded.	Yes, books are recorded.
	Parent	Yes, books are recorded.	Yes, books are recorded.	Yes, books are recorded.	Yes, books are recorded.	Yes, books are recorded.
Retrieval of books	Teacher	Withholding school reports.	Withholding school reports.	Withholding school reports.	Withholding school reports.	Withholding school reports.
	Learner	I still have book, nothing happened.	School compels return of books	School compels return of books.	Withholding school reports.	Withholding school reports.
	Principal	Writing letters to parents.	Withholding school reports.	Withholding school reports.	Writing letters to parents.	Not sure.
	Parent	Withholding school reports.	Withholding school reports.	Buy the book.	Keep informed.	Withholding school reports.
Damaged books	Teacher	Learner repairs book.	Learner replaces book.	Keep and request again.	Keep in storeroom.	No response.
	Learner	Not sure.	Learner replaces book.	Learner replaces book.	Negotiate.	Learner replaces book.
	Principal	Keep and use them.	Not yet experienced that.	Record, report and keep.	Keep them.	Not sure.
	Parent	Learner repairs book.	Not sure.	Learner repairs book.	Learner repairs book.	Learner repairs book.
Purchase of books	Teacher	Yes, learners do buy books.	Yes, learners do buy books.	Yes, learners do buy books.	Yes, learners do buy books.	Yes, learners do buy books.
	Learner	Yes, we do buy books.	Yes, we do buy books.	Yes, we do buy books.	Yes, we do buy books.	Yes, we do buy books.
	Principal	Yes, learners do buy books.	Yes, learners do buy books.	Yes, learners do buy books.	Yes, learners do buy books.	Yes, learners do buy books.
	Parent	Yes, learners do buy books.	Yes, learners do buy books.	Yes, learners do buy books.	Yes, learners do buy books.	Yes, learners do buy books.
Requisition of books	Teacher	Yes, is made in time.	Yes, is made in time.	Yes, is made in time.	Yes, is made in time.	Yes, is made in time.
	Learner	Yes, is made in time.	Yes, is made in time.	Yes, is made in time.	Yes, is made in time.	Yes, is made in time.
	Principal	Yes, is made in time.	Yes, is made in time.	Yes, is made in time.	Yes, is made in time.	Not sure.
	Parent	Yes, is made in time.	Not sure.	Yes, is made in time.	Not sure.	Yes, is made in time.

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Table 2 Responses of book suppliers

| Themes | Respondent | Bookshops | | |
		A	B	C
Empowerment	Manager	Nothing	People are given tenders on the grounds of PDI[1]	People are given tenders on the grounds of PDI
Capacity and experience	Manager	Nothing	There is no capacity and experience on the part of people who are given tenders	There is no capacity and experience on the part of those given tenders
Publishers	Manager	Publishers are slow to deliver books	Publishers do not have confidence in bookshops	Publishers do not trust the PDI service providers because they do not pay.
Tender board problems	Manager	Nothing	They award tenders very late. They concentrate on the PDI suppliers	They award tenders very late They concentrate on the PDI suppliers
Delayed orders from schools	Manager	Schools order books very late	Schools order books very late	Schools order books very late
Ordering wrong books	Manager	Schools order wrong books	School order wrong books	School order wrong books
Cross checking	Manager	There is no thorough checking of requisitions by principals and Area Managers	There is no thorough checking of requisitions by principals and Area Managers	There is no thorough checking of requisitions by principals and Area Managers

1 Previously Disadvantaged Individuals

payer's money. This study therefore does not claim to have covered all the problems. However, it has attempted to unravel some gross irregularities in the supply and delivery of textbooks to schools. It aimed at gaining an understanding of the present system of LSMs supply to schools, that is, the what extent to which the system is cost effective.

From the study it is evident that the system of LMS supply, in the Northern Province is in a chaotic state, almost at a point of collapse. This is evidenced by, amongst other things, lack of proper recording systems, wrong deliveries of materials ordered and packs and packs of unused usable books found in the schools.

As an attempt to gain an insightful understanding of the delivery system we looked at a number of areas; such as: shortage of books, delivery of books, recording and storage of books, retrieval of books, damaged books, purchase of books and requisition of books.

Shortage of books

There is a serious shortage of books (textbooks in particular) in spite of an ever increasing budget on the purchase of books by the Department of Education. By shortage of books this study refers to a case where learners do not have enough relevant textbooks for their syllabus. The irony is that there are packs and packs of textbooks lying unused in storerooms, at least from the schools that we have visited. For example, as indicated in Table 1, all the respondents indicated that there was a shortage of books. When they were asked whether there was any surplus of books, they all indicated that there was, but of irrelevant books. For example, in school (A) the principal said:

"The major problem is that they always deliver books late. And when they deliver, they deliver wrong books. That is the major problem. Well I would have thought maybe when the government gives tenders of delivering books to companies, they should look into the competent companies. Well I understand the question of black empowerment, but they have got to look at people who have experience. I would like that they sit down with the suppliers and talk strictly that books must be delivered on time, and that they must deliver correct ordered books. That may help the situation."

His assertion was confirmed by our visit to the storeroom where we found a room full of books. The reason for this irony (many having nothing yet) is that the books they have are irrelevant to the syllabus of a particular grade in that year. This is partly caused by the dysfunctional system of deliveries.

Seemingly, the shortage of books is caused by a multiplicity of factors, but paramount to these, is the incorrect requisition by the principal, that is, ordering wrong books and using a wrong formula to determine the number of learners who need the books. In some cases, of course, like in school (B), the shortage was caused by the fact that there were no deliveries of textbooks at least for the previous two years or so.

Deliveries of books

Coupled with the shortage of books, as seen above, is indeed the question of delivery of books to schools. On the whole we found that books were not delivered, either wrongly or inefficiently. By inefficiency we mean that books were delivered in time and there was no proper control and accountability in the system. Here we found that there were serious problems, which in our opinion were the main cause of the dysfunctioning of the entire sys tem. In short they may be summarised as follows:

- No deliveries
- Late deliveries
- Wrong deliveries

For example, as indicated in Table 1, the respondents claimed that there were serious problems with deliveries. In school (B) as indicated, there were no deliveries at all, for the previous two years. In schools A, C, D and E it was found that they almost all complained about late deliveries. For example, a parent in school E explained the situation as follows:

"I would say that the department should have enough time of arranging the delivery of books. Let us say this is 1999, they should start now (June) for the following year. Have arrangements, have quotations, know the number of schools and prepare everything in time. Then if it is possible, they should send the books to schools before the schools reopen, say during December holidays and make arrangements with the schools for supply of books. This will help in that when schools start, they can start supplying books to the learners and make sure that they send enough. I mean in accordance with the requisitions."

According to our observation, late deliveries were caused by a number of factors, such late requisitions, lack of transport, lack of capacity from those who won tenders to do the work, etc.

Furthermore, the problem of incorrect delivery of books emerged. The recipients of textbooks from schools complained that they were given wrong orders. In one school they indicated that suppliers forced them to accept wrong orders because they alleged that those were the orders they received. And in another school, they complained that they were always given an edition that they did not order. On this issue, there was a shift of blame from one respondent to another. The suppliers blamed the schools for placing incorrect orders. The Area

Manager also blamed the schools, in particular, the management style at the school. But he also blamed the Department for not giving schools enough time to submit requisitions. On this, a manager of bookshop B had the following to say:

"... sometimes schools order wrong versions of books, e.g. you may find that a N.Sotho version of Curriculum 2005 has been ordered instead of the English version. And when you deliver, they refuse it. But then the Department will insist that because they ordered them, they should take them."

But some teachers on the other hand, blamed suppliers and the department for delivering incorrect books. One teacher in school A said:

"The problem is that if we want to change a book the department refuses. We have a problem with the Std 10 Geography. We tried to change it for the past five years but it was not possible. When we place an order, they do not supply according to the requisition, they keep on supplying the outdated version for the previous five years and we do not use it because it is outdated."

In this cycle of blame for one another, we think that all these problems are caused by lack of capacity, poor system and reliance by the Department of Education on the information from schools without proper follow-up or verification.

The Area Manager painted an even more complex picture of the reasons why books were delivered late at schools. He lamented that:

"This is a complex issue. It is said that between the publishers and the schools there should be suppliers. The suppliers get books from the publishers. Publishers may delay with the books because of several reasons amongst which are non-payment by the suppliers or late submission of orders by the suppliers to the publishers. The suppliers may also deliver books late because of the department. They complain that the department does not pay them in time. The other problem may be due to what they call empowerment. They give tenders to previously disadvantaged suppliers and in the process fail to deliver in time. So it is a complex problem because this one blames that one and the other one blames the other. It is a cycle."

The reflections above by the different respondents indicate the complexity of the delivery of books to schools. Perhaps this complexity explains why there are different views on the mode of distribution of resources to schools, for example, the school-based versus the central-based allocation of resources (Elliot, 1996).

From our observation, based on schools visited, it would seem that the appropriate mode of delivery should be a centralised one because of lack of capacity in handling this matter at both the district and school level. This, however, should only be for those books that are used in all the schools, for example, English literature which is usually taken by all the learners in a particular year. But in those cases where there are electives, the schools themselves could be allocated funds to handle their own requisitions because in this case it is difficult to determine the number of learners taking these electives.

Recording and storage of books

From the responses it is evident that there is some system of recording in place in all the schools. But in practice we observed that the system left much to be desired. Almost all schools visited, hardly knew what kind of books and how many they had in store. This invariably causes wrong requisitions of books. Principals are, for example, not even aware of the books that are lost. In school (E) where books are stored in the library, the teacher claimed that learners had free access to the books and stole them. This was confirmed by learners in school D and E. In school E they said:

"Yes, some of the learners do steal books. This happens during school hours. Teachers use the library as a staff room and sometimes they become so busy in such a way that they are unable to see those who steal books. Another method which learners use to steal books is by going to the library and tell teachers that one of their colleagues has sent them to collect books whereas that is not the case."

Again, the problem of storage in most schools is that there is not enough storage space. This problem seems not to have an immediate solution as books keep on piling from year to year. For example, one teacher lamented that this over-flooding of irrelevant books seems to be with them for ever (infinite). Fortunately or unfortunately these books are not being stolen maybe because of the fact that people in the surrounding areas are not having a culture of reading. The situation as is, is indeed not cost-effective at all.

Furthermore, looking at Table 1, learners indicate that books stored are not safe whereas other respondents are of the view that books are safe. This might be an indication that learners are able to steal books without being noticed by school authorities.

Coupled with the problem of recording and storage of books, is the retrieval of books from learners. The study found that the common method in retrieving books loaned to learners is by withholding school reports. But in cases where that does not work, for example, where the learner drops out of school, letters are written to parents to bring the book back. And if all the methods fail, then the book cannot be retrieved.

This system (of retrieving books) does not seem to be effective. In school A, for example, one learner claimed that she had books with her and nothing was done. This loophole was confirmed by the learners in school E, who claimed that in spite of withholding school reports many learners did not return books. The teacher in this school claimed that the fault was with fellow teachers who did not enforce the policy.

This picture explains why COSAS as quoted in *The Sowetan* (1999:17) expressed that:

"We wish to start the second term next Monday with textbooks collection component of the campaign, known as operation Mazi-buye. We think it is irresponsible, unpatriotic and an absolute waste for such valuable resources to be in the hands of a few individuals, who may not be using these books."

In our opinion, however, this campaign may not succeed since it will depend on the goodwill of the learners to return books. Besides, the problem is further compounded by theft of relevant textbooks by learners. In school A, learners indicated that they steal books and erase the numbers so that it becomes difficult for teachers to trace them at school.

Damaged books

Schools do not seem to know what to do with damaged books. Teachers and principals claim that they keep record and use them whereas learners indicate that they are usually told to replace them. It seems as if there is no clear policy on what to do with books that have been damaged. In school B, the principal indicated that they have not yet experienced this kind of a problem because they are still a new school. The principal in school C indicated that at present all damaged books have been packed in the storeroom.

A teacher in school C indicated that they keep the books and make another requisition for the same book. If what the teacher in school C says is anything to go by, then the Department will keep on supplying books without ceasing.

We are of the opinion that the way in which the issue of damaged books is handled is not cost-effective. There is a need for a clear policy on what to do with books that have been damaged.

Purchase of books

The schools visited indicated that usually learners resort to buying their own books. This is as a result of the problems indicated earlier, that is, late delivery of books, non delivery of books, shortage of books and delivery of incorrect books.

In our opinion, if these problems could be attended to, for example, ordering the correct books, making requisitions in time, etc., the money which learners use in buying books could be used in other projects that could contribute towards the development of the school. This should also be viewed positively in the sense that some parents are willing to take responsibility in the education of their children.

Requisition of books

The other area that need attention is on the requisition of books. Different respondents at the schools claim that requisitions are made in time by the schools. The only problem is that suppliers deliver books late at the schools.

Recommendations

Rethinking methods of supplying books to schools

While substantive supply of books remain decentralised under the Provincial Department of Education, they obviously, from the evidence of this study, do not compare to the centralised model. Since the contraction of private supplies (bookshops) as a strategy is also limited in its usefulness, a more promising approach to the supply of books seems to be a logical thing to reconsider. One of the options would be to give the responsibility of distributions of books to the Regional warehouses.[1] Schools will then collect books from these Regional warehouses.

However, we are aware that some of the activities outlined may be difficult in some areas where there are no resources such as electricity, but most we think, are feasible and practical in addressing the problem. And we also acknowledge that it is not appropriate for every school.

Client education

Many schools (recipients) are still oblivious of the changes wrought by the Department of Education, and others are making bad choices based on misinformation, for example, receiving supplies from service providers just because they are claimed to be from the Department, or signing for books that were not requested. We think schools need more information. Informed schools are more likely to make more informed and better choices and are less likely to face a burden of books that they do not know what to do about.

Large-group training sessions can impart useful information to schools, enable them to connect with other schools facing similar predicaments and thus present some of the most better solutions than the Department can provide.

Another essential part of client education is the development of written materials or manuals on how to handle the supply of books. As we note in this article , a computer system can serve as a monitor for existing stocks, lost stock, etc. Such a system, if welcomed by the Department of Education, can be introduced in different regions with a crash course and/or a manual of how to operate the system. These materials can be adapted to local variations and distributed to schools by the contracted service-providers, for example.

Educating the larger community

School principals and teachers are not the only people who need information about the position of book supply. School Governing Bodies (SGBs), local parents, learners, teacher unions, etc also need information to understand the implications of the distribution of learning materials such as books to schools. This will be in line with the spirit of partnership between schools and their communities. This, we think, will be the best way to engage or enable parents, business and schools to support policy initiatives from government in their implementation processes.

Besides, we think that radio and television programmers could be approached to host recipients (schools) and suppliers (bookshops) for debates. Obviously these public forums present risks such as achieving the unintended objectives but, if chosen wisely, they also present tremendous opportunities.

Developing book-supply partnerships

Community education and other prominent advocacy or technical assistance from external or private donors often lead to identification of allies with congruent (if not identical) interest in solving practical problems. For example, in our study we found that schools in the neighborhood often lent each other books during times of crisis. Unfortunately such collaborative efforts were fragmented and more on an *ad hoc* basis, and were thus restricted and risky, for there are no policy arrangements to enhance such allies. Obviously, the danger may be that such a "gentleman's" arrangement from the "grass roots" may circumvent the Department's restrictions. That may be problematic, for example, the recipient may claim that he/she never received any books.

With our suggested approach we think that if such partnerships are formalised, establishing relationships with a cluster of schools in the vicinity in the sharing of resources such textbooks, learning aids, etc, could be more cost-effective. These relationships could include business, civic associations, *dikgoro* (*makgotla a motse*)[2], churches, etc. From such an array of allies schools can only stand to benefit, unlike when the slogan "everyone for himself and God for us all" is followed. Indeed, divided we fall but united we stand. Coalitions can make the difference.

Sponsors may listen when shown that schools are aware of limited resources and are willing to maximize the little that they receive. And a resource centre may be fund-raised for a number of schools than just for one. Such an approach will definitely lead, we hope, to a well-designed system that treats all low-income people, such as are found in most African schools fairly and will not require exorbitant co-payments. While acknowledging that working in partnership can be time-consuming and frustrating on occasion, we think that the energy and the leverage brought by such allies will increase probability of success. Of paramount importance, however, is to see an effective system of LSMs that is cost-effective.

Working with Area Offices

The idea of schools working with Area Offices seems to be the most effective system of LSMs. Books should be delivered at the area offices and then be distributed to schools. Our opinion is that if the books could be allocated to the area offices, these can be better distributed to schools under that Area because they are the best people who understand the needs of the schools in their local communities. In the process, this could eliminate incorrect and late delivery of books.

Conclusion

Given the above scenario, it is evident that the system of the supply of learner support materials in Northern Province seems to be in a chaotic state. In this paper the chaotic nature of the system manifested itself in: books not being delivered on time or not delivered at all, packs and packs of books lying unused in dilapidated storerooms, and incorrect requisitions and wrong deliveries. What makes it worse is the sheer lack of human resources, both at Head office and at the school level, that are capable of handling the task. School principals, teachers and learners, Area Officers, and Head Office are at loggerheads about

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1 A warehouse is a building where large quantities of goods are stored before being sent abroad, to shops, etc. In this case this building will be for storage of books.

2 *Makgotla a motse* are African civic centers, especially in the villages where civil cases and other matters of interest are resolved by the elder and the chief.

whose problem it actually is. There is a lot of finger pointing. We think that the fault lies with the Department of Education for not taking full responsibility. For example, by not having monitoring systems in place. There is therefore a need to overhaul the system as a matter of urgency if the Culture of Learning and Teaching Services (COLTS) is to be realised.

In this paper, we have suggested that a new system of learner support materials supply should be put in place: 1) by educating schools and the community at large about the importance of books; 2) by developing partnerships between schools in the sharing of books; and 3) that Area Offices, in collaboration with schools, should take responsibility for the ordering and distribution of books.

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