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The Role of Schools and Public Libraries in Promoting Reading Habit among Children and Adolescents in Nigeria

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Abstract

Reading is very vital to progress and development human life and its in the development of children and adolescents cannot be over emphasized. The paper, therefore examines the role of school and public libraries in promoting reading habits among children and adolescents. In an age of modern information and communication technologies (ICTS), with proliferation of televisions and video players, it was uncommon to see children and adolescents carrying books to read. Technology is slowing but very steady taking over the control of children and adolescents lives and cultivation of a good reading habit has gone with the wind. They have gradually abandoned book reading to pursue interests in movie watching and recently, surfing and chatting on the net. Empty school and public libraries are a silent witness of this dread picture. There are diverse ways of promoting reading habits among groups of young people which include programmes such as clubs, mobile reading tents, book talk, and story hours, among others. School and public libraries play a leading role in the reading habit of children and adolescents. The challenges and implication of poor reading habits were discussed. The paper concludes by admonishing parents to encourage the provision of reading materials and utilization to avoid information famine.

Key words: Children and Adolescents, Reading Habit, School and Public Libraries, Nigeria.

1. Introduction:

Reading has been and still a powerful means of communication. It can form part of an individual to the extent that it becomes a habit which once developed, become very difficult to break. However, what children and adolescents read and why they read can be difficult questions to answer. The art of reading could be an interesting experience for children and adolescents if they are properly guided. A reading habit cultivated early in life helps the child to grow into an independent adult.

In Nigeria, there is the general outcry and a serious one for that matter, against the falling standard in education. Several factors are attributed to this fall in standard, but hardly has the establishment of the school and public libraries been mentioned. The absence of school and public libraries and the role they play to uplift that standard of education is ignorantly left out. It is on this basis that this paper is written to highlight the role school and public libraries can play in encouraging reading habits among children and adolescents which is a catalyst to learning.

Access to information is crucial to individual advancement as well as corporate educational development. Information is indispensable and according to (Yusuf, 2007), bridges the gap between knowledge and ignorance. One of the major avenues for acquiring information is reading. Reading is the foundation upon which other academic skills are built. It offers a productive approach to improving vocabulary, word power, and language skills. Tella and Akanade (2007), avert that the ability to read is at the heart of self education and lifelong learning and that it is an art capable of transforming life and society. Yani (2003), as

quoted by Oyeronke (2009), posits that reading habits of Nigerians are a matter of concern in our educational and national development, stating further that in a developing country like Nigeria, the concept of reading habits should not be relegated to the background.

The habit of regular reading, according to shabi and Udofia (2009), refines the reader; it awakes something inside someone that makes him or her take their own life more seriously. One can only imagine the inspiration and noble feeling evoked after reading biographies of great men and women. This is where the school and public libraries come in.

The *raison d'être* of the school and public libraries are to serve as a pivot or fulcrum of reading and promoting of reading habit. The school and public libraries bring together books and other formats of literacy materials and the readers under the expert guidance of a certified librarian. For the promotion of a sustainable reading culture in Nigeria, this central role of the school and public libraries will continue to be relevant both now and in the future.

2. Concept of Reading

In the worlds of Olanlokun (1999), “reading is a complex activity which links the eyes with the mind to come up with the interpretation and evaluation of written symbols” In the light of this, Okoro (2004), posited that it is essential that children be introduced to the art of reading very early in life even before the child steps in school. When this is done, the end result is that children are linked early enough with the joys of reading as a means of enjoyment, self development, love of literature and learning.

Current attempts to define reading tend to regard it as a thinking process with attention focused on comprehension. That is to say reading is a mechanical and thoughtful process requiring the reader to understand what the author is endeavour to communicate and to contribute his own experience and thoughts to the problem of understanding.

Definition of reading habit as put forward by Shabi and Udofia (2009), cited in Johnson and Olsson (2008), as “having the habit of reading in everyday life and not just for school purpose. In the words of Philip (2009), “reading habit tends to be associated with course work and examinations, rarely with pleasure”. Yet it is a known fact that whatever the discipline, students (children and adolescents) cannot fulfil their potential if they do not read widely. Ganguly (2004), argued that reading habit could be said to be a single aspect of the broad culture where reading for pleasure becomes a natural part of daily existence. He emphasised that over time reading ceases to become the uphill task of reading to pass examination, rather it takes on an intrinsic value, reading for the sake of reading until an inclination to further reading is developed.

Shabi and Udofia (2009), quoting Ezeokoli (2008), identified certain elements of reading habit which include these: voluntary reading; what to read; frequency of reading and place of reading. In his autobiography “Gifted Hands” an internationally acclaimed Neurosurgeon Benjamin Carson (1990), as cited by Shabi and Udofia (2009), challenged Young people to evolve a sustainable reading habit. He shared a success story of how he, a non- reader become a fluent voracious reader through the effort of his mother, and the encouragement of the libraries in the local library. Today, he is a strong advocate for promoting of reading habit among children and adolescent.

3. Role of School and Public Libraries in Promoting Reading Habit among Children and Adolescents.

The aim of promoting a reading habit is to get the children and adolescents to read as part of daily life and to establish the reading of books as a habit that would always be needed and enjoyed throughout one’s life time.

A school library is more than a store house for books or a reading. Achebe (2008), described a library as an organised collection of books and other materials (both printed and non-printed) used for study, research and recreation-a repertoire of knowledge. There is no gain saying that knowledge is power and books of course are full of knowledge. The task of encouraging positive reading interest and sustaining a love for reading which will in turn promote a reading habit is not an easy one. This is where the school and public libraries come in. The unique role of school and public libraries is that they are fundamental to the development of literacy which is manifested in a viable reading habit. This in turn provides a background for a lifelong learning process. Philip (2009), has observed that reading habit is the link between libraries and literacy. Once people have developed the reading habit, they will come to the libraries looking for books. By using the school and public libraries they consolidate their reading habit by discovering the new world that links within the library.

Over the years school and public libraries in Nigeria have taken a more proactive approach to the promotion of reading and literacy. At the early stage, libraries were viewed as playing only a supportive role to education but a stronger position eventually emerged that of libraries as lifelong learning centres. On the strength of this assertion libraries (both school and public) moved away from the traditional role of passively waiting for readers to come and borrow books and make reference queries. Sisulu (2004), outlined some literary promotion strategies that could be embarked upon by libraries to achieve a viable reading habit as follows:- Encourage reading for pleasure; Promote the value of reading; and Build a strong library network; backed by an equitable book distribution. The end result will be a nation of avid, lifelong readers. This requires that libraries must make reading visible everywhere. In essence, they should blow their own trumpet.

The initiator of the R.E.A.D (Rainbow Education for Advancement for Development), Kalago (2010), in her view stated that to sustain a viable reading habit among the populace, there was the need for community libraries to establish in every point of the country to get books within reach of those who need them. With the spirally cost of books and worsening economic situation in the country, she suggested that it would be sensible for books to be made accessible through libraries at little or no extra cost to children and adolescents and the general populace in general.

In like manner, Schamber (2006) encourages libraries involvement in literary promotion and places no limitation on how libraries can be involved in literacy education. She suggested that libraries should offer literacy classes or one on-one tutoring programmes especially for people for whom English is a second language. Also, that reading materials should reflect different cultures and interests. In addition, there should be provision of teaching resource and adequate space for tutoring. All the activities should be coordinated by a literacy librarian.

Operations that go on in children's library at both public and school libraries are as varied and interesting as the personnel in the place. The children's library does not operate the same way adult libraries do. Seeking and using information is one of the main reasons and benefits of a library. The library is a partner in the education of a child.

A librarian working in a children's library according to Ugboma (2010), must line up various activities to be able to achieve this goal which include these: Story telling, Craft making, Film shows, Puppetry, Talks, Book exhibition and book talks.

3.1 Library weak

The reason for all these activities is to promote the objectives of the library which is to bring the library alive to the children and adolescents, and to make them library users; both as a youth, and as an adult in the society. If the library is made to occupy a significant place in life of a child, he or she would grow up with the concept and significance of a library permanently etched into him/her.

3.2 Book Exhibition and Book Talk

A low-cost effective strategy organized so that children and adolescents can talk about the interesting books they have read. They could describe characters and bring out similarities in many characters. The librarian could read to them or each child in turn. A librarian could pick a book and talk on it; stimulate interest in the book and ask children to read book and could come back for further literacy analysis of the book.

3.3 Story-talk Hour

Most schools and public libraries organize this activity for the evening of weekday for Saturdays. Story telling is not new to some children who already have the opportunity at home. Story telling is a universal activity as old as time itself. This activity is important for children mental and emotional development. Our traditional folk talk tales and legends from different parts of the country could be used which would appeal to young people's sense of adventure and imagination which would stimulate love for reading African authors.

3.4 Creative Activities or Creative Writing

This is activity that involves the creativity of the child. Children are encouraged to create puppets, either with paper, or clay. Puppets can be used to act in a story. Baker (2007), established a reading -writing connection which helps students to learn at all levels. She is of the opinion that writing comes naturally once it is preceded by reading. It is therefore, follow logically that a good reading habit is a precursor to good writing. After a reading aloud session, or a story telling session, the student could be asked to write a short story or a different ending to the story they were told or read to. This would provide wonderful stimulus for reading youth.

3.5 Clubs

The children librarian could introduce formation of clubs within the library set up. The clubs could be centred on hobbies of children like stamp collecting. The library's role here, would be, to provide all reference and information materials for the chosen hobby. The club members would then build on the information with the assistance of the librarian. In this way, they get to know the role of the librarian in both their recreational and educational lives. Examples of clubs: Stamp collection club, Friends of the librarian, Literacy club, Picture collecting club.

Quality Education for Social Transformation (QUEST 2009), reporting on a range of projects to promote a reading culture among young people in Africa, cited the success of the Minds Across African Schools Club (MAASC). The project promoted reading in English through the distribution of suitable reading materials and the provision of an informal interaction forum which led to improved reading and writing skills among the children. In the course of their interaction, the librarian exposed the children proper to library and information seeking skills.

3.6 Drama

Drama presentation can be light or heavily involved. During the story telling hour, children would act certain parts in the story. Drama could also be organized, where the children take home and learn their parts property. The drama could be presented during end of year activities or special occasions in the school. While providing entertainment, drama sharpens hidden talents of the child.

4. Mobile Reading Tents

Once in a month, on Saturdays or during the long vacation, tents could be pitched in a school play ground with a lot of prior publicity and fun fare. Here under the supervision of a certified librarian, the library

books are made available for reading, story-telling session, drama presentation based on theme from books which have been read, impromptu speeches, book talks and read in turn with prizes could be organized. The options available are as varied as the librarian's imagination. There is no stereotype. Volunteers such as parents could assist the librarian.

5. Collection Development

In order to create a culture in which all students are encouraged to be avid readers, Clark and Foster (2005), advocate for consultation with students to learn of their interests and have to ensure that the range of reading materials available in the school library reflects these interests. This is in recognition of the fact that a wide range of reading materials will encourage students to read. There can be breach of traditional protocol to include the students in the planning and delivery of reading and other library activities, offering them the opportunity to select and purchase reading materials for the school library collection.

This of course should be based on a collection development policy which ensures that larger percentage of the stock consist of curriculum- related non-fiction resources UNESCO (2009), cited in Shabi and Udofia (2009), suggest that the smallest school should have at least 2, 500 relevant and updated items to ensure a wide balanced book stock for all ages abilities and backgrounds

6. Challenges to the Promotion of Reading Habits among Children and Adolescents in Nigeria.

Language obstacles in the reading of individual language in the view of Nzealo (1984), is one of the major impediments which affect reading habits of individuals. The main problem of the acquisition of reading habits among children has been the problem of understanding, thinking and constructing in a foreign language.

The educated average Nigerian Student cannot be credited with learning to read as early as he started building up verbal learning. The lack of opportunity to man reading with the building up of verbal learning underlies the problem of reading difficulty of the average Nigerian students and this has glaringly affected his intellectual achievement. The observed trend indicated that people think best in their mother tongue.

6.1 Modern ICT and how it Affects Reading Habit

The decline in patronizing books began in Nigerian in the early 1980s, according to Ibrahim (2010), with proliferation of Televisions and video players, it was uncommon to see young men and women carrying books in their pockets and purses, sitting under trees perusing. In the pasts, thousand, who grew up reading the African writers series and pace setters and even mills and Boons, not to mention other educational books have gradually abandoned them to pursue interests in movie watching and more recently surfing and chatting on the net.

Shuaibu A.B. (2008), has described internet as a greatest challenge that has faced conventional books. The decline in the reading culture may just be paving the way for the extinction of books; libraries are closing down and being replaced by internet cafes. He gave the case of the famous British Council libraries in Nigeria as example to demonstrate this. The British Council in Nigeria decided to phase out its libraries in Lagos, Kano, Abuja and Enugu and replaced them with " Knowledge, and Development Centres". The books shelves are gone; the books were labelled and auctioned and rooms are now lined with computers. For an optimist like Agada (2010), the president of the Association of the Nigerian Authors (ANA), who may not be considered a regular digital age fellow, said that books will always exist, "publishing in books form will continue to exist" nevertheless, one only hopes that in the next century, books will not be forlorn relics looking back at us from behind museum glass casing.

6.2 Culture and Poor Image of Reading

It was observed by Ogunsheye (1976), that for most Africans, the traditional and social structure does not encourage the reading habit. It is however, observed that one of the reasons why Nigerians do little recreational reading is that, the society is basically one with an oral tradition and recreation traditionally takes the form of active participation in story telling for children, in naming ceremonies, wedding, etc. The print culture has not yet caught a on with the populace. There is a common remark about the ways European think of Africans in terms of their relationships with books. The derogatory remark runs like this “if you want to hide something from an African, keep it in a book” that is to say, Africans do not read.

In a culture which increasingly demands instant gain and gratification, many of today’s young people have not been trained from childhood to develop the skills of reading for pleasure. This trait may have resulted in part on the failure of formal education to inculcate the reading habit in young people. This observation was made by Tahir (2002), when he said that “many primary school pupils today cannot read and write..., more shocking, is that some primary teachers who teach the pupils cannot themselves read and write effectively”. Since primary school is the foundation, of education, there is no better place to start tackling the malaise of poor reading habit than in the primary school.

A story is also told of a professor in developed world, who had come to conduct a workshop for some African students in a certain University. During question time, a young lady asked the visiting professor the difference between ladies in African universities and those in developed countries. The professor looked at her smiling and said, there is one striking difference if you go to ladies hostels in the developed world, their bookshelves are filled with books but the contrary is the case in Africa as theirs are filled with shoes and make ups (Oji, 2011) quoted (Indyer, 2009). These assertions may sound derogatory but, they may easily be true. A visit to our higher institution learning might prove this. The boys at our tertiary level of education are not free from those accusations either.

There is not reason denying the fact that reading take a lot of energy from someone, but just like any other activity, it pays. It is against the backdrop for the benefit of reading that (Indyer 2009), quoting Charles Jones, makes this remarks, you meet and the books you read”. A lot of the problems the children and the adolescents are facing are tied to the fact that they fail to read.

7. Conclusion

The success of children in school depends to a large extent on their ability to read and comprehend which is in turn dependent on the support we give in promoting reading habit. The role of the school and public libraries in preparing students for success in academics is very crucial and cannot be under mind.

Availability of the right type of books especially the beginning for the reading stage is very crucial to the acquisition of good reading habit. Information through reading is the life blood of all human activities. Man’s existence on earth is meaningless if it is devoid of reading. Thus, reading materials should be constantly made available to children and adolescents. It is difficult to be knowledgeable if one is not in the habit of reading widely and since it is impossible for anyone to fuses all the required reading materials, the library fills the gap. The school and public libraries have a role to play in this direction.

Librarians should be in the forefront championing new, innovative techniques and advocacy for reading promotion. TV watching, video and internet browsing time should be limited so as to increase reading time.

The variety of books availability to children and adolescents should be expanded to meet various reading needs and levels. These are books that are not necessarily classroom texts but can compliment what is learned in the classroom or help children and adolescents investigate into their own private reading interests and habits.

There is need for vigorous nationwide campaign for promoting the reading habit by a body like the Nigerian Library, Association (N.L.A); the media, public mobile library; library; school library youth clubs and remedial classes.

It is hoped that this awareness of the value of reading habit will be created among children and adolescents. Children and adolescents should be encouraged to buy books with whatever small gifts of money they received from well wishers.

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