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Neighbourhood Reading Clubs: Rekindling Reading Interest among Nigerian Children

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Abstract

A common comment on the state of reading in Nigeria today is that we have a poor reading culture. Yet up to the early 70s' school children had a healthy respect for reading because there was supportive environment for such activities through the school system, township/mobile libraries, British Council and United States Information Service (USIS) libraries, etc. To rekindle this interest would require not only the provision of reading materials but also democratising access, quality in time and space, environment considerations and technical expertise by teachers and enthusiasts. Above all, any intervention must be unobtrusive, yet must captivate the children especially given the ICT revolution which revolves round audio-visuals. One avenue for achieving this is the neighbourhood reading club. In this paper we present a report of a volunteer reading club situated within the University of Calabar for children of the neighbourhood. Insights into reading interests, impact of the club on the children's emotional, educational and psychological development are explored with very surprising results and outcomes.

Keywords: Neighbourhood reading clubs, reading culture, mobile libraries, reading materials democratizing access, volunteer reading club, reading interest, educational and psychological development.

1. Introduction

There are so many complaints about the inadequacies and challenges facing our children in acquiring reading skills. Different associations such as Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN), and various NGO or governmental interventions have been involved in addressing this problem. Yet, their impact is not much felt because the expected outcomes cannot meet the test of consistency, sustainability or reach. Take RAN Calabar for example. The Association organizes a very rich, exciting and stimulating long vacation reading programme for children every year. But what happens in the intervening period between the annual programmes? Also, how many children can actually sign up on the programme? And how do we ensure a follow-up on each child? The issues raised here question the efficacy of these interventions and demand that we re-assess extensive reliance on them. Perhaps the major problem is that the solutions often proffered are long term and involve huge financial commitment. Often, this requires the State to provide enabling well-equipped township and school libraries or/and trained specialist teachers and the like. And until that is done, nothing can actually happen.

These are macro issues and we cannot get started if we dwell on them. How does one begin to lobby policy makers to include the provision of appropriate physical facilities in schools? What about the required training for reading specialists? How would this be rated given other competing needs of a populace? And how much money would be

deemed sufficient for these needs? The point must be made that we are not denying that there is need to look out for such governmental assistance. Over and above this, however, we are advocating, the need to complement this at individual or group level. Hence in this report, we present a micro-intervention approach on how to rekindle reading interest among children via a neighbourhood reading club/centre. We firmly believe that by the time similar volunteer micro-programmes are replicated, a very powerful network by volunteers could do the magic of making reading readily available and accessible. The networks could come together for training of prospective volunteers, exchange of materials and ideas, exchange visits to other centres by the children and contact with/ formation of internet-based group activities.

2. Programme Background

The researchers' involvement with reading and literacy related activities for children started when as an undergraduate, one of them had to work with a child as part of the requirement for a course "Reading Remediation". This child was suspected to be an under-achiever and after six weeks of working with her, her performance improved dramatically in all school subjects. This experience led to the introduction of literacy and reading related activities into our neighbourhood, thus bringing reading to the doorstep of people in the neighbourhood. Records show that at least two hundred children in our neighbourhood have interacted with reading materials from this programme over a period of ten years. The number may not be so large, but we believe that when we consider the ripple effect of the programme, it has been tremendous.

Moreover, children visit one another after school. They hang out most evenings playing football, watching films and engaging in light chats. Those who visited some of these researchers' homes were surprised that sometimes the television would not be turned on even though there was electricity supply. Rather everyone would be engaged in reading. Curiosity got the better of them and they wanted to know what was so interesting? Then some observed that children's party in these homes always had a quiz segment and other literacy related activities. They took note. Gradually requests for one of the "Aunties" to be the MC at their parties became more frequent just as those who dropped in to read a novel became more regular. That was the beginning of their involvement in neighbourhood reading. This paper details the researchers' experiences in trying to bring reading to the doorstep of neighbours. The insights, challenges and benefits derivable from such engagement are presented in the firm belief that each little light can expand the glow.

3. Location/ Catchment Area

The project is located at the residence of one of the facilitators within the Staff Quarters of the University of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria. The residence is located on the first floor of a six-flat block in the section known as New Staff Village. There are in all seven-two flats in twelve blocks of flats with a 6-room service quarters attached to each block. Residents of the service quarters are usually personal staff of the occupants of the main flats. This means that they are usually drivers, cooks, relations and their families. Contiguous to the New Staff Village is the Old Staff village which as indicated by its name is a much older estate. The old village consists of forty-eight flats in eight blocks and about twenty bungalows. Each of these also has a service quarter. Thus we are looking at a potential population of over five hundred children from the University quarters alone, a number that could easily swell if we

consider the children's friends in primary and secondary schools located on campus. There are two primary schools and a secondary school on campus. Admission into these schools is open to staff and the public who meet the scholastic and financial criteria.

4. Membership

Club membership is open to all children from age two to fifteen years, in the main although some undergraduates and even professionals have signed up. We could therefore affirm that anyone from pre-primary to secondary school level to university level and above is a potential member. Qualification for membership is residency in the neighbourhood. The current official club membership stands at forty three. A breakdown of the figure shows: Staff - 2; undergraduates - 3; children aged 3 to 5- 4children; primary 1 to 3 – 7children; primary 4 to 6 – 6children; Junior Secondary - 15; Senior Secondary – 1; and 2house helps.

5. Operations

In addition to regular lending of books to school children, the club provides books to those who have dropped out of regular school and are serving as domestic servants and petty traders in the university neighbourhood. Children



have free access to the house after school each day, and from about 10am to 6pm on Saturdays. Even though there has been no formal launching of the club, the children pass on its existence by word of mouth to new residents and a steady stream of children continues to meander into the house for reading and related literacy activities. Interestingly, a number of other adult residents do chain borrowing, as will be explained later. The official number is not very large, but this has made a lot of individual attention possible. This way, children are being guided to make appropriate choices of books, develop self esteem and social skills outside of their immediate families.

6. Book Holdings:

The club started with about sixty book titles donated from the facilitator's family library. Soon there was need to expand the number and the range of the book holdings to accommodate age and interests of the club's fast growing membership. Appeals were made to friends and residents in the neighbourhood. A few donated some books and in fact two families presented multiple copies of two titles; while another gave eight different titles. But some of these donations were textbooks on physics, agriculture, geography, geology and other highly specialized courses which were definitely beyond the catchment and the vision of the club. It was essential that we focused on inculcating a love for reading in the children; otherwise it would become an extension of the school where reading is meant primarily for passing examinations or scholastic achievement. We however did not reject any of the books, convinced that as the children developed a love for reading, they would gradually pinpoint their interest areas and these books could then come in handy. The need to source for books became imperative and this took us to importers of containers of used books from Europe. From these we purchased books at relatively cheaper prices, had a variety

of captivating and colourful books which catered for even the toddlers. Soon we could boast of five hundred and seventy-two titles. But some of these were quite worn and tore easily.

We have said that most of the books are exciting stories but sometimes the socio-cultural background and schema required to activate effective appreciation is too diametrically different from what obtains in the Nigerian environment and the children's level of exposure. In Ann M. Martin's *Dawn Saves the Planet* and other books in the Baby Sitters series, for instance, we find that children get paid for baby sitting in the homes of different people and regularly go on "sleep over". The various camping activities and escapades in Enid Blyton's *First Term at Malory Towers* and *The Magic Sweetshop* and other Famous Five Series; and Gertrude Chandler Warner's *Blue Bay Mystery* are unlikely to be encountered in the Nigerian environment. Some children wondered why the seasons of the year are summer, fall and autumn, even though they enjoyed reading poems that focused on them as found in Mary Phyllis Baumer's *Seasonal Kindergarten Units*. But they could relate thanksgiving to the new yam festival! In addition, the expectations in terms of awareness of rights (e.g. lodging official complaints against adults with the police and child welfare) are almost non-existent in Nigeria.

Again the availability or access to domestic technology such as the washing machine, spin drier, dish washer and even a vacuum cleaner, are all assumptions which do not form part of the average Nigerian child's world. Obviously some of these could be affordable, but when we consider the inefficient water supply network and epileptic electricity supply, owning those gadgets could be simply decorative. Literacy enables a child to deal with her reality, and that means that children must be exposed to "books about themselves and their lives, books that will sensitize them through familiar circumstances" (Snitcher 2007: 18). To meet this need, books by Nigerian/ African authors were purchased. Ifeoma Okoye's *Chimere*; Dapo Adeleke's *Akano and his Golden Ring*; Achirri Chi-Bikom's *Sometimes when it Rains*; The Lantern Series with titles such as *Folake and her four brothers*; *Tales from School*; *My Baby Sister*; *Stories from Shona Childhood*; and Anthonia A. Ekpa's *Edidem Eyamba and the Edikang-Ikong Soup* were added to the club holding. Others are from Macmillan publishers. In fact, Jenny Robson's *Breaking the Silence*, a short story published in 2005, has turned out to be a favourite. According to one of the children, "the theme of HIV/AIDS which is presented in the book is humanely realistic". It tells the story of a primary school teacher who contracts HIV/AIDS. She decides to write to her class from her dying bed, in order to inform them that HIV/AIDS is real, and appeals to them to make right choices in future. Of course her family tries to stop the letters from getting to the children, but providence steps in and the 'silence' is broken. But we must concede that over-reliance on the available local publications could be counterproductive. We therefore pursue a philosophy of exposing the child to an admixture of strange and familiar, old and new, in the firm belief that there is need to push the child's horizon, expand her world view and prepare her to fit into the 21st century global world.

7. Club Meetings



The Club does not have designated club meeting days but a tradition of having more children come around from 12noon to 2pm on Saturdays is gradually evolving, although subject to the facilitator's many engagements. Still the house is always open and a child or two sometimes just sit around to read a book in peace. Occasionally, a child is so eager to have something explained or to share some exciting story that he lays ambush on the stair case to ensure the facilitator cannot get into her house without seeing him, as is the case with young Charlie in the picture. Other young ones who require more attention, have spy look outs such that about fifteen minutes after the facilitator gets home, children come along to make their choice selection from books for some Literary Appreciation (LAP) reading session. A popular choice for this is *Madiba magic: Nelson Mandela's favourite stories for children*. It is a collection of thirty-two stories set in Africa, and specially selected for children. But some parents seem to have also extended the concept of the Club/Centre to include a free child minding service where they occasionally drop off their children "to read" while they go about their own businesses! At other times the facilitator has to provide snacks and meals particularly when it is family lunch time. One could make bold to claim that some kids from needy homes have also imbibed the habit of dropping by around lunch time to come and read books! But since what we desire is that all read, these become avenues for more interaction and literacy developments. They are therefore welcome within reason as we can distinguish children that are deprived and those who are gluttons. The latter we discourage firmly and they soon get the message.

Very few of the children can identify all the members of the club, especially since the children do not necessarily come together at formal meetings. However, we are planning a bi-monthly reading circle, for the older members, especially those in secondary school. This should take off before the end of the year.

Books are stored in cartons and once a week these have to be sorted to ensure that books for each category are kept together. There are plans to construct proper book shelves but where to keep them remains a problem. We also need to contend with regular book mending. Such books that require repairs are isolated and sent for mending regularly. Our vision is to inculcate the love of reading as a gateway to personal achievement in the children. We believe that "literacy thrives where reading is introduced as early as possible and is fun and that there are multiple roads to literacy development" (Egbe, Ekpe and Nta 2007: 14). Most of the children encounter books as prescribed texts in school; therefore the reading centre route is a novel experience for them. Mem Fox (2001:38) insists that those who work with children must "demonstrate enthusiasm, excitement, passion, a tremendous liking for children, a good understanding of theory and practice, and high expectations of delight and attainment". These are attributes we also consider essential in our interaction with them.

8. Activities: A number of activities have been undertaken during these club contacts, even though much of these are also individualised. Some of the more engaging ones will be described below:

8.1 Reading our picture stories: Children are encouraged to bring pictures from common neighbourhood events and use them as the basis for story telling. Particularly popular are pictures from birthday parties where each

child contributes ideas and crack jokes. These occasions tend to open up even the most taciturn ones as they gleefully identify themselves, siblings, parents, friends, etc. Sometimes, question props are supplied to encourage more productive language use. Sometimes too, such experiences progress into composition writing sessions.

8.2 Family Tree Teasers: The children in Junior secondary had a school task of drawing their family tree. Since the children who fall within this category kept a barrage of questions at the facilitators, we decided to make it every body's project. Children were thus guided to respond to the following lead questions:

*Who are the family patriarch and matriarch? – Mr. Amos & Mrs. Affiong Amos Peter Obot

*When did they marry? State year. - 1992

*How many children have they? – 5children

*State names and ages of their children:- Okon 16, Comfort 14, Esther 12, Christiana 9, Godwin

7.

*Show names of spouses and wedding dates – Not applicable

* List names and ages of children – Not applicable.

9 .Magic Words: The children engage in word games such that (a) the last sound of one word could signal the beginning of another e.g. flash...shop...pot...teacher...church...; or one word could lead to the production of its antonyms e.g. tall...short, heavy...light; (b) synonyms e.g. house...flat...duplex, happy...glad; or even its spelling. (c) The back word game which requires that words are spelt from behind/backward e.g. the word HOUSE is spelt as ESUOH. (d) Another is to spell a word which gives the same meaning irrespective of whether the spelling is conventional or from behind e.g. MADAM. The children became more enthusiastic when they read Donald J. Sobol's "The Case of the Broken Globe", a detective story woven around a boy's ability to use palindrome.

9.1Word Chain: This helps the children to know compound nouns and phrasal verbs as they are represented in colourful pictures. Examples here are: ear rings, note book, bus stop, stand up, dig up.

9.2Speed reading: This involves rewarding fast readers with first choice of books when new stocks are provided. This is actually quite often, is popular and generates a healthy competitive spirit. Children seem to have developed an antenna that immediately tells them that new books are available. They rush in, usually in little groups to quickly determine the ones they plan to read.

9.3Story Sharing: The children are required to share a story with the facilitator's family members or other club members. The very young readers love telling "Granny", the facilitator's mother, their stories.

9.4Drawing: Sometimes, when other family engagements intrude, the child could be allowed to draw and paint. It's been known to be that only the facilitator could see and appreciate the beauty of these drawings!

9.5Discourse development: At auspicious time, these children describe or engage the facilitator in very interesting and often hilarious discourse.

10.Challenges:

10.1 Space: The first challenge has been that of adequate space. Keeping books in cartons and turning one's living room into a reading club house are not ideal. Our attempt at procuring a suitable on-campus accommodation has

been bedevilled by financial constraint. An available store used as a provision store was offered for outright purchase at N500,000.00. While we were trying to raise funds, the vendor had a change of heart and rather asked us to pay a rent of N25,000.00 monthly. The provision store would require to be re-furbished and furnished, and that perhaps means another N5000,000.00. The alternative seems to be a 40ft container which would cost just as much to equip, after finding an appropriate place to install it.

10.2 Staffing: If we do raise the money for the store or container, we would need to have someone, even if on part-time, to man it, so that children could walk in after school and perhaps all day on Saturdays to read, borrow and return books. That again might involve money.

10.3 Captivating & colourful local books: Getting Nigerian books that are interesting and colourful is not easy. Books for children in pre-primary/ primary are generally school books and not necessarily exciting stories. We intend to contact some publishing houses such as Macmillan Publishers for “Reading World Series” and Literamed, the parent company of Lantern Book publishers who have also introduced cartoon series. Perhaps we could plan writing workshops for young adults and collaborate with the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) to write books targeting this group. For this too, we shall require some sponsorship.

11. Gains:

11.1 Expressiveness: The children gain a lot of self confidence and many are also becoming not just fluent, but can use a wide range of vocabulary appropriately. An interesting anecdote was given of a five year old who surprised all when he spoke English extensively outside the home. Not even the class teacher knew he was that articulate.

11.2 Biblio-therapy: Some of the young adult members have attested to finding that some of the books address their peculiar situational needs. Those from very indigent backgrounds have found stimulation in books such as Ben Carson’s *Think Big*; Braithwaite’s *To Sir with love*; and Eddy Iroh’s *Banana Leaves* among others. Even knowing how to handle ‘pest-like’ younger siblings and appreciate enduring values are adequately articulated in Ann Byrant’s *Make friends with Rachel: She’s found the perfect pet*.

11.3 Possible Interest Areas: We have noted that some children read all the books in a particular series and keep looking out for other titles which focus on a particular theme or topic. A child for instance, has read all the manuals on discovery, some are keen on things with medical slants, others on human interest stories and yet another on animals. Who knows how many budding scientists, politicians and journalists are in the making.

11.4 Current Affairs: Now many more of the children also read dailies since these are always available. That : Perhaps the greatest attraction of the Club is that no membership fee is charged. In addition, children are allowed to check out books for a minimum of one week. With club holding at over five hundred titles, one could say we have a fair number. Actually, this club benefits from a faith based reading club (Reading Cherubs). Unlike the present one, the Cherubs meet only on Sundays in a church. The neighbourhood club is an offshoot since some of the children trailed the facilitator home in order to access more books. Also, those who belong to other religious sects find the home based outlet easier to handle. For us, there is no discrimination. Our desire is that every child reads.

Of course books are damaged, but these we get mended. Those that are already very old and tattered at purchase have very short last span. Still we know that many children behave responsibly and really take good care of the books.

11.5 Self Discovery: In this regard, children and young adults are equipped to make decisions regarding friendship, developing relationships, academic choices and the like. Some have gained confidence to identify and develop their means they also occasionally have contributions to make or even ask questions on topical issues.

11.6 No Fee talents in singing, painting, the sciences, writing and the like. Handy books are those which make even school subjects interesting. In this regard we have made a “Sciencesaurus”, a thesaurus, and different encyclopaedias available to the children. They also have access to various activity books.

11.7 Chain Borrowing: Some older residents get club books to read without coming over to the club room. How they get around this is by asking their children or younger siblings to sign for books on their behalf. We noticed that some children occasionally selected books well beyond their frustration level. Worried that perhaps the children were losing interest in reading, we had a chat with them. That was when the children confessed that the books were for the “biggies”. Thereafter we sent notes to these invisible members to know their interests areas. At the end, some came over to see the range of books. Should we have insisted on their taking up full membership? We hope your reaction will help us decide.

11.9 Internet Facilities: We plan to get onto internet-based clubs and get children to read books off the screen, e.g. Encarta. Our desire should however not be allowed to kill the magic of their holding books in their hands, and the knowledge that these books could follow them to their rooms, sit-outs, etc. where computers cannot go.

12. Conclusion

Can a two-year old read? Guests often wonder and ask when they espy older club children come in to read/reading with their two-year old brothers and sisters tagging along to the club. The pictures toddlers see as they flip through the books, the nonsense sounds they make as they work out the marvel of words; the way they examine the books perhaps to re-assure selves that the pictures will not escape; really convince us that they “read”.

Reading is virtually taken for granted in our society; thus making the slogan “the earlier, the better” true. School demands that we read in order to be promoted from one level to another. Bill boards, traffic lights and sign posts dot our streets and roads. We also need to read weather reports, drug prescriptions papers and leaflets which accompany domestic and electronic appliances. The ability to read some of these could mark the difference between life and death even though not all of these have to do with print. The child who hawks bread may not be able to read a story book or even decipher the alphabet, yet that child knows the different denominations of the Naira and cannot be cheated. What is apparent is that there are many roads to literacy and according to Goodman, “it is extremely important to legitimize the concept of multiple roads to literacy” (2003: 115). That road may be of a parent or care giver taking the lead in reading to the child; it may be the child needing to know how to count money; or perhaps may mean the need to master road signs and street lights in order to go across a busy highway; it may simply be just so as to pass examinations. Whichever form it takes, the goal is to get the child to read. The various activities presented above focus on developing interest for reading. To an extent too the children are exposed to different reading skills. But beyond these, the children are also engaged in appreciating and interrogating the world. Thus we

make bold to claim that a solid foundation for personal and communal development is attainable through neighbourhood reading club intervention.

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