

## READING FOR EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES\*

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the role reading plays in creating independent learners, reducing illiteracy in society and helping people understand themselves and others better. It highlights the relationship between reading and education and stresses the role that libraries play as one of the key stakeholders in promoting the culture of reading. The paper also presents experiences of reader developments and reading promotions from libraries of developed and developing countries. Some challenges in inculcating the culture of reading in libraries of developing countries are also highlighted. Recommendations are made for sustaining the culture of reading in developing countries.*

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KEYWORDS: LITERACY, DEVELOPMENT, DEVELOPING COUNTRIES, READING CULTURE

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### Introduction

**This paper focuses on some of the roles played by public and school libraries in the furtherance of reading in developed as well as in developing countries. It shares some of the challenges facing these two categories of libraries in developing countries and makes recommendations for sustaining the reading culture environment.**

The popular slogan “*A reading nation is a winning nation*” cannot be overstated. Recent technological developments require that individuals possess a high degree of literacy and a complexity of skills to be able to function effectively in the society. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines literacy as “the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community - to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.” In other words, literacy is the ability to read, write, speak and compute at a certain level. Citizens who lack these abilities feel alienated from society and are faced with social and economic problems such as poverty, crime, and unemployment.

A UNESCO Report (2006) mentions that the number of African adults who cannot read or write has increased from 133 million in 1990 to around 144 million in 2004. This breaks down to four out of every ten adults in Sub-Saharan Africa who cannot read or write. A further breakdown puts the average literacy rate in Sub-Saharan Africa to 51.2 per cent for women and 68.9 per cent for

men. Statistics show that 42.1% of the Ghanaian adult population of 15 years or more is illiterate. This startling information reinforces the need to provide citizens with the necessary skills to reduce illiteracy in the society. One such way is to promote reading with the relevant reading materials.

### **What Is Reading?**

Smith and Robinson (1980) define reading as "an active attempt on the part of the reader to understand a writer's message". **The Chamber's Twentieth Century Dictionary** (1983) also defines reading as "to look at and comprehend the meaning of written or printed words." **Anderson and others** (1985) state that "reading is a process, a mode of thinking, a kind of real experience and involves many complex skills: the ability to perceive printed words, to skim for information and then perhaps read intensively."

Rodríguez (2002) sums up the views of some scholars who regard reading as something more complicated and has to do with an individual's ability to recognize the letters of a word and the set of words that give a phrase a sense. In my opinion, reading is the ability to understand words contained in a document and make use of that knowledge for personal growth and development.

### **Reasons for Reading**

There are various reasons why people read. Onwubiko (1985) summarizes the purpose for reading to include - reading for pleasure, leisure and relaxation; reading for information; reading for knowledge (studying); and reading for any of the combination of the above.

### **Reading for Pleasure, Leisure and Relaxation**

Reading for pleasure, leisure and relaxation expands one's horizon and imagination and helps to discover one's hobbies, interests, etc. which can provide enough distraction from boredom, indiscipline and even crime. It is a well-known fact that when there were no televisions or computers, reading was a primary leisure activity. People would spend hours reading books and travel to lands far away-in their minds. The only tragedy is that, with time, many people have lost their skill and passion to read. A good reading material may help you know what other people know so that you avoid repeating their mistakes and experiences.

### **Reading for Information**

Reading for information influences an individual's emotional, cultural, educational, social, moral and spiritual growth. Reading is the fundamental skill needed to take advantage of all the information around us and to take advantage of the information age. It is the only means to decipher what you see on your computer screen, how to skim and browse for information on the Internet. Reading gives the individual the opportunity to think for himself/herself and be able to make up his/her mind about important issues and take informed decisions. For instance, being unable to read and understand a product label or the directions for taking medication, or the instructions on how to install a new printer to use with a computer may cause a feeling of inadequacy and frustration, and may result in a variety of undesirable behaviour manifestations. Reading for information challenges your views, exposes your biases and prejudices, and banishes ignorance and superstition. It makes you a better citizen and an instrument of change for individuals

and for community growth. It is an indispensable tool for a successful democratic way of life and crucial to being an informed citizen.

### **Reading for Knowledge**

Educational researchers have found that there is a strong correlation between reading and academic success. Students who are good readers are more likely to do well in school and pass examinations than students who are bad at reading. Good readers can understand the individual sentences and the organizational structure of a piece of writing. They can comprehend ideas, follow arguments, and detect implications. Good readers can extract from the writing what is important in a particular task. Reading raises their training level for their job and contributes significantly to job success, career development and ability to respond to change. The end result of reading for knowledge is to become an authority on a topic, gain insights, skills and an insider's working knowledge of a topic.

### **Pre-Requisites for Reading**

Makotsi (2004) posits that the conditions for learning to read and for sustaining literacy skills include a home environment where reading is encouraged, good teachers and schools, plentiful books which are relevant and up to date and access to computers. Such conditions are likely to exist in countries which produce much of their written information thus defining and preserving their own cultural identity.

Countries which have a common language, countries in which the demand for reading materials is matched by the ability to afford them, and countries in which information technology is widely available, suffer little from reading inadequacies.

In addition, countries which have a strong infrastructure of authors, printers, publishers, booksellers and librarians are successful in establishing and sustaining the reading culture. In these environments, many people can afford to buy books and computers and those who cannot, have access to the information they need through library services.

### **Effects of Poor Reading Habits**

Poor reading habits have been noted to have negative consequences on children and adults alike. They can result in boredom, frustration, procrastination, lack of concentration and self confidence and lower grades. Children with poor reading habits receive poor grades, are easily frustrated and have difficulty completing assignments. They are also noted to have low self-esteem, have behaviour problems and have more physical illnesses due to stress. Such children do not also like school; they grow up to be shy in front of groups and fail to develop to their full potential.

### **State of Reading in Africa**

From the above pre-requisites to reading, it would seem as if developing countries will continue to suffer reading inadequacies. Is it that there is no hope for us to inculcate the culture of reading in our environment? What then is our state of reading?

Reading cannot be said to be the way of life in most African countries today. A study by Ogunrombi and Adio (1995) noted the some inhibiting factors to reading which are still valid today. These

include the family background of students where few homes are conducive to reading owing to noise and lack of reading materials; the lack of functional libraries in most of the schools surveyed and absence of trained librarians or teacher librarians; the failure to provide library periods in schools; a shortage of language teachers, equipment and resources for teaching reading skills; as well as a heavy reliance on school texts, although students show willingness to read more broadly, e.g. newspapers and novels.

In most parts of Africa, reading is regarded as something connected to the school or formal education. It is perceived as an academic exercise and a means to pass examinations. Reading is taught as a perfunctory skill to be employed only in school time pursuits. However, for an individual to find his way in the complex and fast-changing world in which he lives, reading should transcend simply passing examinations. Reading should be viewed as an important part of our culture with the tacit involvement of both parents and children.

Reading, it would seem, is indispensable to education. It is instrumental in forming a foundation on which to build an individual's educational career on. What then is education?

## **EDUCATION**

Education has been defined as the act or process of imparting or acquiring general knowledge, developing the powers of reasoning and judgment and generally of preparing oneself or others intellectually for mature life. It has also been defined as the process of enhancing the development of certain knowledge, skills and attitudes in any individual to enable him/her to become better identified with his/her community aspirations and contribute successfully towards the community's common goal, which is development (Asiedu, Adoo-Adeku and Amedzro, 2004).

The **New Encyclopedia Britannica** (2003) also describes education as the transmission of the values and accumulated knowledge of society. It is designed to guide individuals in a learning culture, moulding their behaviour in the ways of adulthood and directing them toward their eventual role in society.

To sum up all three definitions, education can be said to be the driving force in enlightening the individual for personal growth and development.

### **Purpose of Education**

Several scholars have demonstrated the diversity of beliefs about the purpose of education. Rand quoted in Yero (2001-2002) states that "the only purpose of education is to teach a student how to live his life by developing his mind and equipping him to deal with reality. The training he needs is theoretical, i.e., conceptual. He has to be taught to think, to understand, to integrate and to prove. He has to be taught the essentials of the knowledge discovered in the past and he has to be equipped to acquire further knowledge by his own effort."

Beattie quoted in Yero (2001-2002) states that "the aim of education should be to teach us rather how to think, than what to think—rather to improve our minds, so as to enable us to think for ourselves, than to load the memory with the thoughts of other men."

Hoffer quoted in Yero (2001-2002) also states that "the central task of education is to implant a will and facility for learning; it should produce not learned but learning people. The truly human society is a learning society, where grandparents, parents and children are students together."

From the above, it can be concluded that the purpose of education is to develop the capacities latent in human nature and to coordinate their expression for the enrichment and progress of society.

### **Benefits of Education**

Education is beneficial to the individual not only for economic productivity, social mobility, social justice and social cohesion but also for citizenship. The quality of human resource of a nation is easily judged by the number of its literate population. If a nation aspires to achieve growth and development and more importantly sustain it, then its citizens must be highly educated. This may well explain the fact that rich and developed nations of the world have very high literacy rate and productive human resource. Education also helps with global sustainability, moral development and the realization of potentials in the individual. It trains the human mind to think and take the right decisions. It is through education that knowledge and information is received and spread throughout the world. It serves as an instrument of change for individuals and for the community growth. The end result of education is skills training, identity formation, experiences of relationships, biological maturation, learning, achievement of qualifications and others.

### **Methods of Acquiring Knowledge**

The acquisition of knowledge with the accumulation of observations and experiences can be obtained through formal and informal means, such as the school system from primary to tertiary level, the free adult education, informal search and training, in a group setting or within the framework of social movements. Knowledge acquired through the formal system cannot be done without the individual knowing how to read and understand. The individual will need to know how to read to be able to develop mental and physical skills, to acquire information about the past and present, to be capable and able to recognize and evaluate different points of view and also capable and able to think creatively. Indeed, the success and recognition in the formal system depend upon the development of skills and concepts of reading, listening, oral expression and written expression. Herein lies the correlation between education and reading.

Whichever means is used to acquire education and reading, it must be supplemented by institutions offering a broad choice of different media and professional guidance such as libraries, archives and museums. Libraries have the potential to make a difference between a traditional system of formal education and a broader system of learning. They go beyond formal education. There are different types of libraries – public and community libraries, academic libraries, schools and college libraries and special libraries which contribute to reading and by extension, to the education of individuals. For developing countries where some of the preconditions for reading are difficult to meet, it would be most appropriate to equip public and school libraries to provide the necessary ingredients to promote the culture of reading in the society.

## **The Role of Libraries**

Libraries are collections of human culture in diverse formats and languages, preserved, organized and interpreted to meet broad and varying needs of individuals for information, knowledge, recreation and aesthetic enjoyment (Alemna, 2000).

They provide free and equitable access to information for all, be it in written, electronic or audiovisual form. Libraries play a key role in creating literate environments and promoting literacy by offering relevant and attractive reading material for all ages. Libraries are instruments of self-education, a means of knowledge and factual information, a centre of intellectual recreation; and a beacon of enlightenment that provide accumulated and preserved knowledge of civilization which consequently enrich one's mental vision and dignify his habit, behaviour, character, taste, attitude, conduct and outlook on life. Libraries can be at the heart of personal and community development. They embrace the social responsibility to offer services that bridge social, political and economic barriers and traditionally make a special effort to extend their services to marginalized people. They also assist in finding, using and interpreting appropriate information that opens up opportunities for lifelong learning, literacy enhancement, informed citizenship, recreation, creative imagination, individual research, critical thinking and ultimately, empowerment in an increasingly complex world.

## **Public Libraries**

A public library is an organization established, supported and funded by the community, either through local, regional or national government or through some other form of community organization. It provides access to knowledge, information and works of the imagination through a range of resources and services and is equally available to all members of the community regardless of race, nationality, age, gender, religion, language, disability, economic and employment status and educational attainment. It is also an aid to mass education of those who cannot read or write. The primary purposes of the public library are to provide resources and services in a variety of media to meet the needs of individuals and groups for education, information and personal development including recreation and leisure. They have an important role in the development and maintenance of a democratic society by giving the individual access to a wide and varied range of knowledge, ideas and opinions.

The public library should be the primary centre for cultural life and should promote active participation and appreciation of all arts. It should also play a positive role in encouraging an active use of leisure time through recreation and entertainment.

The public library should link itself with other educational, social and cultural institutions, including schools and adult-education groups. Literacy is one of the services rendered by modern public libraries.

There are several reported experiences of reading in public libraries in developed countries and the impact it has had on its citizenry. Proponents of the public library service believe that reading has an intrinsic value to all citizens, not only in a formal educational setting, but also as a means of informing and enhancing the lives of all who choose to use it.

Train (2003) reports on reader development initiatives within the public library service of the United Kingdom. The underlying principle was to raise the status of reading as a creative act, increasing people's confidence in their reading and finding ways of bringing isolated readers together. Interventions such as "Opening the Book" and "The Reading Agency" which emphasized the importance of intervention, of increased choices and of shared activity, were started.

A considerable amount of public and private funding was given to support reader development work, giving public library services an ideal opportunity to develop new and alternative elements of their overall service and to promote reading in innovative ways.

Weber (2006) has reported on the "Reading and Cultural Activity Centres" of 17 Francophone developing countries operating in more than 200 centres. The Centres operate as a network of public libraries where 5,000 to 25,000 inhabitants of a town or village have their information needs met. Generally, each Centre is equipped with a collection of 2,500 books suited for lending purposes, properly bound to resist extensive use and often, extreme climatic conditions. Patrons also had access to local and international newspapers, journals and magazines, more than fifty board games and educational tools, pedagogical kits including books and published works on teaching methods for teachers, audio and audio-visual materials including televisions, satellite receivers, audio and video-players/recorders.

McNicol and Buckingham (2003) report on reader development and reading promotion activities aimed at 11 to 16 year olds involving school and/or public libraries in the UK. Some activities which were embarked upon included summer reading schemes, reading clubs, Shadowing awards, Author visits, 'Everybody's Reading' Festivals, Bookshop/Book fairs, Book clubs, Displays, Storytelling sessions, and Recommending books.

In Africa, some reader development and reading promotion experiences in public and community libraries are reported in Nigeria, Tanzania and Zambia.

Oyegade (2003) reports on the readership promotion campaign activities of the Oyo State Library Board to create awareness and arouse interest in the use of resources. Some activities embarked upon include book fairs/library weeks; film shows/video library, repackaging of information, exhibitions and high-profile lectures. Reading slogans on mobile libraries and the production of yearly calendars with readership promotion campaign slogans have been effective in sensitizing the public on the importance of reading. Some slogans on the 2002 board's calendars include: "*Reading improves Knowledge*", "*Read a Book Today*", "*Enrich Your Minds with Reading*", "*Reading Empowers Man*", "*Knowledge Is Power*", "*Develop a Reading Habit*".

Nsubuga (2003) reports on the Bagamoyo Community Reading Tent as part of reader development and reading promotion in Tanzania. The purpose is to stimulate and promote a reading culture among the members of the community and to provide them with the opportunity to have close and easy access to books and other literature. Some activities promoted included reading for leisure and reading competitions.

In Zambia, Chifunda (2003) reports on the Women's Reading Corners to promote reading among women in Zambia. The corners are run by Zambia Library Service and they provide reading books and other printed materials (of interest to women, for example food production and farming), make practical demonstrations, assist women with reading and collaborate with other organizations dealing with women's affairs.

### **Reading activities at the Accra Central Library**

Public libraries in Ghana have been involved in promoting reading among children. They have been doing so through extension activities such as the "Book Club" and the "Story Hour" Sessions. At the Accra Central Library, the Book Club meets every Friday with some schools in the vicinity of the Library. Some of the activities of the Book Club include Spelling 'B', Quiz, Word Formation, Scrabble and Puzzle competition, etc. Story Hour is another activity carried out with resource persons from the Library or with some invited guests. Talents show (singing, drumming, dancing, poetry recitals, etc.) and riddles are also carried out to make the Reading activities exciting. During the school vacation, the Library meets every day to carry out many of the activities of the Book Club. Reading clinics are also held in collaboration with some NGOs in Ghana where selected schools are involved. Also, the Hans Anderson Book Day celebration which is held in April each year is organized to select the best student in reading and reading activities such as Essay competition, Spelling "B" and Word Formation.

Some of the reading activities mentioned above in developing countries are laudable efforts but the activities cannot be said to be all-embracing as most of them are not sustainable and/or are carried out on ad hoc bases.

### **School Libraries**

A school library is that part of the school where a collection of books, periodicals, magazines and newspapers, films and filmstrips, video-tapes, recordings of all types, slides, computers, study kits and other information-bearing resources are housed for use by teachers for professional development and pupils for learning, recreational activities, personal interests and interpersonal relationships of children and students in a school or college. School libraries are mandated to carry out activities which promote reading such as Reading Aloud, Story Telling, Reading Competition, Essay Competition, Word Formation, Spelling 'B', Watching or Performing theatre or Music connected to books and reading.

School libraries provide access to supplementary materials that complement and enhance the learning provided by prescribed textbooks. They also provide information and ideas that are fundamental to functioning successfully in today's information and knowledge-based society. The libraries help the children to build up their innate faculties and enable them to put knowledge to good use. School libraries are essential to every long-term strategy for literacy, education, information provision and economic, social and cultural development. It goes without saying that, the resources of the school library must be harnessed towards inculcating the reading habit in the students and sustaining it by providing them with the right materials and conditions to enable them read widely and deeply. Some success stories of reading activities with students and children in developed countries are noted below.



Jensen (2006) reports on the Storymobile Project which assisted childcare centres in Vaerloose, Denmark in reintroducing reading stories aloud and storytelling as major activities by providing an intimate, relaxing space for these activities.

Song (2006) describes the various campaigns to promote family reading and efforts made towards effective practices of family reading in children's library services in Korea. Activities such as reading camps and story showcases are mentioned as the best practices for family reading.

Nilsson (2002) reports on the efforts made by the Zimbabwe Book Development Council to empower school libraries by allowing them to select and buy books from a special regularly updated Book Fund Catalogue. School libraries had access to all available books that were published and available in Zimbabwe. The Council also held library training workshops for adults – mostly teachers, parents and grandparents. Papers were presented on almost any topic that had anything to do with children and reading as authors came and spoke about their books and their writing.

Makenzi (2004) reports on the mobile reading tent in Kenya which targets children in order to inculcate the reading culture and introduce them to libraries at an early age. Some of the activities the various organizations use in this outreach programme include Loud and Silent Reading, Reading Competition, Creative Writing, Recitals, Story Telling, Book Talks, Puzzle and Word Building.

Rosenberg (2003) reports on reader development initiatives and reading promotion in seven African countries. The experiences recorded cover predominantly work with children such as the Born to Read Project and the READ Project carried out in South Africa; the Want to Read and Zambia's Readathon (the reading competitions for primary-school children); Reading Clinic in Ghana; Book Boxes for primary schools in Kenya and Reading Tents in Tanzania and Zambia. School libraries can provide information about all sorts of issues which can help alleviate poverty and act as Focal Points for the community. In Botswana, most school and public libraries have created HIV/AIDS corners which give focus and emphasis to HIV/AIDS as an issue needing daily confrontation. Through the corners, young people are targeted with fiction titles covering different aspects of the disease and how it comes about. (Baffour-Awuah, 2004)

Again, we have some examples of what is going on in some school libraries. But in developing countries where school libraries are virtually non-existent and collection of books are kept in trunks in the head teacher's office, it becomes difficult for pupils to cultivate the love for books and reading.

### **Challenges to Sustaining the Reading Culture**

Libraries in developing countries encounter a lot of challenges in trying to promote and sustain the culture of reading in the society. These challenges cover both internal to external factors.

### **Availability and Access to Reading Materials**

Libraries in developing countries lack access to a wide range of reading materials and other learning resources to enhance the establishment of a reading culture. This could be attributed to the book industry which is struggling to develop in an environment where there is virtually no purchasing power. These difficulties are compounded by the complex issues of numerous local languages in Africa where books in the local language are often not published.

### **Dwindling Public Funds**

Funding has made it hard for library services to equip libraries with good and relevant books and also to build and maintain staff capacity. Library budgets are being cut drastically and instead of public libraries opening more branches and stocking their libraries with new materials, they are faced with closure and obsolete materials. They are also losing their hardworking staff to other libraries where the conditions of service are favourable.

### **Library Networks**

Many schools in Africa do not have libraries. A cost effective strategy for equipping schools with library resources is to link them with the public library network where reading materials for the schools would be regularly replenished. This situation would actually work when the public libraries are in themselves well endowed.

### **Reading Policies**

Rosenberg (2003) reports that few libraries in Africa have established Reader Development Policies and that too many initiatives are one-off events. There is the need to have Reader Development Librarian positions so that they can formalize the centrality of this work in the structure of the library and establish solid networks with schools and school libraries.

### **Training**

Librarians and teachers lack appropriate skills to sustain reader development initiatives in libraries and schools. Quite often, it is assumed that librarians and teachers by virtue of their professional education already have the skills necessary to engage in reader development. But the need to provide training to upgrade and refresh the skills of these personnel is a must, as new ways of inculcating the reading culture is being discovered daily.

### **Information and Communication Technologies**

Information and Communication Technologies have great potential to help bridge the information gap between developed and developing countries. Information available in electronic format and through the Internet can supplement and in some cases replace that available in print. Some public and school libraries have access to Internet connectivity but do not have access to web-based library information services. The challenges libraries face in providing such a service include lack of funds, inadequate infrastructure, power fluctuations, subscriptions to databases, limited skills for maintenance and training in the use of computers.

### **The Way Forward**

There is the need for libraries to forge ahead with the improvement of reading and the inculcation of the reading habit especially, among children and adult learners. Some measures which need to be taken.

### **Change at Policy Level**

Policymakers need to recognize that libraries have a key role to play in the delivery of educational goals and in maintaining people's literacy skills for life. Information is a pre-requisite for education and skills development and should therefore receive priority during the allocation of resources.

Policy on library development should reflect the commitment of governments to enable people integrate and access relevant information in order to improve their lives socially and economically. In the light of this, it is recommended that the Government of Ghana implements the recommendations of the Ghana Library Association's *Memorandum on Role of Libraries in Education (2001)* sent to the National Education Review Commission. The Memorandum recommends, among others, the need to have a School Library Policy which would address the need to have trained and adequate staff in school libraries, adequate accommodation, book stock, equipment, and above all, adequate funding to support any meaningful programmes.

### **Increased Funding**

Libraries need to be properly resourced and recognized as mainstream for educational reform, literacy enhancement and social development. Increased funding is thus, crucial to increase the number of public libraries, the size of library networks, the building of staff capacities in areas of reading promotion and the stocking of good and relevant books. Increased funding should also ensure that libraries take advantage of new technologies and share these with local communities.

### **The Book Industry**

For libraries to function effectively, the whole book sector must be strengthened, in order to create a supportive environment in which local authors, publishers, booksellers and libraries can work together and flourish. Local language publications must be made available to support the acquisition of literacy skills for children and adults. Since local publishing industries cannot currently meet all book needs, there is a legitimate case for soliciting donated book schemes.

### **Training**

There is the need to provide training in the form of workshops and seminars to enable librarians share experiences and perfect their skills in the area of reader development. Workshops should include ways to increase staff knowledge of contemporary literature as this can assist with the Readers' advisory roles that librarians have to provide. Readers' advisory role is a patron-oriented library service for adult fiction readers, a service in which 'knowledgeable, non-judgmental staff help fiction readers with their reading needs. Other workshop themes can include ways to increase librarians' awareness of readers and patrons' reading needs, acquisition of (transferable) skills with which to design training programmes and acquisition of tools with which to attract larger reading audiences to libraries.

## Conclusion

The ability to read is central to education. Individuals need literacy skills if they are to benefit from education. Education brings opportunities for economic, social, political, moral and spiritual development because it enables individuals to think critically and make informed choices. Promoting reading and providing relevant reading materials are the keys to sustained literacy and libraries offer a unique and cost effective means of providing access to information for all because resources are shared. Public and school libraries therefore have a lot of responsibility in sustaining the culture of literacy by creating a solid foundation for reading in the country.

In sum, reading by all segments of society irrespective of social status, widens one's horizon, holds the key to societal development and serves as a veritable ticket out of ignorance.

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