Conclusion

This book is first and foremost about the role of small libraries located in various African countries that are changing the landscape of literacy, learning, rural development, and community engagement. These libraries work as part of their environments and are owned and valued by those who use them. The impact of these libraries is still being evaluated, but it is clear that interest is growing. These libraries are providing an environment that is fostering personal development and improvement of those who use them on many levels. This book has demonstrated that the role of these libraries extends far beyond just a place to read. As they continue to grow, these libraries must be sensitive to the fact that they may be the only place in these rural communities where students, the newly literate, farmers, teachers, young children, and others can be free to put their imaginations to work and explore resources and services designed to improve their way of life. Books can help facilitate this exploration, but so too does independent learning, building friendships, sharing knowledge, and interacting with new people. Each of these elements play a role in the success of the libraries addressed in this book. It is our hope that rural village libraries continue to create services and programs that are specifically aimed at supporting this type of personal and reading culture development. One key lesson is that reading culture development and personal development are inextricably linked – that by engaging in a reading culture, the imagination is bound to be stimulated and a quest to read and learn more independently aroused.

What about technology? Johnson, Pejovic, Belding, & van Stam (2011) assert that “while Internet connectivity has reached a significant part of the world’s population, those living in rural areas of the developing world are still largely disconnected” (p. 493). Some of the libraries discussed in this book do infuse technology into their landscapes. For many users, the presence of solar-powered electricity may be considered a technological advance. Some libraries have donated laptops and computer workshops for the community, others offer only print material. The main aim of the libraries discussed in this book is simple – to provide the surrounding community with access to a variety of reading materials in support of reading culture development, literacy practices, and reading habits. These elements can provide skills that last a lifetime – skills that are technology-independent, portable, and teachable to others. As technology continues to grow and change, as donated laptops become obsolete and are not replaced, as donated copies of word processing software suffers the same fate, there libraries will still provide a valuable set of services in a welcoming environment that is designed to support the promotion of reading.
This monograph also brings to attention serious challenges to learning and literacy development in the countries where these rural village libraries operate. We know that literacy and reading are central to enhancing economic development, personal development, and scholastic achievement. Sturges and Gastinger suggest that literacy is a human right, but literacy must be linked to resources that can support its development. Thus, access to reading and informational materials for all ages, in as many languages as the people require, and on topics of local interest should be one of the most fundamental elements of any community. Providing this access has and continues to be one of the most significant ongoing challenges to eradicating illiteracy in our time. It is hoped that by describing the work of the rural village libraries, we can support the further exploration of factors that may have a positive impact on the lives of library users in these areas and the development of new rural libraries on the continent.

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