

Rescuing The Endangered Habit: The Challenge of Readership Promotion for the Children's Library In Nigeria

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Abstract

Reading has become endangered specie in Nigeria consequent upon the preference for the newer media of communication over the printed book by most people. However, the presence of these newer media does not vitiate the usefulness of the book as a veritable source of education, information and entertainment. Reading must therefore be sustained, but this is a function of a sound reading habit acquired in early life. The children's library must pursue readership promotion vigorously in order to assist children achieve this desirable reading habit. The activities of the children's library constitute the traditional means of readership promotion; however, innovative approaches can be explored.

Keywords: Endangered habit; Readership promotion; Reading culture, Children's library, Children's Librarian, Public Library.

Introduction

Reading became a means of acquiring knowledge and information from the time when writing was introduced as a means of communication. Although the exact date of the invention of writing is not certain, evidence abounds that early writing was associated with the civilizations that flourished simultaneously around the fertile crescent of the Mesopotamian valley and the Nile River about the 4th Millennium B.C. Thus, writing has been part of human activity since the early Sumerian cuneiform and the Egyptian hieroglyphics were developed about the end of the 4th Millennium B.C. (The New Encyclopedia Britannica, 2007). There are conflicting theories about the development of the alphabet, but the pioneering and finishing roles of the Phoenicians and Greeks respectively, are usually acknowledged; by the 6th century B.C, the alphabet had been standardized, giving a boost to writing. With the long passage of time came the ingenious invention of printing in the middle of the 15th century which expanded access to written materials, and hence increased the scope of reading. For more than 500 years after, the printed word and reading dominated the communication landscape.

The new media of communication such as the radio, television, film, filmstrip, transparency, cassette, video, the computer and the Internet, are products of the 20th century, and with advances in technology, these have increased in sophistication in the 21st century. In the face of these new media, reading has become endangered species, as we have observed a downward trend in reading in recent times. Obviously disturbed by this trend, the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan launched the Bring Back the Book Initiative (BBBI) on December 20, 2010 with a view to developing a book reading culture amongst Nigerians, especially the youths whose value for reading either for education or recreation has grossly diminished (www.bringbackthebook.org). In their evaluation of the initiative, Igwe and Uzuegbu (2013) note that the programme has not achieved its mandate, as reading culture in Nigeria remains poor. President Jonathan

himself is disheartened over the persistence of the poor reading culture among Nigerian citizens and on May, 19, 2014 indicated an intention to re-launch the Bring Back the Book Initiative and upgrade it to a national programme (m.dailytimes.com.ng).

Although the decline in reading traverses the various age strata, it is the view of this paper that the check point is the childhood, in the belief that a fine reading habit developed in childhood would be carried to, and sustained in adulthood. Readership promotion among children is a key 'rescue-reading' strategy and the centrality of the children's library in its implementation is unquestionable. But, are the children's librarians in Nigeria aware of the constituents of readership promotion? This paper has been put together essentially to expand the scope of readership promotion which the children's library, with its librarians, is challenged to pursue. Readership promotion is conceived in this paper as the totality of actions taken to encourage young people find joy in reading. Its goal is to assist the child acquire a sound reading culture. The children's library is the section of the public library used by children while the children's librarians are the librarians serving in the children's library.

The imperative of readership promotion in the children's library

For several reasons, readership promotion is imperative in the children's library.

Basically, the nature of the children's library dictates that readership promotion be the core of its services. Butler (1975) has described the children's library as one that provides children with good books supplemented by an inviting environment and intelligent and sympathetic service by which means to inspire and cultivate in children, love for reading, discriminating taste for literature, and judgement and skill in the use of books and tools. It is easily discernible from Butler's description that readership promotion is integral to the conception of the children's library. It is the summation of the objectives of the children's library and therefore, non-negotiable.

Moreover, the non-innate quality of reading skill creates a necessity for artificial hunger for it through various readership promotion activities. Unlike speaking which is a natural competence for the normal person, reading is a painstakingly learned competence. There is no natural attraction to reading and so acquisition of a habitual reading skill by a person draws from the active promotional work of those around them who know the value of the skill. 'Catch them young' is a popular slogan used in library circles for readership promotion campaigns, conveying the hypothesis that an early introduction of the child to the library will enable him acquire a healthy reading culture. As The International Federation of Library Association (IFLA) (1973:13) has observed, 'it is in early life that a taste for books and the habit of using libraries and their resources are almost easily acquired'. The implication is that the adult who failed to achieve habitual reading skill in childhood may have real difficulty adjusting. This goes to support the need for the children's library to engage in aggressive readership promotion campaign to children in order to 'catch them young' as readers.

The competition between reading and the newer media provides another justification for readership campaign. Advances in technology have brought into the living rooms of many families sophisticated electronic hardware and software such as the radio, television, cassette, video, the computer and Internet. Reading is competing hotly with these newer recreational media for the child's leisure time. Ordinarily, reading may not win in the competition because the newer media hold higher appeal to the child as less stressful pastimes. The retrieval modes employed for most of these newer media – listening, viewing, manipulating, key-punching, screen-tapping - are less tasking than reading. All that the child needs to do is to turn on the radio or television and begin to enjoy the programmes being aired. He slots in the musical cassette or the video tape and relaxes to enjoy their productions. He requires just the appropriate skill to manipulate the computer for the computer

games. The social media available in the Internet provide the child with the cherished avenue to interface with friends in glamour.

Reading on the other hand, involves a high mental stress. Usually, the child would be required to read in a quiet place, often away from the living room, the centre of family life. Therefore, ordinarily the child would prefer to spend his time using the newer recreational facilities which in fact, afford him the opportunity to enjoy in the company of other family members or peers. Readership promotion becomes imperative to instill in the child a sense of value for the book even in the midst of the newer media. The fact is that in spite of their numerous advantages, the newer media have not replaced the book as a source of entertainment, education and information. Our educational system is still largely book-based and therefore the child must necessarily read one thing or the other in the learning process. A healthy reading habit is necessary to keep him craving for the book among many competing alternatives. Therefore, the children's library must dutifully assist the child to cultivate a good reading habit.

Furthermore, the continued relevance of the print library is another basis for readership promotion. Despite the predictions of extinction of the paper-based library, certain advantages of the book will continue to retain its relevance. Ifidon (2009) outlines some reasons for the continued existence of the book-based library as follows:

1. Many library users, especially in developing countries, are still reluctant to use electronic equipment.
2. Some student researchers prefer hard copies to the Internet resources, while others are frightened by the data stream of the electronic resources.
3. Some on-line users get disillusioned and disappointed when it turns out that the information they need is not available on-line, contrary to their expectation that everything is available via the Internet.
4. Ignorance of the use of computer makes a number of library users uncomfortable with the computer.
5. Some sources of information are available and accessible only in printed form.

Promotion of reading in the children's library is thus crucial in order to develop in the child, the reading habit necessary to keep using the library as he grows older.

Advantages of a positive reading culture

The goal of readership promotion is acquisition of a positive reading culture by children. A pleasant reading habit will have an overriding impact on the overall development of the child.

Firstly, it boosts the mental development of the child. There is a correlation between reading and intellectual expansion. This is because reading is a mental exercise that can sharpen the natural intellect. Reading passes the child-reader through some mental experiences which put him at an intellectual advantage over his non-reading age mate. It improves his vocabulary and increases his level of comprehension and conceptualization. It helps him to think and reason more maturely and make intelligent decisions. As Fleet (1973) states "the child's imagination is fired by entering the realm of books". Thus, reading ignites the mind, the seat of the intellect. The ignited mind is able to conceive productive ideas which can push the child forward in life. Books feed the mind; just as a child who is denied of nourishing food soon becomes lean, the child who is denied of good books soon becomes lean of ideas. This could be why Beecher (1981:85) warns, "No man has the right to bring up his children without surrounding them with books if he has the means to buy them. It is a wrong to his family. He cheats them".

Secondly, reading helps the child develop an avid thirst for the pursuit of knowledge. According to Beecher (1981:85), "the love of knowledge comes with reading and grows upon it". This is obvious, as the more one reads, the more knowledge he acquires. Even in adults, a piece of writing read by chance can spark off a research investigating the truth or otherwise of the claims of the work. It might result to a new publication

challenging the claims of the work or affirming them. Thus, the habit of reading learnt early in life can help a person engage in productive scholarship.

Thirdly, the habit of reading cultivated early in life affords a life-long benefit which may not be accurately measured. There is a high likelihood that a child who has developed a love for books and reading early will grow into adulthood with it; he will find this handy for his purpose at any time. For example, as a student, he will not find reading or studying a drudgery and this will obviously increase his chances of making high grades, which in turn can launch him into great opportunities in life.

Also reading facilitates cross-cultural understanding. When a child reads books with foreign backgrounds, he begins to understand and appreciate the values of other societies other than his. In deed, the world has become a global community and the book is playing a part. Through reading, a child travels across the globe mentally before he travels physically. This development holds prospect for better cross-cultural understanding and world peace.

Finally, reading can shape a child's behaviour positively. Good characters in books can form role models for him. The art of reading itself can be a safe guard against wrong doing. Beecher (1981:85) explains it in these words: "The love of knowledge comes with reading and grows upon it. And the love of knowledge in a young mind is almost a warrant against the inferior excitement of passion and vices." Reading can also serve therapeutic purposes. Some psychosomatic cases are cured by bibliotherapy. A careful selection of the appropriate book may be all that is required to stabilize a psychosomatic patient.

Dealing with the challenge

The abandonment threat on reading poses a challenge to the children's library to lay a solid foundation for the development of a reading culture through readership promotion. The starting point to deal with this challenge is the proper conception by the children's librarians, of their job as basically readership promotion. This is key to their development of the right attitude toward the performance of the activities of the children's library. These activities are the traditional means of readership promotion in the children's library and so, their optimal performance will lead to improved reading habit among children. In what follows, the activities of the children's library are discussed in order to project their readership promotion content.

- 1. Provision of book collection:** The children's library is expected to provide children with an array of reading materials such as, fiction and non-fiction, story books, adventure books, picture books, historical books, biographical works and science books, newspapers, magazines and poetry, as well as selected non-print materials. The availability of these materials in the library is the basis of readership promotion. Without the books stocked, there will be nothing to attract the children to a so-called library.

Moreover, the typical library would normally stock more books than individual parents would be able to provide for their children. Therefore, the child using the library not only has more books to read, but also has a wider choice of what to read. Thus by providing a wide range of reading materials for children, the library encourages them to read. Unfortunately, book acquisition in the children's library is adversely affected by the economic and political forces debilitating its mother library, the public library. Gross underfunding of the public library in Nigeria is a fact, and hence, most public libraries record zero acquisition by purchase in many years. The problem is exacerbated by the apathy of the political leadership over the public library, such that suggests low appreciation of the value of this type of library by their state government owners. The children's library, in concert with the management of the public library should embark on advocacy visits to government representatives in order to attract better support for the children's library in particular and the public library in general.

2. **Assistance in the choice of books:** Sometimes a child may not be certain of what he really wants to read. The librarian's duty includes guiding the child-user in the choice of appropriate titles that suit his age or purpose at a particular point in time. It is required of the children's librarian to possess knowledge of child psychology to be able to satisfy a growth need of the child at various stages with appropriate books. For example, children within the age bracket 5-10 years love adventure stories. From early teens, they begin to develop interest in fantasy stories. The dutiful librarian should know how to supply the required books in order to sustain the child's interest in reading.
3. **Selection of books for purchase:** Care should be taken by the children's librarian to ensure that books that are appealing are selected for purchase. Usually, younger children are attracted to books that are profusely illustrated. Also books with familiar backgrounds are preferred by children to those with foreign backgrounds. By selecting and acquiring books that are fascinating to the children, the library stimulates them to read.
4. **Teaching to Read:** It is part of the duties of the children's librarian to help children who cannot read learn to read. Hers becomes an extension of the class teacher's role. Sometimes the librarian teaches by reading out the stories in the books to the hearing of the young learner in such a fascinating manner as to excite the interest of the child in reading.
5. Special holiday programmes such as story hours, film shows, displays and exhibitions, reading competitions, riddles and jokes and singing sessions are very potent ways of attracting children to the library environment. A first timer would want to come again and with repeated visits may develop interest in reading the library books. Such sessions must be kept exciting to retain the children's interest.
6. **Provision of a conducive reading environment:** The children's library is usually distinct from the adult library. It may be a separate building or a section of the main library building reserved for the exclusive use of children. Facilities provided such as chairs, tables, shelves and catalogue cabinets are built with the comfort of the children in mind. The library environment provides an atmosphere for a healthy interaction among children. A mere sight of other reading children can motivate a child to begin to read too.

Restriction of the children's library to children alone is of particular psychological significance. Some children may be intimidated by the presence of reading adults if they were to share library facilities together. The tension created in them can affect their concentration in reading. This point was dramatically driven home when this writer visited the Imo State Library Board, Owerri, Nigeria, in the course of preparing this paper. An adult user walked into the children's library and asked to be allowed to stay there and read because she could not get a space in the adult section. The response of the staff on duty was a vehement "No, You (adults) scare them". It goes to buttress that the children's library takes adequate care to ensure that nothing either physical or psychological discourages the child from reading.

Beyond the readership promotion through the library activities, children's librarians in Nigeria are challenged to device innovative ways to get children become habitual readers. Fortunately, the Federal Government is leading the campaign for the development of good reading culture by Nigerians through the Bring Back the Book Initiative (BBBI). The children's librarians should cue into this campaign whose objectives are to:

- 1) Revitalize the reading culture, with knowledge serving as a tool for development.
- 2) Project the nation's culture, for survival, sustenance and protection.

The activities of the initiative are:

- Organizing book readings in educational institutions at all levels across the country.

- Establishment of Bring Back the Book clubs in educational institutions to serve as hubs for development of intellectual capacity of the youths.
- Support for literary events and projects.
- Creation of platform for national discussion on ways to develop the educational system cum reading culture.
- Conducting research and supporting organizations carrying out related activities.
- Support the production of books locally by encouraging publishers via buying of books for distribution to libraries nation wide.
- Construction, refurbishment and stocking of libraries across the country.
- Organizing national competitions aimed at driving the culture of book reading in the country (www.bringbackthebook.org).

Some of these activities mesh with the readership promotion goal of the children's library and could be undertaken by the children's librarians. For example, children's librarians could visit schools within the areas of their location to give book talks and organize book reading competitions. Furthermore, they should partner with BBBI on advisory capacity regarding ways of domesticating its activities in the children's library. They could also serve as resource persons to the Initiative at occasions where their professional experience gives them the advantage of informed contribution.

Librarians in general and children's librarians in particular, should begin to strategize on the sustenance of the platform for the recognition of Port Harcourt, Nigeria as World Book Capital (WBC) 2014. According to the Unesco WBC Selection Committee, Port Harcourt was nominated the World Book Capital on account of the quality of its programme, especially its focus on the youth and the impact it would have on improving Nigeria's culture of books, reading, writing and publishing to improve literacy rates (www.thetidenewsonline.com). Relevant aspects of this world-acclaimed programme should be adapted in the public libraries, including children's libraries. For instance, a monthly book reading programme holds in Port Harcourt with scores of young people attending. This could be replicated in public libraries across the country.

Children's librarians should be proactive; rather than wait to serve only the children that visit, they could take books to homes and speak to parents on the benefits of taking their children to the library. A related service is the mobile library service. In the 1970s and 1980s, the public library in Nigeria ran an effective mobile library service. State Library Boards had mobile library vans that took books to remote communities where excited children gathered at designated places to collect books from the library staff. This service has become extinct, as those vans have long broken down and are packed in the premises of the Library Boards, only as relics of that cherished service. There should be a revival of the mobile library service in order to reach the children living far away from the library buildings with books. This is one way of meeting the reading needs of such people and must be explored in the quest for improved reading culture in Nigeria.

Children's librarians in Nigeria should engage themselves in professional cooperative activities in order to gain from shared experiences. They should initiate the process of creating a Children's Library Section of the Nigerian Library Association; this is without prejudice to the Public Library Section. This Section will serve as a forum for children's librarians to address issues peculiar to their genre of library, especially as it is defined by their clientele. Besides, they could conduct collaborative researches on issues that border on library use by children, with prospects of generating results that can increase awareness of the value of the children's library, and hence, increased patronage. Also, in a globalized world characterized by exchange of information across nations, children's librarians in Nigeria should establish links with colleagues in other climes in order to be in tune with the trend in practice.

Additionally, the children's librarian could seize the opportunity of informal gatherings to speak to friends, relatives and members of her social groups on the value of the book and the need to take their children to the library. She could encourage them to buy book gifts for their children.

Conclusion

Reading has had a long history as a means of acquiring knowledge and information from written sources. So long as the book remains valuable, reading will continue to retain relevance. Therefore, it is imperative that children acquire positive reading habit which they would find useful as they live through life. The children's library is well suited to assist in the cultivation of this reading habit. Children's librarians therefore should understand their primary mandate of readership promotion and pursue it with vigour.

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