

School librarianship in the African Sub-Saharan region in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis

By Jerry Mathema

Snapshot

Jerry Mathema, an experienced school library media specialist in Zimbabwe, details the difficult and concerning impact of COVID-19 on the education community in his region.

Today, children and young people are global citizens, powerful agents of change and the next generation of much needed future professional expertise. The advent of the novel corona virus, commonly referred to as COVID-19, has disrupted learning in most African countries and governments have since ordered the closure of schools. The re-opening of schools in many

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African countries still hangs in the balance and it's likely that 2020 will be a wasted year in the history of learning and librarianship. Most countries have since introduced various lockdown restrictions as the protection of children and educational facilities such as libraries is particularly important. Precautions have been necessary to prevent the potential spread of COVID-19 in school settings hence the closure of school libraries.

The governments have taken this stance because of the importance of saving and protecting the lives of the children we value so dearly. It should be remembered that COVID-19 does not differentiate between borders, ethnicities, disability status, age or gender. To avoid stigmatizing students and staff who may have been exposed to the virus most progressive governments, through their various ministries of health and education, have taken it upon themselves to come up with various communication strategies through which they convey important information. Such as how Covid19 is spread, how its effect can be mitigated and how it can be managed since there is no known vaccine. However, due to the economic problems bedeviling most developing African states and the corrupt nature of some politicians the exercise has been met with profound challenges.

The African continent experienced a surge in the spread of the novel corona virus a little bit late after having learnt through the media of its destructive and fatal nature from other continents that were badly hit. This gave the continent ample time to learn and employ strategies on how to tackle the spread of this disease. Unfortunately, this did not help much because some African states are characterized by ailing health delivery systems that is compounded by lack of funding, poor remuneration of medical staff, corruption and the subsequent poor maintenance. Surprisingly most African countries still prefer to invest heavily in defending territorial integrity rather than improving their health delivery systems.

As schools, libraries and different workplaces shut down all over Africa Sub Sahara due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the African Library and Information Association (AfLIA) is supporting library associations and librarians with a suite of COVID-19 resources and other information about platforms that can aid the provision of online services. Librarians can also direct their user communities to these sites for reading purposes, distant learning and online interactions including meetings and webinars. The sites and links contained in the suite are from the entire African continent. The content is largely from Anglophone and Francophone states with very low input from the remaining Lusophone nations.

In Zimbabwe a company known as Cassava Edutech launched the Akello E-library, an online library platform offering numerous school curriculum books to support the education sector. The E-Library platform was introduced to the market in order to offer convenience to learners and students who have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic amid fears of the provisional closure of schools and with the understandable uncertainty over their opening due to health and safety concerns.

The launch of the E-library platform followed the launch of the Akello digital classroom which offers learners live online classes, as well as on-demand lesson videos after the live classes. Akello E-library houses books across various categories for all age groups and it has partnered with several local publishers, including Consultus Publishing Services, Priority Projects Publishers, College Press, Palm Publishers, Zimbabwe Publishing House, Connexional Bookshop, Palm publishers, Edulight and Secondary Book Press, to offer a wide range of books, including ZIMSEC-approved curriculum education text books, Christian reading and many more. International publishers have also been engaged to bring their content on board in order to offer a wide selection of e-text books. Akello E-library offers convenience and accessibility with a subscription model for library books, which is up to 90% affordable compared to printed books.

The Zimbabwe Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education launched a digital library programme that enables pupils to access books online as part of a key strategy of ensuring continuity during the Covid-19 lockdown period. The digital platform known as Odilo Digital Library, allows pupils to borrow virtual books, and can be accessed through a link on the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education website. Odilo is the leading ecosystem for unlimited and collaborative learning and it is considered by many to be the 'Netflix for Education as it offers a Netflix-styled and highly engaging digital library experience. It also offers a virtual book club and infinite learning possibilities with access to over 2 million digital titles from over 5 000 publishers.

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Despite the support rendered by AfLIA, Akello AND The Odilo Digital Library, school librarians are continuously facing many unprecedented challenges during this pandemic notwithstanding the physical closure of library facilities. Schools have invested and introduced online lessons to their pupils but surprisingly there is no corresponding investment in digital libraries and electronic resource collections for both pupils and teachers. School librarians have been sidelined and

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totally shut out of the learning platforms, only a few vibrant practitioners have managed to fight gallantly for their recognition and subsequent inclusion in such activities or programmes. School administrators have dismally failed to support 21st Century libraries and they have opted to ignore the great need to build virtual collections and be abreast with emerging new technologies in librarianship. In

some worrying instances school librarians have become redundant or they are simply assigned alternative online operations that are not directly linked to school librarianship.

In Zimbabwe, the government pays teachers' salaries only and other employees are paid by the School Development Associations (SDA) or Parents Teachers Associations (PTA). These associations are solely dependent on the payment of school fees in order to pay non-teachers. It has proved difficult for most of these associations to pay salaries during this pandemic. There is a government directive for fees to be paid in full by parents despite the closure of schools. This directive is meant to help school administrators to meet their obligations of paying salaries to non-government employees. But this has been met with resistance by most parents who have preferred to forego the payment of fees. In most instances school librarians have been left exposed and vulnerable to the social and economic effects brought about by this pandemic. They simply do not have any disposable income to pull through during these trying times.

The same applies to mission, private and independent run schools, they have been badly affected too and have since stopped paying salaries to both teaching and non-teaching staff who are not government employees. Please note that mission, private and independent schools are registered and licensed by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. It is the sole responsibility of the church board or board of trustees to employ their own teachers and non-teachers. There is no government financial support extended to the affected school entities. School librarians are classified as administrative staff. In most countries in sub-Saharan Africa libraries are manned by qualified librarians, untrained librarians or teachers. There are rare instances where volunteers are engaged. Teacher-Librarians are also not common since our universities do not offer dual qualifications in teaching and school librarianship with the exception of Botswana. The UB offers a Bachelor of Education in Library and Information Science but the majority of these graduates are assigned teaching duties in schools upon graduation and subsequent engagement at schools. In some South African universities, they once offered and taught a course for school librarians who had undergraduate degrees in education, widely referred to as the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE). Training in this certificate program has been discontinued and it has been replaced by a Post-Graduate Diploma in Library and Information Science.

As it is, most of the COVID-19 measures and guidelines that have been instituted by various nations through the ministries of education, and that of health, are school wide and not peculiar to school libraries. The question is, is it the responsibility of the government, the National library service or the local Library Association to come up with measures and guidelines that are particularly suited to the library and information sector?

In the post COVID-19 era we envisage an educational setting that is comprised of facilities that are welcoming, respectful, inclusive, and a supportive environment to all. Measures taken by schools can prevent the entry and spread of COVID-19 by students and staff who may have been exposed to the virus, while minimizing disruption and protecting students and staff from discrimination. A repeat of the horrible stigma that characterized the advent of the HIV-AIDS pandemic must be avoided at all cost.

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