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**TOPICAL ISSUES IN
LITERACY, LANGUAGE AND
DEVELOPMENT
IN NIGERIA**



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CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Creating an Optimum Reading Culture in Nigeria: The Role of Libraries

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INTRODUCTION

When most people are banished to a desert island, and they are told they could only take one thing with them, would it be a book? That was one of the questions the Miss World Agbani Darego answered during the 2001 beauty contest and won. I'm sure that as a member of Reading Association of Nigeria, you would say yes if you happen to be in such position. For you, reading is essential - part of your life. But you're one of the last. When Nigerian youths are asked the above question "Why do we read?" the most common assumed answer would be "to pass my examinations" "to enter higher institution" or "to have high grades when graduating". Nigerian youths have poor reading culture and there is still a struggle to help children develop good reading habits (Fayose, 1995), which has caused the average Nigerian child to lack adequate vocabulary in English. According to Sanders-ten Holte (1998), Netherlands statistics revealed that 43% of citizens would take their TV set with them, 17% the radio, and 17% a stack of magazines when taken to an island. Nobody mentioned taking a book. What would the result be in Nigeria?

The overall objective of any reading campaign is to awaken interest in literature and to encourage people to venture into the land of books on their own. It is necessary to stimulate the reading of books, newspapers and magazines among Nigerians and this is especially important at a time when an increasing number of people are spending less time reading, and when reading skills are declining. More so, the younger generation in particular has found interest on the Internet. However, the library has an important role to play in encouraging people to read. According to a Danish Library Agency newsletter (2003) "books contain exciting experiences, recognition and insight and the knowledge which children gain through reading, is the very foundation for becoming committed citizens". There are

different reading materials that are found in the library, these include adventures, fiction, non-fiction, autobiographies, biographies, teach-yourself materials etc. There are also reference materials like encyclopedias, handbooks, dictionaries, yearbooks etc. Onwubiko (1985) as cited by Ogunrombi and Adio (1995) summarized the purpose of reading into four main types; these are reading for pleasure, information, knowledge (studying) and any combination of the three. The last two purposes are the most demanding in terms of the totality of activities involved in the reading habit of children within any society and within the reading culture in their society. In other words, the role of libraries has always been inextricably tied to educational reform, but aside from this, the library should be seen as a relaxation center where recreational reading could be enjoyed.

THE LIBRARY AND READING CULTURE

The importance of libraries in the attainment of quality education cannot be overemphasized. It is important to note that there is a strong association between reading and libraries, reading habits would be difficult to form with the absence of books and other printed information resources found in the library. More so, because of the Nigerian economic instability, it is not possible for the average Nigerian to afford all materials that would necessitate pleasure reading. Therefore the establishment of libraries would provide intellectual stimulation that would encourage reading among the Nigerian youths. Studies [Sangowusi and Makinde, 2001; Odusanya and Amusa, 2002] has shown that school libraries are virtually non-existent in public schools and where available they are scantily stocked in hostile reading environment. In Nigeria, there are many challenges facing provision of library services in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. These includes small budgets allocated to schools or education for the purchase of learning and teaching materials, lack of trained librarians to manage the libraries, lack of opportunities and options for keeping abreast of the changing library services and environment and lack of published reading materials beyond school textbooks.

The process of developing a reading culture should start at an early stage of childhood and nurtured into adulthood. Librarians are central to the development of reading habits hence the need for libraries to organize seminars as its own contribution to developing and inculcating reading among secondary school students in Nigeria.

Libraries should promote 'reading for leisure' activities including anything from comic books through newspapers to the latest bestseller. By promoting reading in this way, libraries would encourage reluctant readers and then, over time, introduce them to new material. In additions, public libraries in Nigeria could encourage pupils by running storytelling sessions for children during holidays. Libraries could initiate, coordinate and stimulate the reading culture in Nigeria most especially among the youths by following the steps below:

1. Development of new strategies

The importance of motivation cannot be overstressed because people do things better when they are interested in what they are doing. Youths must be encouraged to conceptualize, implement, and monitor programs that would assist other youths in reading through the activities of "reading clubs". Libraries can position themselves as mediators of information between children who use library resources as part of their learning about life skills and the communities they come from. This could also include how they can facilitate intergenerational discussion on social inclusion of traditional life skills, indigenous knowledge and cultural values held by communities as an integral part of adaptation to changes as a result of reading. Interesting library signs (posters) should be produced and distributed, and these could also be pasted within the library that reading for pleasure is also encouraged in the library. Librarians should see themselves as public relations officers who are always available to attend to the reading needs of the populace.

2. Improving the reading environment:

Most Nigerian libraries are in a poor state due to lack of funds. The empty library shelves or outdated books on the shelves says it all, more so the library buildings are dilapidated and these conditions are not inviting enough to stimulate reading. The physical environment of the library should be rejuvenated in order to have a serene environment. The improvement of libraries is considered essential. Consequently government at all levels, educational institutions, individuals, publishers, booksellers and organizations should adopt and refurbish libraries in the localities.

3. Improving the image of reading

This is image building or public relations for pleasure reading. The younger generation is very individualistic: a mobile, zapping generation. To many, reading may seem dull - not the thing to do, because it takes time and concentration. Nigerians especially the youths need to be shown that reading cannot only be fun, but that it is also a great way to spend your leisure time; that reading is valuable and rewarding. Reading campaigns should be organized with features such as inviting popular musicians and well-known TV presenters so that such programmes would be interesting and encouraging. Examples could be taken from the interesting programmes organized for AIDS and HIV campaigns in Nigeria.

IMPORTANCE OF LIBRARIES TO THE READING CAMPAIGN

1. Thinking skills: The library plays a valuable role in helping to develop thinking skills among readers because of the variety of materials and viewpoints offered through different materials for reading activities.
2. Literacy skills: the ability to read is a crucial skill for information retrieval, without literacy people are severely limited in the information they can access (Dike, 2006). It has been demonstrated by research that we learn to read by reading! It is not through drill and practices but by free voluntary reading. And for this reason, readers need access to plenty of pleasurable books that are of interest to them and libraries support emergent literacy by providing these pleasurable books.
3. Libraries are established to advance the course of education and library objectives are interwoven with that of education which is aimed at producing intellectually developed and complete individuals in the society (Odusanya and Amusa, 2002). In other words, when library resources are explored to the fullest it will encourage independent reading and "a formed habit hardly dies".
4. The role of the library as an information provider and local archive would serve as a meeting point for leisure, learning and entertainment, where people can socialize in a safe environment and these would encourage reading amidst the younger generation.

Examples of other countries

Promoting the reading culture is a universal issue and activity. In other countries, there had been collaboration between libraries and different organizations in spreading the campaign on reading and lessons could be learnt from them.

Denmark

A two-year campaign was launched by the Danish Ministry of Culture, Danish National Library Authority with assistance from the Literature Committee and Danish Arts. Some of the activities engaged in are as follows:

- ⌚ **Kindergarten libraries:** this is where the local public library lends a number of books to the kindergartens for both the children and parents to borrow. This was done partly to make small children more familiar with books and partly to make it easy for busy families to borrow books. And partly to give teachers a chance to develop their skills in reading aloud to children during activity period.
- ⌚ **The establishment** of special children's books website for children by the Danish Arts'
- ⌚ **"In-house authors" a programme organized in schools and institutions** where authors on a regular basis meet children introduce their own works and encourage children to write their own stories.
- ⌚ **The good story** programme was done to prepare and develop a recurrent campaign focusing on children's books at local events in schools, libraries, children's institutions etc.
- ⌚ **The magic of words** projects was organized at the National Hospital, for sick children and their parents, with the emphasis on the story as a catalyst in helping, encouraging and curing children
- ⌚ **Children reading aloud** programme was organized to teach children to read aloud and for competitions.
- ⌚ **Children's book of the year** was chosen by children at a large book festival.

Canada

The Canadian Library Association representing those who work in and support Canada's college, university, public, special (corporate, non-profit and government) and school libraries with others collaborated to launch a reading campaign for school children. The Partners in the campaign included the Canadian Space Agency, the Canadian Association of Children's Librarians (CACL) and Library and Archives Canada. The Launch Your Future with Reading campaign included a national question and essay contest for kids; the creation of a first-ever "Space e-Library" housing hundreds of space related titles for children. Their goal was to get kids excited about reading, libraries and space, and the success of the campaign showed effectively because kids were excited about the programme all over Canada.

Netherlands

The Dutch government had developed a new strategy called *Boekenpret* ('Fun with Books'). This programme was designed to help young parents build up good reading habits with their children, starting with babies as young as three months old. *Boekenpret* is based upon the concept of emerging literacy (Sanders-ten Holte, 1998). The idea was that literacy has its roots in frequent pre-school language practice. During the programme, the children were read to for approximately 500 hours. This equals the time parents from an academic background spend on reading and language stimulation with their pre-school children!

USA

In Washington for example, the State Library Director sent a letter to all Washington state legislators highlighting the importance of Summer Reading as the State Library's largest literacy program for youth and encouraging elected leaders to get in touch with their local libraries to learn more about what they were doing each summer. The same campaign included the Washington Newspaper Publishers Association which included information on the Summer Readings in its e-newsletter, and also by encouraging members to participate in the promotion campaign. Washington State Library also publicized the annual Summer Reading programme in Parent Teacher Association conferences.

Filipina

The Filipinas Heritage Library (FHL) and Adarna House, together with other partners, launched *Teens Read, Too! 2007 (TR2)* on July 27, 2007. High school students and teachers attended the launch at the FHL in Makati. The programme began with a musical performance by a band, followed by a brief presentation of the TR2 project. TR2 was packed with exciting events and contests that were organized to ignite teenage passion for books. The 20-Book Challenge group offered various prizes for teens that finished reading the 20 recommended young-adult titles in three months. An inter-school competition on the same material was also part of the book challenge. Another competition for public school students was the Interschool Best Reading Campaign Contest. The contest sought to encourage students to conceptualize, implement, and monitor their own reading campaigns in their respective schools.

Nigeria

In Nigeria, education experts, the media, NGOs, librarians etc have seen the need to educate Nigerians on improving their reading culture. Several reading campaign programmes were organized in urban towns like Abuja, Lagos, and Port Harcourt while the rural communities and semi-urban centers are mostly left out. Many of these campaigns were shown on the National television and given wide publicity but for those in cities. To curb the menace of reading only for examination the University library at Ladoké Akintola University of Technology organized a day seminar for secondary schools in Ogbomoso to inculcate in them the habit of reading for leisure. This campaign was tailored towards encouraging youths in medium-sized city towards reading.

Lessons learnt from other countries

The major lesson that could be gained from these other countries is that there was a strong collaboration between library agencies and other stakeholders in developing the reading culture of their citizenry. The reading campaign was also presented in an interesting way especially for the youth to include music, games, competition, prize giving among others. As done in the Netherlands where the Dutch government developed a program for toddlers should also be embraced in Nigeria, the reading campaign should start from the

nursery schools in order to catch them young. Parents should be involved in the campaign so that their reading culture would be change positively which would also influence that of their children too.

Nigerian libraries should join in propagating the reading campaign through the following ways:

- a. Reading campaigns seminars could be organized for secondary schools and thereafter allowing the students to go for library visits.
- b. In other to encourage the youths, yearly book prizes could be presented to the youth that has borrowed and read a great number of books out of those registered in a particular library.
- c. Essay contests could be organized on a yearly basis for both primary and secondary school students in other to get them interested in reading and the library.
- d. Holiday reading programs could be organized for all students from pre-nursery classes, known authors, actors/actress and musicians may be invited to read portions of books.
- e. Television and radio programs could be produced by Nigerian libraries and sponsored by corporate organizations to create awareness of available book in the library.
- f. Exhibitions of literature books could be organized in collaboration with publishers in libraries
- g. Libraries sometimes have excess copies of books bought or donated to them, such copies should be distributed in prisons, hospitals, orphanages among others to encourage reading amidst the less privileged.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The reading culture of Nigerian citizens should be tackled through a multi-disciplinary approach and the reading campaign need to be repacked in order to make it interesting as done in other countries. Stakeholders like publishers, Nigeria Library Association (NLA), Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN), Parent Teachers Association (PTA) and various agencies of government like the Education Tax Fund (ETF), and Federal Ministry of Education must

contribute to the growth of the reading culture of Nigerian citizens through collaboration of efforts. Reading campaign programmes should be an annual event by these organizations. Libraries should be established and funded with a primary focus of developing and promoting a reading culture even in the rural communities apart from their primary role of sourcing, providing storage facilities, classifying and properly organizing these valuable information resources and making them accessible to the people. Reading is a function of many things namely conducive environment both in the office, school and at home. There must also be a steady supply of electricity especially during hot weather conditions and at night. There has to be availability of current and interesting books to be read for leisure in all libraries.

UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN LIBRARY

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