

# FOREWORD

## **'Sorry, no Free Reading'<sup>1</sup>**

*'Reading is important because if you read you understand  
and want to read again.'*

(Mabel Mbavu, aged 13, Glen Norah High School.)

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### **Background**

When Zimbabwe achieved its independence in 1980, the Ministry of Education and Culture immediately set about rectifying the inherited inequities in the education system. Free open access was given to primary education, and enrolment rose from 1.2m to 2.3m in the first few years. The number of primary schools increased from 2,401 in 1979 to 3,161 in 1980, and 4,234 in 1985. Similar advances occurred at secondary level: the number of schools rose from 177 to 1,517 and the number of students from 66,215 in 1979 to 687,742 in 1992.

There were many logistical problems to be overcome in trying to cater for this huge increase in the number of students attending school: proper buildings, trained teachers, and equipment. Relevant textbooks, all of which had to be written to the new syllabuses, as they were developed by the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) and Examinations Branch in the first few years of independence, had to be created.

The first five or six years of independence were years of challenge, growth and financial reward for the major textbook publishers in Zimbabwe: Longman, College Press, Zimbabwe Publishing House and Academic Books.

However, because of the inevitable time lapse between starting a school, developing a syllabus to meet the requirements of the new Zimbabwe, printing and distributing the syllabus to schools and publishers, writing materials and having them approved by the CDU, and then publishing textbooks, there were few government and council schools that had sufficient books for the first several years of their existence. Moreover the huge cost of the expansion in education, despite the large injections of donor funding, meant that many new rural schools could barely afford to buy a minimum number of basic texts.

In 1983 it was decided that the CDU, with full donor support, would publish its own material and provide it free to rural schools. Twenty-six subject teams began work on producing materials. In retrospect, however, it can be seen that this initiative was of limited benefit to schools.

<sup>1</sup>This is adapted from a paper given at a Librarians Day Seminar at The London International Book Fair, March 1995.

All the CDU staff were trained and dedicated teachers, but few had written before, and given the numerous other demands made on their time, the development of course material was uneven. The unit had inadequate editorial and production support; the government printer found it difficult to cope with the number of titles and the huge print-runs (80,000 copies of a primary text and 30,000 copies of a secondary text) during a period when many other government departments were making heavy demands on their facilities; distribution structures were inadequate, particularly given the intention to reach out to rural, often remote, schools. Teachers and pupils alike were less than enthusiastic about using material that covered only part of a course (e.g. Form 1 Term 1 Pupils' Book), and which they saw as second rate because the book, being a low cost production, was on newsprint with inadequate black and white illustrations and staple bound. One lesson to be learned from this experience is that if you want people to appreciate books, quality is as important as relevance.

Throughout the 1980s foreign exchange was limited, and the quota system for imported books used during the sanctions era remained in place. Publishers and booksellers applied to the government, (through the Ministries of Education and Culture, and Trade and Commerce) for funds to import textbooks for A-level, college and university students. In 1986 it was estimated that Z\$4m was needed to meet the demand, but little more than a quarter of this was made available. Although Zimbabwe Junior Certificate (ZJC) and O-level texts were licensed and adapted to the Zimbabwean syllabuses, this did not happen at A- and tertiary level as print-runs of one to two thousand were considered too small to be viable. Higher-level courses depended on imported texts which were available in limited quantities and were comparatively very expensive. Even today at university level, teachers and students depend on a few basic, often photocopied, texts and under these circumstances, the culture of reading cannot seriously be developed or encouraged. The university library has done its best with the support of donor funding, but it is estimated that their grants have never covered more than a third of the requirements.

Despite the efforts of government, the CDU, donors and the publishers, the supply of textbooks never met the needs of the new system. Today, despite a discretionary school levy on parents, the reintroduction of school fees, and considerable financial support from SIDA and the European Union, the situation has not improved. While the Education Budget is now the largest of all the Ministries, the annual *per capita* grant for books and materials is still at the 1980 figure of \$23 (£1.70) and is the lowest in the region: in Namibia it is Z\$87.50, in Swaziland Z\$402.88, in South Africa Z\$125.87 and in Botswana Z\$550. In the meantime production costs have increased considerably – paper costs alone have gone up by 130% in the last year – and the Zimbabwean dollar has continued to decline in value.

In 1993, 78% of the candidates sitting O-level failed, that is they failed to achieve a pass in the required five subjects and, according to Alexon Mutasa (*Teacher in Zimbabwe*: July 1995), only 5% of rural school children pass their O-level English examination. The reasons for this high failure rate cannot solely be attributed to an insufficient number of textbooks in most rural schools, but this is a major contributory factor.

Although quite a number of students will re-sit their examinations at private (crammer) colleges, most students will begin their adult working life with a sense of demoralisation. Education – textbook learning – is given a disproportionate value and one which I believe implicitly undermines the value of a broader, more liberal concept of education for life: knowledge not tied to certificates and exam results.

Access to education in 1980 was an absolute criterion, meeting an essential demand and a basic human right. However it placed a huge, and possibly unforeseen, cost on the exchequer, particularly in a country with a very small tax base, and one which over the last seven years has suffered devastating droughts and high inflation.

## The Current Situation

Against this background, I think it would be fair to say that most schoolchildren's experience of books is a negative one as:

- textbooks often have to be shared between three or more students; and if the books are lost or damaged the children are often punished.
- many older teachers came through an autocratic teacher-centred system, and rote learning will continue to be practised as long as pupils have to share books, or when the teacher possesses the only classroom copy. Many teachers, like many parents, had very limited access to books during their childhood, and consequently do not realize their potential or know how to use them creatively.

This is one reason why visual literacy remains a problem that has gone unheeded. You cannot teach the letter 'y' using the word 'yolk', if the child thinks the picture of a poached egg is the sun. Illustrations and cartoons used to teach difficult concepts will be ignored, and disparaged, if the teacher does not know how to read or use them.

- it is the head teachers who have access to catalogues and it is they who buy the books with grant money. This practice does nothing to encourage the idea of buying a book for oneself. In comparison with the trend in recorded music sales, where virtually all of the Z\$60m annual sales turnover is bought by individuals, less than 5% of the Z\$30m turnover in books is accounted for by non-institutional customers. Yet a tape costs Z\$60 while a locally published novel costs approximately Z\$35.
- the value that is placed on books is reflected in the unremitting complaint that the price of books is too high. This complaint is not often justified for locally published books, but seems rather to reflect the low priority given to them in the domestic budgets of even the educated, and influential, middle class.
- a low-level of general book purchasing does not encourage publishers to develop fiction or children's book lists, especially as library grants have remained very small.
- there are very few bookshops in the high density and rural areas; they primarily service schools with textbooks and rarely hold stock. Bookselling is not generally regarded as a profession where one is required to know – or even read – one's product. Browsing is not encouraged: 'Sorry, no Free Reading'.
- Zimbabwe has been starved of books and ideas for a variety of historical, political, and social reasons. The minority that did read through the fifties, sixties and seventies personally imported the books they wanted. White middle class culture was sporty rather than literary, closed rather than open, combative rather than conciliatory, escapist rather than reflective. Even today, when bookshops look to a market beyond textbooks they tend to give priority to glossy, imported remaindered titles such as *Cake Decoration for the Proud Housewife*, or books for the tourist market such as *The Zambezi River*. The idea that serious fiction and non-fiction does not sell thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.
- government has not yet fully realised the importance of libraries to the development of the country. Rural and working class people cannot generally afford books, and libraries are essential if they are to sustain and build on the education they have received. However, the National Library and Documentation Service's annual grant for books is only Z\$66 000 (£5,000) for the 22 district and public libraries that fall within its purview; the smaller libraries receive approximately Z\$1,500 (£115) annually, the larger libraries such as Harare City receive Z\$7,000 (£538) annually. Malawi and Zambia have respectively 400 and 800 rural libraries; Zimbabwe has 46 and these began as an independent rather than a government initiative.

Since 1980 a number of donors have provided library books for schools, the British Council and CODE being at the forefront of this endeavour in their awareness of the importance of providing books which mean something to the recipients. Not all donors have been so sensitive – for example, *How to use a Microwave* is not much use in a rural area where the average annual income is approximately Z\$1,500 (£111). Donated books, despite their occasional irrelevance, are often on very good paper and in hardcover, and can make books published in Zimbabwe look second rate. Moreover no matter how good the content, if students are not given material that affirms their own lives, reflects their own culture, or explores the complexity of their own value systems in a changing world, their sense of who they are will continue to be implicitly undermined.

As long as children's experience of books during their school careers remains at best very limited – a brief survey of Form 2 students in rural and high density schools revealed that very few of them had read anything beyond their prescribed readers – and at worst negative or reductionist (literature interpreted as grammar) then they will be unlikely to make reading or the purchase of books a high priority in later life. Their development and the future of the country will depend on their access to ideas and to knowledge. What is the future of a society if the majority of the adult population do not read more than a newspaper once a week? For as Niyi Osundare said in his acceptance speech during the presentation of the 1991 Noma Award in Harare: 'A society that reads is easy to lead but hard to deceive; one that does not read is hard to control but easy to manipulate.'

If publishers rely on institutional purchasing of textbooks with government grants that grow less with each passing year, and if the market for locally published general fiction, non-fiction and children's books remains small, the future for the local publishing industry is not very bright. We must look to ways to increase the awareness of the value of books in life-long education and development in order that individuals and communities begin themselves to invest in books.

Over the last few years, however, there have been a number of encouraging developments which indicate that the future is not as bleak as I have painted it. For despite their current limited access to general reading material the majority of rural and high density urban-dwelling thirteen- and fourteen-year-old school students who replied to my questionnaire commented on the importance of reading: 'Reading is important because one can learn more about life and to live with others.' 'Reading is important because for example if you read books written by Zimbabweans you will be able to understand your history. Also English novels increase your language and grammar skills, and again Shona novels do the same. Again after reading some novels you will know what is wrong and what is right and you will be able to know yourself better. Reading fills up leisure time.'

Although there are still comparatively few libraries outside the former white schools, the British Council and the Ranfurly Library Trust (now Book Aid International) have done a great deal to promote and foster the development of libraries in Zimbabwe.

The European Union has recently provided Z\$25m over two years (1994–96) for library books, and it will be interesting to see how schools respond to this challenge and how far they will look beyond the need for reference books. For we should now ask if a grant for library books is adequate in itself, or if one could increase its potential with more sensitive training in the value and use of books.

If trainee pre-school and primary teachers were given a course in reading aloud and shown how to dramatise stories; and if all teachers were given training in how to establish, use and value a classroom library; and if a library grant was made a statutory provision; the advantages would be manifold. Students would then be introduced to a world beyond textbooks, literacy would qualitatively improve, authors and publishers would be given greater financial security, and the public would be generally better informed, more able to

access information and have a deeper understanding of the ways in which books can become integral to life rather than objects to be studied at school.

Access and awareness are, therefore, perhaps the two most important goals to which we should aspire. Initiatives have already been taken to achieve these objectives. For example:

- the Rural Library and Resource Development Programme (RLRDP) began as a donor-supported pilot project with two libraries in 1988 and now has 46 affiliated rural libraries with many more communities on their waiting list. The scheme ensures that people are involved and trained in the development of their own libraries and in the selection of books that they want. The future development of libraries hinges on community involvement, and on library constituencies lobbying for better services;
- the Bulawayo Mobile Library Service now issues approximately 35,000 books a year to children in the high density suburbs of the city;
- the only two children's libraries in Marondera and Bulawayo have fostered an awareness of the value of books for children, and have increased their membership through the personal commitment of their librarians and a combination of story-telling, schools visits, extension work and exhibitions;
- over the last few years, the Zimbabwe International Book Fair has done a great deal to bring books to the attention of a wider public. In 1995, despite a Z\$2 entrance fee, there were over 30,000 visitors to the Fair including 2,000 teachers and librarians, most of whom attended over the weekend;
- the Zimbabwe Book Development Council is using the idea of a 'Book Week' to promote the idea of reading and held its first major promotion in February 1995. The Zimbabwe Book Marketing Scheme is doing what it can to get affordable books to people who do not live in urban areas;
- the Bulawayo Municipal and Public Libraries, with consistent financial support from the Bulawayo City Council, have worked closely with the British Council and Book Aid International to show that responsive outreach programmes will draw people into libraries and their membership over the years has steadily increased despite the recession.

Examples such as these reveal that if people are given access to books that they want to read, and if they are encouraged to see books as providing more than a source of information which must be learned for an examination, the potential for developing a more broadly based reading culture is promising.

It is important to remember that there remain many reasons why Zimbabwe does not yet have a strong reading culture. Most people still live in the rural areas. This means that they work from 5.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. They do not have electricity by which to read at night, candles are comparatively expensive, and there is a strong tradition of sitting around a fire during the evening and sharing experiences. Books are not only not affordable, and not accessible, but in some ways, still rather alien to a traditional way of life.

If a family lives in a high density urban area, with perhaps three or four people sharing each room, it is not hard to imagine that a private and solitary occupation such as reading is difficult to practise. For this reason, many libraries are centres for homework rather than browsing.

A change in perception about the value of books cannot happen overnight. Seventy-five per cent of the population still lives in the rural areas, without electricity, libraries or bookshops. The majority of adults in the rural areas still only have primary education, and it has been said that it will take several generations before children are born into homes with a supply of books. The government's finances are severely restricted and most library developments have depended on the initiative of a few creative individuals and donor funding.

At Baobab Books we receive a steady flow of letters from children asking for books, books which they want but cannot afford themselves. While we cannot respond to each request with a free book, the fact that a child has taken the initiative to write to us, gives one hope that books are acquiring a value in and for themselves.

It has been said that television and video are closer to an oral culture and the social experience of people not accustomed to the very private and exclusive habit of reading. We must therefore continue to ask ourselves what reading and books can provide that no other medium can satisfy. Will most people have access to film? Will most people travel? How will they begin to explore other worlds and keep abreast of new ideas and information? The answer in a developing country must be through increased access to books.

Zimbabwe today is a country of many class, cultural and experiential differences. We are living through a process of flux and change and we are striving to find a way forward in a harsh economic environment. Different ideas and values are often competing for the same pot of money. I believe that in time reading will be seen as progress, not toward an O-level, but towards our future development and our place in the world.

Most people never travel far beyond their national boundaries. Most do not have access to television and few to radio. Books can provide enjoyment, companionship, information and understanding. Their value must not be underestimated.