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To: Subject Advisors, Teachers, Departmental Heads

Promoting a reading culture through community libraries

Message Objective:

To :

- explain the concept of a reading culture and its purpose
- share approaches of improving reading in communities

The poor reading culture in South Africa has sparked debate among some citizens in urban and rural communities. Some people I engaged with in the rural Mkhuhlu area where I come from often asked the following questions: In a rural community where books are scarce and reading habits are limited, how will a community library make a difference in how much is read, and how do people perceive and value reading? Those in urban settlements such as Soweto in Gauteng and Kanyamazane in Mpumalanga kept on asking what the Department of Basic Education will do to ensure that the books are in a context that will make learners want to read them. These questions are central to exploring the notion of a reading culture and what could be done to improve reading with resources available in communities.

The reading culture moves beyond a focus on decoding skills and enters a space where literacy is widespread and is a daily and life-long activity (Magara and Batambuze, 2005). The social and affective aspects of reading for pleasure are an indication of a reading culture. A reading culture presupposes adequate and appropriate reading materials, but also a culture where reading of various kinds is part of everyday life. An existing community library can address the supply of materials and reading space effort to promote reading through cluster of schools located in a particular area.

The main purpose of community libraries is to give learners access to books so that they can acquire subject matter content and improve their language skills. Literacy is a set of skills that are learnt in school and can be practiced at the library. Schools in communities where there is a community library can cluster and establish a common time-table that will allow learners to share books in a coordinated manner. The schools can share ideas for activities that will promote reading throughout the year without any compromise of curriculum coverage. For instance, national and international reading days can be used as days where learners of a particular grade of the cluster borrow books to be read at school or in homes.

The community library could be used as a venue where schools can come together to hold events like Book Week and quizzes. They can also be used to drive reading competitions such as Spelling Bee and Readathon. Schools do not necessarily have to build libraries if community libraries exist. Community libraries can be useful resource to promote a reading culture if better used.

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Reference:

Magara E and Batambuze C (2005) Towards a reading culture for Uganda. African Journal of Library, Archives and Information Science 15(1): 35–42.