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LIBRARIES AS TOOLS FOR DEVELOPMENT: A SURVEY OF USERS OF OYO STATE PUBLIC LIBRARY

by

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ABSTRACT

The role of the library as a tool for creating life long reading habit in the youth is the focus of this paper. Reading by children and the ability to acquire knowledge from infancy up to adolescence and young adulthood were explored.

A study of users of the Oyo State Public Library was carried out, using questionnaires and oral interview methods. The findings indicate that majority (82%) of the respondents agreed that inability to read hampers knowledge acquisition in many ways and that reading skills need to be taught very early in life to actually entrench a sustainable and good reading habit. Libraries and resource centres, government policies on education and the provision of adequate reading facilities for all segments of the populace including the visually impaired and the handicapped will encourage reading which will in turn enhance growth and development of the nation.

Recommendations are made on the adoption and implementation of the 'library hour' in primary and secondary school curricular. Reading and reading skills also need to be taught in schools.

"The failure of our schools and colleges, in times past, to teach the practical fundamentals of reading as a life long culture has been a curse to our civilization and development"

- Brewer 1846.

INTRODUCTION

Reading cannot be separated from learning, or better still from knowledge acquisition. Although the youth of today have the privilege of learning through sight-seeing and audio-visual devices that abound around them, the fact still remains that a sizeable part of knowledge is acquired through reading. Effective reading therefore makes for effective mind growth and mind enlargement. To promote these reading materials must be provided. Reader development recognizes that reading has a crucial role to play in

creating independent learners, underpinning literacy skills and educational attainment, and helping people understand themselves and others better. (Rosenberg, 2003).

Efforts to simplify learning to read go back several hundred years. The fact that reading problems exist is not a new thing. However, reading difficulties and its attendant effects on the large society have been given fresh importance within the last two centuries because of changes in society. (Reids, 1971). Some of these changes were social and political. For instance the introduction of the Universal Primary Education to England in 1870, to Scotland in 1872 and to Nigeria in 1975, exposed the entire population of five and six years olds to the task of learning to read and write in a way that had never been before. This innovation represented a change in society's view of equal opportunity. But a change, which brought its own problems.

There is the view that those who cannot turn to books to fill their spare time will often times turn to pursuits which are not desirable. There have been changes too in educational practices. Literacy rate in schools has changed very much in the last decade. Pupils are now more likely to be given the task of finding out for themselves from books than they are allowed to passive listeners.

Experts have always been unanimous on the view that sound and qualitative education remains Nigerians surest and quickest route to all-round development and industrialization. Therefore it is pertinent to inculcate good reading habit in youths. This must begin from the early years of a child. Reading however, should not be learnt until children have acquired some vocabulary and have been able to understand simple conversations, "for we learn to speak before we learn to read"

THE IMPORTANCE OF READING

It is generally accepted that literacy is a basic tool in national development and for this reason, the government is concerned with increasing the literacy level of as many of its citizens as possible. Phillips (1997) notes however that about 57% of Nigeria's population above age six years is literate, that is can read and write with understanding in at least one language, local or foreign. The literacy rate is higher among the male population (about 66%) than among the female population (about 48 per cent). Also whilst the literacy rate ranges between 50-82% in the southern states, the literacy rate in most of the northern states (excluding Kaduna and Katsina) ranges between 32-50%.

By the time a child leaves school he/she should have acquired the skills of using books and libraries as resources for a life-long educational process. Language helps to teach, to bring meaning to the confusion of experience one has observed. The use of language in ordering and classifying experience begins in early childhood and continues throughout life so also is one's reading habit.

Reading generally extends one's capacity in language. By reading one could add the efforts of other writers to one's own, thereby gaining perhaps greater powers of expression. Instead of struggling alone to forge out of experience, one could also see perceptions reflected in someone else's words.

Through reading one can engage in aspects of human experience not available to one directly. Literature helps one shift one's attitudes and values and helps deal in the floods of data that one encounters in daily life. A student's further education after secondary school education depends to a very large extent on the quantity and quality of reading.

More importantly, unless the youths master the ability to read and to read without difficulty, they will lose the benefits and opportunities open to avid readers i.e. deep rooted knowledge based on broad-based experiences.

DEVELOPING A LASTING READING HABIT:

Reading is a life-long activity. Those who enjoy reading derive pleasure and satisfaction from it. The aims of any beginning reading programme, therefore, is to lay such a strong foundation that one can benefit from throughout (Taiwo, 1990).

Reading is a process of mentally interpreting written symbols that is essentially a combined activity of the eye, which perceives and explores the verbal symbols and the mind that discovers and interprets the thoughts that lay beneath them. However, it is one thing to acquire the ability to read, it is another to develop the urge for reading (Taiwo 1990).

Proficiency in reading will depend on the frequency of reading. Reading difficulties are attributable to many factors although literacy is generally acquired in school. The foundation for good reading habits is set in the home in the earliest years of life. Early lessons in literacy involve oral tradition, story telling, rhyming games, songs, poems, etc. If books are plentiful in the home, and valued and used by the parents, children develop positive attitudes towards reading and feel easy and familiar with books.

INHIBITORS TO READING

Since the parents in most Nigerian homes are not literate or are poor readers books are rarely a regular feature of home life. If reading skills are acquired only to read school texts and pass exams, there is little likelihood that it will continue to be a basic part of life once the child leaves school. Other problems encountered are slow reading rate, slow comprehension rate, difficulty in reading, making good summaries, uncritical reading behaviours and inadequate reading interest. Added to these are cultural differences – the reading of novels is a characteristic leisure pursuit of the middle class elements in the Western world.

The situation in Nigeria is a militating factor. In a situation where people are daily finding it extremely difficult to exist, reading cannot thrive in whatever form, as a hungry man is an angry man. Lack of qualitative teachers in schools also affects the reading of students as they do not encourage good reading habits in students but rather glorify examination malpractices (Obe, 1998). To make it worse, library hours are not incorporated in school timetables and therefore the students are not taught library skills and the use of libraries and their resources.

A survey was thus conducted on users of the Oyo State Library Board Public Library to find out reading habits of the users, and the general attitude towards reading and acquisition of a lasting reading habit. Questionnaires were distributed to users over a period of two weeks. Some of the users were also randomly interviewed. Of the two hundred questionnaires administered, 180 were returned giving 90% response. Of the 180, 135 came from the Dugbe library, 15 from the Bodija Centre and 30 from the Elekuro public library. In all, there were 108 males (58.9%) and 74 females (41.1%). Only 12 (6.7%) of the respondents were between the ages of 26-35. All others i.e. 168 (93.3%) were between the ages 16-25.

The educational qualifications of the respondents were as follows: Senior Secondary School graduates = 112 (62.2%) National Diploma = 18 (10%) Higher National Diploma = 20 (11.11%)

PhD = 2 (1.11%) Senior Secondary class 3 = 15 (8.33%) No response = 13 (7.22%)

On the question of their reading habits, the number of books read per week varied from 3 to 14 books per week. A great number 102 (56.66%) read 3 books per week, while 9 (5%) read occasionally. Their reasons for reading varied.

TABLE 1: REASONS FOR READING

	No	%
Pleasure only	-	-
Examination purpose only	-	-
For pleasure and exams	57	31.7
To widen knowledge	139	77.22
To write research papers	2	1.11
Other reasons	-	-

The third part of the questionnaire elicited a True or False response to several statements concerning their reading habits and opinion about reading 166 (92.2%) indicated that they read more now than when they were younger. All the 180 respondents (100%) agreed on the following points:

- Reading improves knowledge
- Good reading habit is necessary for development of the youth
- Parents have a lot to do with getting their children to acquire good reading habits.
- Libraries can help in improving reading habits and
- Getting good reading habits starts from infancy.

However, 63 (35%) were of the opinion that one does not necessarily need to read to acquire knowledge. This may stem from the fact that knowledge is not acquired from books only. Again 76 (42.2%) believed that the government can develop policies to ensure that youths acquire good reading habits. When asked to freely give advice on how they felt libraries and resource centers would help in cultivating lasting reading habit in youth, the answers varied. The general advice was for libraries to create awareness using posters, giving lectures, providing good books, government should be more involved in youth programmes, making the library environment more attractive and conducive to reading, and provision of more well-equipped libraries.

Coupled with the fact that only a few private primary schools bother to put library hours on their time-table, it is obvious that a lot needs to be done to get the youth to develop good and lasting reading habits.

SUGGESTIONS FOR USING LIBRARIES

School libraries and teacher librarians have to be involved in the quest for lasting reading habits in Nigerian youths. They could help in the following ways:

Attracting The Youth To The Library: This can be done through the display and exposition of a variety of books and other non-book materials that serve their interests. Reading promotion can be done in libraries following some guidelines e.g. those suggested in *Book Links* by Aslett (2003). The website <http://www.openingthebook.com> gives more insight on this. The Readership campaigns should reach the grassroots. Efforts of this nature have been documented (Oyegade, 2003, Chifunda, 2003, Apenten, 2003). More of this can be done and extended to primary and secondary schools.

Formation Of Book Clubs: This is yet to be fully adopted in Nigerian school libraries. In Australia, parents and children who are between the ages of 3 and 18 organize book clubs. They collect books and introduce them to the club members, read to them and supervise reading. The efforts of the Educare Trust Centre, Ibadan in encouraging youths to read and to better their lives should be commended. More of such efforts all over the country are necessary.

Organizing Reading Competitions: School libraries should organize both silent and vocalized reading competitions. This will ultimately make the youths have more interest in book reading. The more encouragement and opportunities children are given in school to develop skills in reading, the more likely they are to be habitual readers as they grow older (Southgate et al., 1981; 36).

Lending Books To Students: If students borrow books they can also read in their homes and beyond the library hours. As there is a time limit for the loan of library books, there will be the urge to read quickly is always there, thereby improving their reading habits and skills.

Establishing Mobile Libraries: Like it is done in Kenya, box libraries can be created. This is to help the youths who reside in the rural areas. The mobile libraries should not be for the benefit of the urban youths alone. There are reading potentials in rural youths just as they require equal measure of qualitative education. (Chetty, 2003).

Provision Of Books In Local Languages: This is essential so that the youth can read materials in their native languages, which they tend to grasp better. A pilot programme of teaching in the indigenous language experimented by the Obafemi Awolowo University under the direct supervision of Professor Babs Fafunwa is a clear testimony of this. If a child finds it easy to read in a language, psychologically this acquired ability is transferred to another language understood by the child. This could improve the reading interest of the child.

Conducting Research Programmes In Reading: Libraries can have programmes tagged "Joy through Books" as is the case of France. This programme coordinates a research programme in reading, answers questions through phones about reading materials for children and it involves teachers and librarians. Although the economic realities of Nigeria may not make such a programme an immediate success. It could be explored.

Establishment Of School Bookshops: Where and when the funds are available, teacher librarians should encourage the establishment of school bookshops attached to the library. Such bookshops will be able to sell books to the students at a relatively cheaper price than what is obtainable in the open market, since they too will be getting direct supply from the publishers. While not losing sight of profit motive, the main objective will be making books available to encourage reading. Some private secondary schools in Oyo State are already doing this. However, in situation where the economic situation does not encourage this, the government could also establish a Book Depot under the direct supervision and control of the State Library Board. There, school libraries can buy at relatively cheaper prices under a well-articulated programme to be managed by the state library boards. Examples of this could be found in the School Bulk Loan Centre of the Oyo State Library Board, and in the flourishing programme of the former Bendel and Anambra States.

Redesigning The Education Curriculum: Teachers themselves should be book readers. Thus they can pass on the habit to their pupils (Taiwo, 1990; Odozi, 1996). Botha (2003) describes the experience of READ programme in South Africa. Teachers are trained to be able to teach reading with books. Thus, teachers training colleges need curricular that promote reading by the teachers.

MAKING PROVISIONS FOR THE VISUALLY HANDICAPPED IN SCHOOLS AND LIBRARIES

It would help Nigerian youth if efforts are made in by teachers in junior classes to observe children closely determine whether they have visual impairments. If such is detected the attention of the parents or guardians should be called to this. Early detection and provision of adequate medical intervention could help to stem a child's tendency to lose interest in reading. Libraries should be equipped to provide literature for the visually impaired and even blind users. Reading is fun. It should be made so even for the blind.

IMPROVEMENT IN THE LIBRARY SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

The library system in Nigeria has to be given a boost such that it becomes responsive to the needs of users at various levels of contact – schools, colleges, universities etc. Each school, college and university should have a well-stocked and functional library. These libraries should vigorously pursue Readership Promotion Campaigns and reading specialists must begin to teach those who need to acquire rapid reading skills as it is a sophisticated kind of activity (Odozi, 1996).

In conclusion, teachers, librarians and teacher librarians in Nigerian schools need to address the challenges of building up today's youths for tomorrow. The youths must be encouraged to seek knowledge. The deep-rooted knowledge, which they need to be able to face the challenges ahead of them, is found in books. Parents must accept the primary responsibility for the up bringing and education of their children. As Plato said in CRITO: "No man should bring children into the world who is unwilling to persevere to the end in their nature and education". Reading is part of education, and since reading brings knowledge and knowledge is power, it is only through reading that the youth in our society can be free from the shackles of ignorance and oppression.

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