

‘LET THE LITTLE CHILDREN COME TO ARCHIVES’: SCHOOLS AS A CONDUIT FOR TAKING ARCHIVES TO CHILDREN

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Abstract

Public programming initiatives are considered an integral part of archival operations across the world because they support a greater use of archival records. In South Africa, public archival institutions are mandated in terms of section 5(1)(c) of the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa Act (Act No. 43 of 1996) (NARSSA Act) to reach out to the less privileged sectors of society, including children, by making known information concerning records by means such as publications, exhibitions and lending of records. As a result, public archives repositories in South Africa have designed programmes to take archives to school learners for the purpose of creating future users and expanding the use of archival sources. Despite efforts to take archives to the people in South Africa, it would seem that public programming methods that repositories use at schools are not effective in creating awareness and promoting public archives to attract school learners. This qualitative study utilised semi-structured interviews and observation as data collection tools to investigate schools as conduits for taking public archives to learners in the Gauteng province of South Africa. The key findings suggest that the public archives repositories in Gauteng do not use technology, particularly social media, to market their services to school learners. The main method of taking archives to learners is through invitations and participation in the annual archives week, which do not yield any positive results, as learners do not visit the archives afterwards. It is recommended that public archives repositories in Gauteng should consider using school learners who participated in the previous archives week as

ambassadors to further recommend the use of archives to potential users and their peers. Furthermore, collaboration between archivists and teachers from neighbouring schools should be considered by including school projects that involve the use of “archives”. In this regard, the repositories should be able to provide access to such learners. The study concludes that failure to adopt social media platforms to market archives would result in school learners not using archives.

Keywords: public archives; public programming; archives repository; children, learners

Introduction and background to the study

The importance of schools as a conduit for taking public archives to children cannot be overemphasised. Information contained in public archives is of concern to each citizen of a nation, including children. In South Africa, the majority of people, including school learners, have never made direct use of archive facilities (Harris 2000; Van der Walt 2011; Mukwevho & Ngoepe 2019). According to Craig (1991:136) and Cook (1997:103), a huge, and largely ignored, part of the clientele of public programming is middle and high school learners. Children are the adult citizens of tomorrow, and becoming involved with archives at an early age creates an opportunity for them to appreciate and benefit from archival records, as it is from these that a sense of individuality, national identity and continuity develops (Van der Walt 2011:122). In other words, targeting children helps to create the users of tomorrow. In future, these learners will become adults and might use archives as they would be aware of their existence. Therefore, it is necessary to ‘let the little children come to archives’ in order to create users of tomorrow.

Harris (2000:27) refers to the fact that archives repositories do not do enough to provide ready access to their holdings and to be responsive to their users’ needs. Indeed, as Ngoepe and Ngulube (2011:5) would attest, if the public does not know what archives are or what purpose they serve, it is simply because archivists have not touched their lives. Archives will be unknown or unused if archivists fail to target children, who are regarded as tomorrow’s users. As Jimerson (2003:13) indicates, members of the public, including school learners, will view archives as merely the “graveyard of government records which lacks reputation”. Indeed, should awareness about archives not be created, the above statement by Jimerson (2003) would ring true.

Although public archives repositories are memory institutions that offer information services to the public and other interested organisations, very few people, including learners, utilise these facilities (Van der Walt 2011; Kamatula

2011; Mnkeni-Saurombe & Mosweu 2013; Saurombe 2018). Harris (1993) describes the use of the archival resources as the main goal of archivists. In order for archives to be used, people need to know about them. Ngoepe and Ngulube (2011:6) argue that “public programming holds the promise for archives to become visible and exploited by society”. Gregor (2001:1) observes that public programming enables archivists to “promote the use of archives and educate their sponsors and users in how to use them”.

The mandates of public archives repositories in South Africa require these institutions to take their archives to the people, especially less privileged members of society or the previously marginalised. For example, in terms of section 5(1)(c) of the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa Act (Act No. 43 of 1996) (NARSSA Act), “the National Archivist shall, with special emphasis on activities designed to reach out to the less privileged sectors of society, make known information concerning records by means such as publications, exhibitions and lending of records”. It is crucial to get young people and rural communities interested in the sources of their past by making them aware of archival resources (Ngoepe & Ngulube 2011:8) for the purpose of creating future users of, and expanding the use of, archival sources.

As Van der Walt (2011:115) argues, “public programming, or outreach, is still not playing an important enough role in the South African archives arena, especially when it comes to exposing children to archives”. Archivists must become creators of users and have to take the archives to the people, especially children and the youth (Harris 2000:27). The benefits are not limited to the growth of lifelong learners and patrons of archives repositories (Saurombe 2016). Archives repositories, being in partnership with the Department of Education, teachers of neighbouring schools and learners, could gain more attention and could perhaps lead to change for the betterment of the archives and records services in South Africa. Archivists should also take advantage of developments such as social media to reach out to users and potential users (Crymble 2010; Lacher-Feldman 2011; Venson, Ngoepe & Ngulube 2014). Ericson (1991:115) emphasises that if archivists do not touch the lives of people, all their well-intentioned efforts will be in vain. This study explored schools as a conduit for taking public archives to children in the Gauteng province of South Africa with a view to creating lifelong users. According to Ericson (1991:120), outreach activities will help promote and improve the perception of archives and promote the awareness and use of public archival holdings. This can be done through robust public programmes. It is hoped that this study will help improve and promote the archives themselves, and create awareness and encourage the use of public archival holdings through robust public programmes (Ericson 1991:120).

Problem statement

Despite efforts to take archives to the people in South Africa, it would seem that public programming methods used by repositories are ineffective in creating awareness and promoting the use of public archives (Osborne 1986-1987; Cook 1990-1991; Cook 1997; Van der Walt 2011; Ngoepe & Ngulube 2011; Archival Platform 2015; Dominy 2017; Sulej 2014). Several scholars cite different factors such as language, literacy levels, poverty, location and accessibility of archival repositories, historical perceptions and a general lack of appreciation for heritage as factors contributing to this situation. For example, Ngoepe and Ngulube (2011:12) cite language barriers as one of the factors contributing to the low usage of archives in South Africa, as most of the archival holdings are in Afrikaans and English. The low level of interest in archival collections could be attributed to the lack of technology use such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter by archives repositories in South Africa. Furthermore, the archival holding does not reflect the diversity of the South African culture (Ngoepe 2019). Venson, Ngoepe and Ngulube (2014) reveal that technology platforms, including social media, are hardly used by archives repositories.

Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of the study was to explore how schools can be used as a conduit for taking public archives to children in the Gauteng province of South Africa with the view to creating lifelong users of archives. The specific objectives of this study were to:

- identify public programming initiatives used by public archives repositories in Gauteng to create awareness at schools
- assess the effectiveness of existing archival public programming activities at schools in Gauteng
- assess the perception of school learners towards public archives repositories in Gauteng
- identify the underlying factors that impede or stimulate learners to visit archives repositories after having been involved in public programming
- determine whether public archives repositories in Gauteng made use of technologies to increase the awareness of the existence of public archives to school learners.

Research methodology

A qualitative research approach within the interpretivist paradigm was considered as appropriate for this study. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews and observations of public programming activities. While there are numerous schools in the Gauteng province, only four high schools were purposively selected to participate in the study as they participated in outreach activities rendered by the Gauteng Provincial Archives, as well as the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (NARSSA) during 2014 and 2016. The study involved 13 high school learners, four teachers and eight archivists purposively chosen from NARSSA and the Gauteng Provincial Archives, as they participated in archival public programming activities. Learners who participated in the public programming activities but have already left the schools were excluded from this study. The high school learners and their teachers were interviewed at their respective schools, while the archivists were interviewed at their respective repositories. It is worth noting that as the study involved children, and therefore ethical clearance was applied for at the University of South Africa where the researchers were based and permission was granted by the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the study. The permission was granted at provincial level, district level, as well as school level. Public programming and outreach activities were observed during the National Archives Week, which took place at the NARSSA building in Pretoria on the week of 8 to 12 May 2017.

Table 1: A summary of learners, teachers and archivist interviewed

Name of institution	Learners	Teachers	Archivist	Year of visits	Total
School A	6	1	-	2016	7
School B	0	2	-	2014	2
School C	2	1	-	2016	3
School D	5	0	-	2016	5
NARSSA	-	-	6	-	6
Gauteng Provincial Archives	-	-	2	-	2
Grand Total	13	4	8		25

As reflected in Table 1, 25 participants comprising learners, teachers and archivists, were interviewed. To ensure anonymity, the four schools are identified by the letters A to D. However, no learners were available in School B as they visited NARSSA in 2014 and had already completed matric at the time of conducting this study. In school D, the teacher was unavailable as her contract had ended. Pictures that were

captured during the national week are severed to prevent the identity of the learners from being known.

Each group of participants had a different interview schedule developed for them. This meant that the high school learners were not asked the same questions as their teachers or the archivists. However, all the questions were aligned to the objectives of the study. An observation schedule was also compiled to guide what should be observed in line with the study's objectives (Neuman 2011). The information gathered from the interviews was thematically analysed to identify common categories for the answers. These categories were further coded and grouped according to the themes emanating from the objectives of the study (Romm 2015).

Results and discussions

The results are presented as per the objectives of the study.

Public programming activities

The purpose of this objective was to identify public programming initiatives used by public archives repositories in South Africa to create awareness at schools. In order to create awareness at schools, public archives repositories use a variety of strategies and methods such as advocacy, exhibitions, tours, seminars, workshops, newsletters, school visits and social media platforms (Pederson 2008; Kamatula, Mnkeni-Saurombe & Mosweu 2013; Liew, King & Oliver 2015). Ngoepe and Ngulube (2011:10) list exhibitions and tours, the National Archives Week, social networking, word of mouth, radio, seminars and workshops, website, Heritage Day exhibitions and school visits as public programming activities that may be used to engage with learners. According to Van der Walt (2011), the importance of becoming involved in children's outreach programmes and, in particular, the importance of educational programmes, should not even be a debatable point.

Participants from NARSSA and the Gauteng Provincial Archives stated that both entities engage in public programming activities for promoting archives to school learners and encouraging them to use the archives. In this regard, learners are given branded school bags, flyers and other goodies at these public programming activities. Furthermore, although teachers attended yearly visits to an archives repository, they have not actively incorporated archival sources in their school curriculum. One of the teachers indicated that "our hands are tied as far as incorporating archival sources in the curriculum is concerned as this is the responsibility of the Department of Education not the school. However, that does not mean we cannot be creative in infusing archival sources in our teaching. The

problem though will be access to archives by learners as there are is no remote access facilities for archives in Gauteng.” The teacher indicated that they had never used archives or participated in public programming initiatives because the content of the archives is not incorporated in the school curriculum. He also lamented that archives are inaccessible and too far and can only be used if remote services for users were to be made available, a situation that is highly unlikely in the few coming years. Additionally, learners indicated having knowledge about archives through attending public programming activities during the National Archives Week, an exhibition at the Pretoria Show and a NARSSA open day. This was also corroborated by the archivists at both Gauteng Provincial Archives and NARSSA that learners are sensitised about archives through the school visits to NARSSA and provincial archives during the archives week, open days and exhibitions at major events in the country. As reflected in Figure 1, the learners were oriented at the NARSSA during the national archives week and Figure 2 provides details about the national archives week.

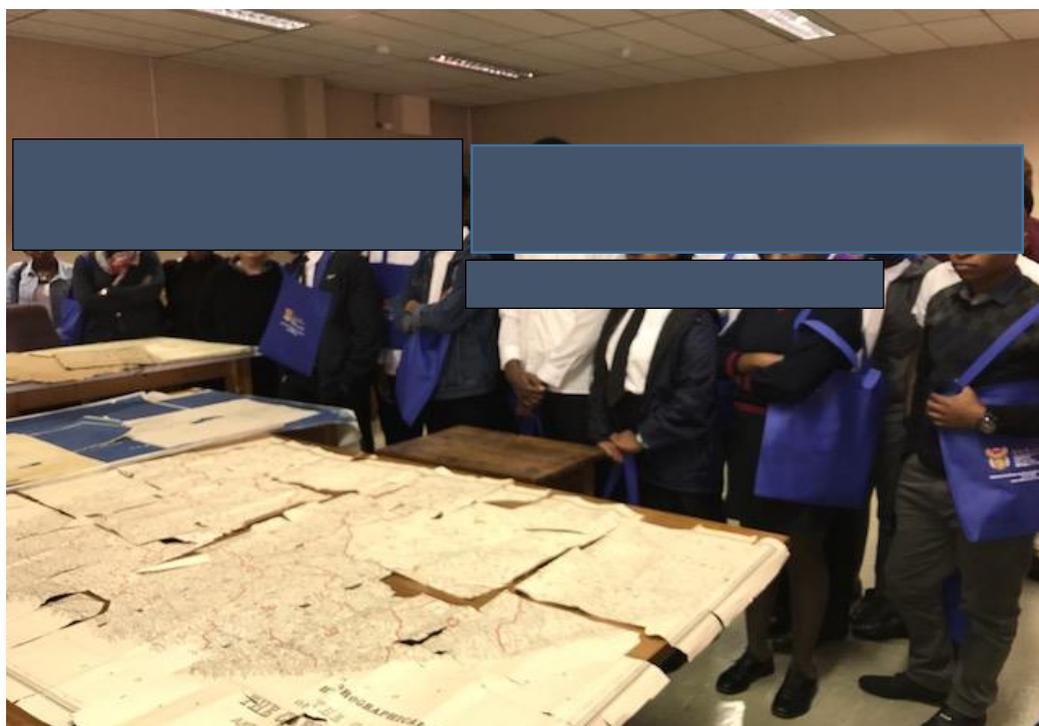


Figure 1: Learners taught about preservation and conservation (Photographer: Researcher 2017)

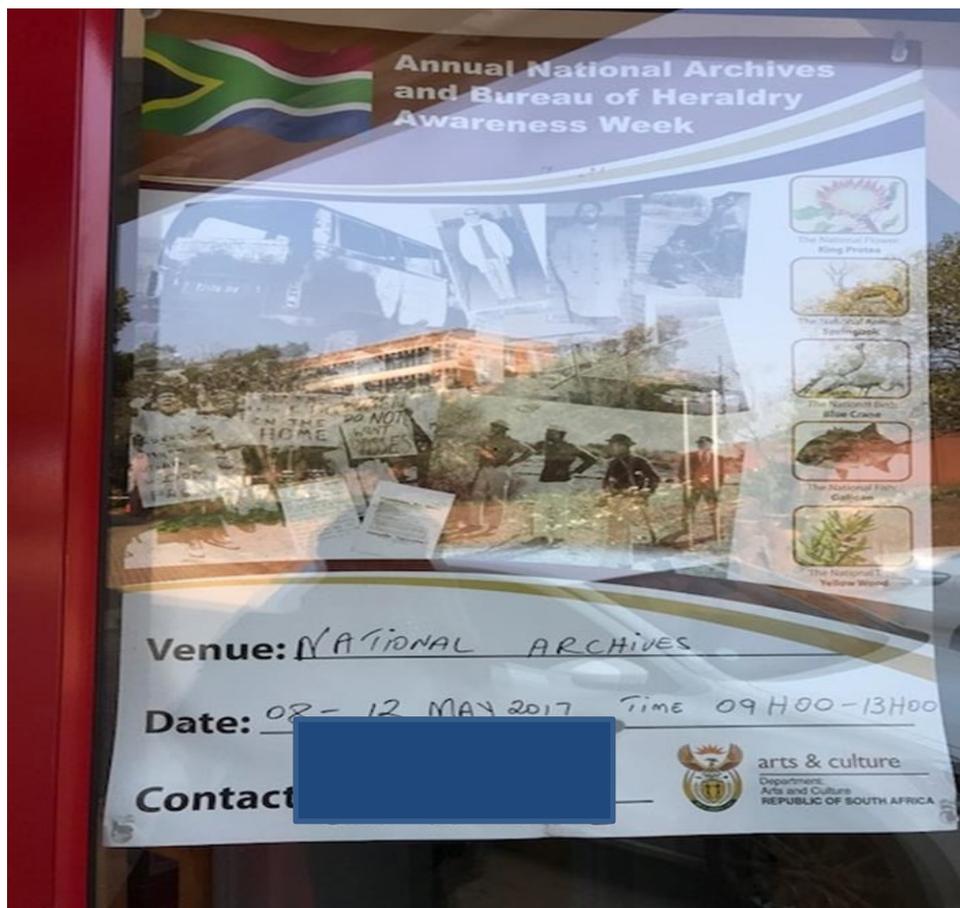


Figure 2: A poster for NARSSA’s Annual Archives Week, 8-12 May 2018

During archives week, the activities included teaching learners about the importance of archives, and tours to strongrooms to show them how archives are arranged and described. Furthermore, learners are showed some of the videos (as reflected in Figure 3) that are in the custody of the National Film, Video and Sound Archives (NFVSA) which is a sub-directorate of NARSSA. The NFVSA is a legal depository for audio-visual records produced in and about South Africa.



Figure 3: Learners viewing a film at NARSSA during archives week (Photographer: Researcher 2017)

Effectiveness of archival public programming activities at schools

The purpose of this objective was to assess the effectiveness of existing archival public programming activities at schools. Wilson (2005:539) points out that if public archives repositories fail to connect people, including children, with the archives, they end up defeating the purpose of keeping archives. Ngoepe and Ngulube (2011) have underscored this problem in their study, which found that the South African public has little knowledge about NARSSA due to its poor public outreach

programmes. Although learners indicated that they were encouraged to use archives, this is not happening as teachers indicated that they rarely made use of any archival places or resources in their teaching lessons. Teachers also do not send learners to public archives, but usually wait for an invite from NARSSA and the Gauteng Provincial Archives. When questioned about the effectiveness of these initiatives, staff from NARSSA and the Gauteng Provincial Archives responded in the following manner:

- “They make a huge impact in creating awareness about archives.”
- “Very much so, because many learners don’t know what archives are and their functions.”
- “There is no feedback.”
- “Not fully efficient because it is predominantly black and coloured schools, and does not reach out to white schools.”
- “They reach out to other communities, especially the most disadvantaged ones.”

The staff in the Gauteng Provincial Archives indicated that it was difficult to measure the effectiveness of public programming in bringing new users as the archives building was not operational at the time of conducting this study. As she put it “it is like marketing a shop that is yet to open. The danger is if you find the potential shoppers and you are not yet ready for them.” However, the staff member did indicate that after engaging in public programming with schools, they never receive requests or any visit from learners of such schools. Some of the responses from staff members of NARSSA about school learners returning to use public archives included: “Most schools are very far, but normally tours are arranged for those who do come back”; “they do not come as often and not as many as you would expect after public programmes” and “very few come for their research”. Wilson (2005:539) points out that if public archives such as NARSSA and Gauteng Provincial Archives fail to connect people, including children, with the archives, they end up defeating the purpose of keeping archives. Ngoepe and Ngulube (2011) have underscored this problem in their study, which found that the South African public has little knowledge about NARSSA due to its poor public outreach programmes.

School learners’ perceptions of public archival repositories

The purpose of this objective was to assess what participants think about public archival repositories and the archives. The general feeling among learners, teachers and archivists was that the public repository is not the first place learners would go

to when they search for information. When asked about their perception of archives, a learner in School A indicated that the public archives are interesting but public repositories do not really run interesting public programmes. Another learner in School C even suggested that public repositories should create new, fun and more interesting activities by including games, using physical activities like drama, music, singing and other activities in the programmes. “Otherwise, I will never visit the archives as the place looks dull and the materials very old”. A teacher from School B said that learners do not use archives to complete their schoolwork; while teachers from School D said that “We are not to use archives and cannot ask learners to use archives to complete their schoolwork because the curriculum does not require them to refer to archival resources, while the public repositories are far from schools. However, public repositories can be used to enhance the learning and the learners’ experience of teaching”. The learners’ perceptions of archives repositories suggest that they do not find archives interesting. They also do not use archives to complete their schoolwork and they are not encouraged to do so. Surprisingly, the archivists also thought, and were in agreement, that learners do not find archives interesting and their programmes were not interesting.

Factors that impede or stimulate learners to visit archives repositories

The purpose of this objective was to identify factors that impede or stimulate learners to visit archives repositories after their involvement in public programming. Ericson (1991) and Reid (2010) explain that, worldwide, most archival institutions face challenges such as access, literacy and technology; nevertheless, public archives such as NARSSA should bear in mind that the goal of any archival service is use. For this reason, such institutions should not be dissuaded by these problems from doing what it takes to make the archival profession “a noble profession”, which is to protect records and facilitate access to them. Ericson (1991) argues that having adequate knowledge of archival users will help in developing relevant public programming strategies.

The teachers indicated that factors such as access, literacy and technology contribute to children not using archives and that failing to reach out to users would mean that most people, including learners, might never make direct use of provincial and national archives facilities. As a result, the archives facilities will only be used by a small percentage of the population that is aware that archives are open to the public (Harris 1993). Additionally, learners indicated that their involvement in public programming is limited because they are not required to make use of archives for homework and their parents do not offer encouragement. According to the learners, they are highly likely to visit archives repositories only if there is:

- availability of free unlimited Wi-Fi connection

- frequent public programme activities by archivists
- proximity to the school
- motivation by teachers and after-school activities organised by the repository
- provision of free stationery and other items/goodies at the archival repository.

Use of social media to increase awareness of the existence of public archives

Kotler and Lee (2007) advise public institutions such as public archives to tap into various marketing strategies in their quest to attract more users to their services. The committee on best practices and standards working group on access from the International Council on Archives (2012) adopted a set standard on principles of access to archives that clearly stipulates the responsibility and necessity of the archival institution to raise awareness and promote access to their holdings. Studies worldwide seem to imply the need for archival institutions to facilitate access to their holdings (Blais & Enns 1991; Bradley 2005; Ericson 1991; Kamatula 2011; Kim, Kang, Kim & Kim 2014; Nesmith 2010; Sanford 2011; Saurombe 2016; Saurombe 2018; Sulej 2014).

Archivists should also take advantage of developments such as social media to reach out to users and potential users (Crymble 2010; Lacher-Feldman 2011; Mukwevho & Ngoepe 2019). Learners spend most of their time on social media technologies engaging in non-educational activities (Igbokwe, Obidike & Ezeji 2012), such as social networking on Facebook or playing videos on YouTube. Indeed, children are sometimes forgotten, yet they are an entirely different user population with their own culture, norms and complexities. In order for public programming initiatives to be more effective, archivists should tailor activities to this community.

Social media technologies are becoming a necessary platform for sharing, collaborating, disseminating and interacting instant information to the intended target audience (Ericson 2011). Daines and Nimer (2009) explain that archival institutions can make use of social media to raise awareness about the archives. This is echoed by the findings where most learners and teachers thought that if public repositories use social media such as YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp, school learners might develop an interest in the archives. Most of the outreach staff of NARSSA and the Gauteng Provincial Archives agreed that social media could reach more learners. However, NARSSA and the Gauteng Provincial Archives are not using it sufficiently.

This finding suggests public repositories do not use social media to promote their institution and its services. Some participants indicated that they promote archives through their personal Facebook and Twitter accounts. The Gauteng Provincial Archives do not use any social media tools to promote archives because at the time of this study, the repository was not fully operational. A study by Mukwevho and Ngoepe (2019) established that Facebook is the most commonly used social media tool to promote archival collections and services, globally and in South Africa in particular. With regard to the Gauteng Provincial Archives it was established that a social media strategy was not yet in place. However, upon conducting social media analysis, posts on the Gauteng Provincial Archives parent department's Facebook page can be detected such as the one posted on 10 May 2016. The Facebook account for the department is www.facebook.com/GautengSACR. However, it should be noted that institutions such as public archives repositories are not allowed to open their own social media accounts. Everything in relation to social media has to be done through the communications unit within the department. This was also the case with NARSSA and not only with the Gauteng Provincial Archives.

Conclusion and recommendations

The research problem drew attention to the fact that the use of archival resources in most of the public archives in NARSSA and Gauteng Provincial Archives is low (Cook 1997; Van der Walt 2011; Murambiwa & Ngulube 2011; Ngoepe & Ngulube 2011; Ngulube 1999; Sulej 2014; Saurombe 2016). Therefore, public programming initiatives were mentioned as one of the measures that could be used to address this challenge. Contributions from the literature (Hedlin 2011; Kamatula 2011; Kamatula, Mnkeni-Saurombe & Mosweu 2013; Njobvu, Hamooya & Mwila 2012) indicated that public programming initiatives could be strengthened by focusing on the use of schools and technology, among other issues, as conduits for public programming initiatives.

The study established that although NARSSA, the Gauteng Provincial Archives and the schools in the province participated in public programming projects, these actions were considered as marginal activities. Furthermore, the methods were ineffective. As a result, this study attempted to find ways that could help public archives enhance and improve their current public programming activities and make them exciting for school learners. This was achieved by investigating a number of factors derived from the research objectives. It was found that both repositories do not make use of social media tools to create awareness.

Based on the results of the study, the following recommendations are suggested:

- The study recommends public repositories to create more fun and interesting public programming initiatives as indicated by participants.
- In order to be more effective, NARSSA and the Gauteng Provincial Archives should consider using school learners who participated in the archives week and are interested in archives to be ambassadors to further recommend the use of archives to potential users and their peers.
- Archives repositories should consider partnerships with the Department of Education and teachers of neighbouring schools to include archives in the school curriculum.
- Public repositories in Gauteng should find ways to deal with factors such as access, literacy and technology. These archival institutions should realise that the records they keep can make a difference in the personal lives, families, organisations and governing authorities (Richards 2009).
- This study revealed that public repositories do not to use social media technology to enhance their public programming initiatives. Because of this, public repositories are advised to use relevant technology and social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter, together with their website to promote and create awareness and improve their services.

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