CREATING LITERACY LEARNING SPACES THROUGH GROUP READING STRATEGIES: THE CHILDREN'S CENTRE LIBRARY VACATION EXPERIENCE

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Abstract
Literacy, while still essential for both personal and national development, has evolved far beyond the ability to read and write print; the concept is now applied to varied media in such forms as visual literacy, aural literacy, computer literacy and information literacy. It is best developed through conducive and nurturant learning spaces in libraries, schools, and communities, spaces supporting a wide variety of activities, including numerous group reading strategies. This paper identifies the Children's Centre Library of the University of Nigeria as such a literacy learning space, as exemplified by vacation programme activities. It describes the use of learning spaces for literacy development during the 2013 and 2015 vacation programmes by detailing the use of eight group reading strategies: sustained silent reading, story hours, play with toys and games, book clubs, competitions in spelling and quizzes, art activities, comic book writing, and book making. The paper concludes that the Children's Centre Library vacation experience provides an example of literacy learning spaces in action.

Keywords: Literacy, learning spaces, group reading strategies, Children's Centre Library

The Importance of Literacy

Literacy, traditionally equated with the ability to read, is considered essential for both personal and national development in the modern world. Fulfilling one's full potential in academic, economic and social life is linked to literacy, as is the nation's attainment of development goals. For this reason, educational systems around the world emphasize literacy as the first objective of the foundation level of education. This is evident in the Nigerian National Policy on Education, which has as the first goal of primary education: "to inculcate permanent literacy, numeracy, and ability to communicate effectively" (Nigeria, 2004). In the Information Age children and youth have even more need to acquire varied literacy skills if they are to take advantage of the new information infrastructure available to them. But what do we understand by literacy?

Literacy as an Expanding Concept

Literacy is a term that has expanded in meaning and scope in recent years. In the past literacy was defined as the ability to read and write; that is, it was confined to written language, to the ability to decipher letters and words, in order to comprehend the meaning of sentences and paragraphs. With time, it was recognized that this basic level of literacy was insufficient: literacy was only useful when it was functional, when it

could be put to use as a life skill. This is well expressed by Lipschultz (2006, p. 51), who defined literacy as "the ability to use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential."

Usually coupled with literacy is numeracy, or mathematical literacy, the ability to understand and speak the language of mathematics. The increasing importance of visual information resources—whether pictures and graphic materials like maps and charts, cartoons and posters, film and television, or multi-media computer programmes—has led to recognition of the need for visual literacy as well. Learners need to be able to interpret, to "read" visual media, and to convey information in visual forms. At the same time, rediscovery of the importance of spoken language has led to a renewed focus on the listening and speaking skills required for effective oral communication, or aural literacy. Another long recognized language is that of music; we recognize musical literacy in the expression "to read" music, or the saying that music is the universal language. Cultural literacy, the ability to communicate through cultural arts and traditions, likewise has gained increasing recognition. Awareness of all these diverse forms expanded the concept of literacy.

The development of computer technology further extended the definition of literacy to include the skills for using digital sources of information, leading to terms such as computer literacy, Internet literacy and digital literacy. The vast increase in information brought about by the advent of information and communication technology (ICT), information that is often unfiltered and unorganized, led to more awareness of the critical thinking skills necessary for building and generating knowledge, and retrieving and processing information for use. These skills and abilities, referred to as information literacy, constitute an ever more essential set of competencies in the twenty-first century, where information and knowledge have become so central to life in society.

All these are brought together in the definition of the International Literacy Association (ILA), formerly the International Reading Association (the name change itself indicative of the evolving concept). According to the ILA: "Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, compute, and communicate using visual, audible, and digital materials across disciplines and in any context." The statement goes on to say that "the ability to read, write, and communicate connects people to one another and empowers them to achieve things they never thought possible. Communication and connection are the basis of who we are and how we live together and interact with the world" (IRA, 2015).

How can this be achieved? How then can literacy be acquired and maintained—and transmitted outside school settings? How can learning and literacy be fostered across the lifespan? What strategies can be employed to further literacy learning and in what spaces?

Group Reading Strategies for Literacy Development
Once upon a time (and often even today) reading was taught by recitation and drill. Typically, children sat in a reading circle and took turns reading the text aloud, a

practice often referred to as Round Robin Reading (2012). Pupils were assigned words to learn to spell or filled in the blanks in reading comprehension exercises. However, with time new ideas emerged, emphasizing the importance of free voluntary reading; the catchword being: we learn to read by reading (Krashen, 1993). Free and extensive exposure to pleasurable reading materials, which children read on their own, was seen as the better approach by the Whole Language Movement.

However, given the importance of connection and communication brought out by the ILA, educators looked for ways to intensify the reading experience through group reading strategies. A variety of these strategies were developed based on the constructivist learning theories of Piaget, Brunner and Vygotsky. These stressed that learning is an active process that occurs through interaction with others in the physical and social environment, as learners mentally construct knowledge. As explained by Izuagba, Nwigwe and Emejulu (2012, 137):

> *The context in which the task is situated as well as the activities the learners engage in provide rich opportunity for them to negotiate meaning. Their level of comprehension increases as they collaborate, complementing one another's ideas and incrementally attaining a shared understanding.*

Group reading strategies mean much more than reading round a circle or reciting words and sentences on the writing board together. Rather, they are strategies that give learners the opportunity to share, discuss and enjoy literacy experiences together. Group reading strategies are as many as they are varied. For example, the Reading Association of Nigeria utilized eleven such strategies during a workshop for language teachers in Imo State primary schools (Izuagba, Nwigwe and Emejulu, 2012). These included: prediction activities (predicting what will happen in a text based on the title and graphics); group/pair work; brainstorming/thought shower; picture walk; think-pair-share; Know-Want to know-Learn (K-W-L), (in which a learner states what he/she knows based on the title, identify what they still want to know, and read the text to resolve the problem); story map and Venn diagramme, both using graphics to give a visual summary of the written text; developing Big Books; discussion; and retelling. Similarly, Totemeyer (2011) describes Readathon activities in Namibia as including: group reading; storytelling and other oral presentations; writing of stories, poetry and dramas; drama performances; arts and crafts; singing, dancing, marches and parades; quizzes and games. Some of these and similar strategies will be presented as part of the Children's Centre vacation experience.

Creating Learning Spaces for Literacy Development
The context in which tasks are situated is an aspect as important as the strategies themselves, a point articulated by Izuagba, Nwigwe and Emejulu (2012) in the above statement. This brings us to the learning spaces libraries can create for literacy development. The concept of learning spaces expresses the idea that there are varied spaces within the environment providing opportunities to reflect on and analyze one's own learning. The creation of learning spaces might be something that is a choice but all

have certain characteristics. According to Okpala (2013), learning spaces—whether virtual or real, formal or informal—should be:

➢ Controlled by learners
➢ A space to learn or grow into new roles and responsibilities
➢ Where learners can hang around
➢ A space to practice oral and written language
➢ A place to inspire learners and motivate them to learn
➢ A space that is flexible
➢ A place that provides students and teachers with access to tools they require to be successful
➢ A space that is safe and inclusive.

Those who are successful at defining, generating and using such spaces have discovered how to use them best for themselves, and such individuals find various ways of forming learning spaces. Libraries serving children and young adults are dedicated to providing free and equitable access to information for all learners, be it in written, electronic or audiovisual form (Uzomba, 2014). These libraries play a key role in creating literate environments and promoting literacy by offering relevant and attractive reading material for all ages and levels and providing a space conducive for literacy.

As a learning space, the library is a place for a full range of learning activities. UNESCO (2005) has identified libraries as the epitome of the learning organization, in part because their environment encourages varied, independent and informal approaches. Libraries 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. Libraries also unfold the community's learning potential by providing relevant materials and information on community issues. According to Alberta Education (2010), school library services are seen as a significant part of school support where all learners can pursue intellectual engagement in both real and virtual landscapes.

Children's Centre Library as a Literacy Learning Space
The Children's Centre Library at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka was created by the University Women's Association in 1978 as an educational, developmental and recreational facility for children and youth. Though not called by that name, the Centre was envisioned as a literacy learning space offering young people varied opportunities through a model library, programmes of activities, and an outdoor playground. Basic to the Children's Centre philosophy is the conviction that children learn much of value through play and informal activities in a relaxed setting such as afforded by a literacy learning space. The women who developed this project, primarily teachers, librarians and lecturers in various fields, were concerned about too narrow a focus on formal schooling and book learning to the exclusion of development in other spheres of life—imagination and creativity, a spirit of inquiry, social and emotional life, moral and

spiritual development, sports and play, the arts and leisure. The Centre was conceived as providing:

- Relevant facilities and experiences for growth in a relaxed, warm, but professionally guided atmosphere;
- A place for introducing the world of knowledge, providing library and information resources for exploration of all fields of human endeavour;
- A place for exploring the wealth of Nigerian culture—its concepts, values, festivals, literature, music, artisan activities and all forms of creative expression;
- A place for encouraging scientific and technological inquiry and development of reflective and critical thinking skills;
- A place fostering the development of values, respect for human dignity, and appreciation of the unity and diversity of human experience;
- A place where children can pursue their interests, talents and studies at leisure and build their sense of competence and worth;
- A place where parents receive assistance in the challenging task of bringing up children in our changing society (Children's Centre, 2003).

In other words, it was conceived as a literacy learning space.

Vacation programmes have been among the earliest and most enduring features of the Children's Centre calendar. These offer a programme of activities for children during the long vacation and at times during the Christmas and Easter holidays. Typical activities include: arts and crafts; science skills; storytelling and creative writing; drama, music and dance; cookery and sewing; health education and first aid; sports and games; visits to the motherless babies home; and excursions to places of interest. Resource persons have included women and men from the community, youth corpers, students of library and information science, and members and international interns of a students' organization, and adolescent members of Children's Centre. This paper explores the use of these vacation programmes as learning spaces offering a variety of group reading strategies for enhancing literacy.

Group Reading Strategies in Literacy Learning Spaces: The CCL Experience

Strategies to develop a wide range of literacy skills must be carefully thought out and developed by libraries as an essential aspect of their services. This requires a nurturant environment, a learning space conducive to literacy. Within this space child can engage in literacy-building activities in a relaxed, informal and friendly atmosphere. Among the strategies libraries can employ in promoting reading and other forms of literacy are various forms of group reading in the informal setting of a literacy learning space.

The Children's Centre Library has provided a number of these in its recent (2013-2015) vacation programmes. Group reading strategies employed include: sustained silent reading, story hour, play with toys and games, book clubs, spelling and quiz competitions, art activities, comic book writing and book creation.

Sustained Silent Reading (SSR)

Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) as the name implies, takes place during a specified period of time, usually five to 20 minutes. The time is devoted to silent reading by a group, perhaps a class or family. Key to SSR is its completely voluntary nature in terms of choice; each person freely selects the reading material desired, so typically each is reading something different. What unites the group is that all are reading a material of choice at the same time and place. As noted by Seow (1999), SSR aims to:

- improve pupils' concentration span
- provide pupils with an adult model of reading
- provide pupils with a positive book experience
- expose pupils to a wide range of literary genres
- help pupils form good reading habits for extensive reading
- increase pupils' desire to read on their own during their free time
- develop in pupils a life-long love of reading.

Aside from silent reading as individuals, the strategy can take various forms. Jensen and Jensen (2002) outline a number of procedures that may be used effectively in SSR, for instance:

1. Summarizing in one sentence the main idea or theme of the book.
2. Reading a paragraph from the book and relating it to current happenings, such as national events or something in school
3. Using a dictionary to check a word in the book and commenting about unusual usage of the word.
4. Having the children ask questions about the book and developing models of questioning so that the pupils learn to go beyond simple recall-type questions.

5. Collecting a journal of interesting or unusual words, phrases, ideas, etc.

These extend learning through articulation of experience, collaboration with mates and connections to other areas and activities.

During the Children's Centre vacation programme, the first hour of the day was devoted to SSR. Children in senior primary and junior secondary school were asked to select any library book of their choice that they could finish within one hour. Some of these books were later discussed during book club. Most of the children selected stories, while one girl selected only comics and three boys chose titles about science and technology. At first the hour was too long for the children to concentrate on reading as they were eager to play. However, with time they became accustomed to the quiet time for reading and even came early so they could fully participate.

Story hour

Story hour programmes help to develop and nurture the reading habit and drive home points which may have been abstract to a child (Fayose, 2003). The activities of story hour programmes are planned to build up pupils' interest in books, reading and libraries. A typical story hour consists of two or three stories linked by "connectors" like conversation, a song or poem, a picture or object featured in the story, or riddles and jokes. Materials that can be used for story hour are almost without limit. They

include stories (how and why stories, adventure and romantic stories, funny stories, myth, etc); picture books, non-fiction books and magazines; poetry and songs; other forms of folklore; creative dramatics; and varied multi-media.

In the earlier days storytelling was usually carried out during moonlight games or in homes in the evening. Story hour now is organized beyond traditional settings—in school libraries, classrooms, pupils' libraries, homes and village squares. In modern times, story hour involves well-planned activities that would help develop a variety of literacy skills, such as skills in listening, viewing, and thinking.

Story hour can contribute greatly to a child's educational development by providing pleasurable introduction to language and literature, oral and written, as well as various arts. It promotes reading as well as expands horizons of knowledge and fosters healthy personal development. It is a social experience, fostering community and communication. Story hours can also be used to support classroom instruction, as demonstrated in the pilot study carried out by Onyebuchi (2010). This might be why Howe (cited in Onyebuchi) emphasized that "selecting stories related to topics students are studying in the classroom reinforce learning in school and offer them opportunity for collaboration with teachers." Most important is to remember that story hour is to be enjoyed!

During the vacation programme, story hour groups were organized into four according to age: the baby group, junior primary, senior primary and secondary. Themes for the junior group focused on animals of various types, while in the senior primary group the children themselves made the book selection. After the storyteller read a story aloud, children were encouraged to pick a book each and read to the group. After each session the children engaged in questions and answers. The secondary school students also engaged in story hour session but ran it themselves, with adults only sitting to listen and guide them. In all sessions the children pointed out words that were new to them, and through the guidance of the adults, they were able to find meanings of the words and use them in sentences, thus increasing their vocabulary.

Toys and games for literacy
Literacy skills were also developed through group activities with construction toys, jigsaw puzzles and games such as *ayo* and chess. These enhance pre-reading, mathematical, and thinking skills, thus contributing to several types of literacy. They also further social interaction and build self-confidence. For these reasons, the CCL made play with toys and games a regular activity for vacation as well as Saturday programmes. Simple forms are suitable for pre-schoolers, while elaborate Lego constructions, advanced jigsaw puzzles and games of strategy also task the abilities as well as entertain adolescents and adults.

For instance, in children, playing and creating with construction toys such as Lego can provide a foundation for mathematical, physics, engineering and creative skills, as well as build self-confidence and promote creativity and sociability. Jigsaw puzzles help develop visual, spatial, matching and analyzing skills, thus preparing the way for mathematics, reading and critical thinking. They also provide opportunities for

cooperation in completing the task, thus giving a sense of group satisfaction and accomplishment. Games such as *ayo* and chess, among others, develop strategic skills, as players visualize future moves and develop a plan for achieving the goal.

Book club

Shultz (2013) likened a book club to taking apart a stereo or bicycle so one can learn how to put it back together again, examining every screw, wire, and bolt and understanding how it fits within the grander scheme of operation. For him, book clubs move you outside preferred genre—your comfort zone. As expressed by Richard Thomas (in Shultz, 2013), to find your voice, "Step outside your comfort zone and see what else you can learn since every genre has something to offer you." The aim of any book club is expressing opinions, likes, dislikes, etc. Book clubs provide avid readers a community of other readers who share their enthusiasm, while the social nature of book clubs can engage developing readers who lack positive reading experiences. Miller (2012) noted that book clubs – groups of readers who meet on a regular basis to discuss books – appeal to readers because they combine book discussions with an opportunity to engage with reading peers. It is important that membership be made up of people who have something in common. This will help the participants to air their views openly. The many contributions of a book club include the following:

➢ It helps to have different ideas on an issue;
➢ It helps to relax and escape from the demands of everyday life;
➢ It is an easy way of teaching about social values, health issues, etc.;
➢ It helps to sharpen one's ability to think;
➢ Helps to improve vocabulary;
➢ Helps one to learn the act of speaking in public; and
➢ Provides an opportunity for meeting people (Dike, Osadebe and Onyebuchi, 2013).

Book clubs are not new to the Children's Centre Library, the most prominent in recent experience being the Football/Reading Club organized for adolescent boys (Osadebe, 2013). During the vacation programme, participants in senior primary and secondary school formed a book club, whereby the children were given a type of book appropriate for their age. Each child was to read the book for four days and on the fifth day they would come together as a group to discuss what they had read. Guiding questions concerned the author, illustrator, the plot, the setting. Was it well illustrated? Did the title match the story? What had they learned? Did they come across new words? They were then asked to make sentences with the new words.

The book club experience provided a literacy learning space that developed children in several crucial areas, including speaking fluency, confidence, team work, and thinking skills. At the end of the programme, the children had improved in speaking confidently and fluently. The children who were shy were able to develop more confidence towards the end of the programme; they started coming forward to speak and read before their group members.

Also, the children improved tremendously in working together as a group. During the first week of the programme, the children in secondary class were grouped into two

and asked to showcase the differences between two countries: Nigeria and the Philippines. There were cases of argument and bickering among the children in the beginning, but by the third week they were working together very well, asking one another questions and giving their views in different cases. One of the things observed was that there was improvement in the way the children reason with others; their thinking skills developed greatly. When asked about what they thought could have been done to avoid some problems, the children were eager to think and proffer some solutions. Their knowledge about things in their immediate environment and the wider world expanded.

Competitions - spelling bee and quiz

The above skills were also developed through a variety of competitions. For instance, spelling bee was introduced in the book club. Groups consisting of four children were separately asked to spell twenty words, in levels from the easiest to the most difficult. Those children who scaled through by spelling all their words correctly were re-grouped for the next stage with more difficult words until an overall winner emerged.

Their knowledge also increased in the area of quiz competition, focusing on questions about current issues. Because of their new confidence, a majority of the children were able to present quiz and debate confidently during the last week of the programme. Through identifying new words, finding their meaning and forming sentences, the vocabulary of the children greatly increased, and this made the quiz competition more interesting and greatly competitive.

Art activities

Art is a basic form of human communication. The earliest human records are cave paintings, and people have continued to express themselves through art throughout the ages. In recent times, with the development of audiovisual and electronic media, visual information resources have become more and more important, necessitating emphasis on the development of visual literacy. The theory of multiple intelligences has also called attention to the vital role of creativity and the imagination in human activities (Gardner, 1991). As a result, artistic and creative endeavours are seen as a crucial aspect of literacy learning spaces.

The children also engaged in art group during the vacation programme, where they used art, i.e., drawing and painting, to tell a story. The children were encouraged to develop a story each by themselves and to also draw and paint each object or subject in the story. At the beginning it was somewhat difficult for the children, but by their third practice, some improved greatly and by the end of the art classes were able to produce good drawings and paintings. These were primarily animals in the primary group; and animals, objects and people in the secondary group. It was observed that the children's creative skill improved. Most of the children, especially those in primary and junior secondary, developed love for art and painting.

Comic book writing

The encouragement received from the art class gave rise to introducing children to comic book writing as a strategy for developing their literacy, both basic and visual (Bitz, 2010). This strategy was introduced to the CCL by Obi Emejulu and Michael Bitz,

who had worked together on projects in the United States; both conducted workshops on comic book writing and other group reading strategies for literacy development at the Children's Centre in 2013.

In the first phase, children were given a short story and asked to transform it into images with appropriate text in the dialogue balloons. The children were then given a panel board that contained topical issues affecting society. Using the theme of a superhero, the children selected one of these topics for their story, after learning the qualities of a superhero. In the second phase, the children used their imagination to build a story about a superhero in the context of their own immediate environment. The major focus was on how the superhero saved the day in a given situation. The themes they wrote on concerned the following:

1) Disease: saving a community from the spread of disease among the people;
2) Crime: helping to arrest criminals terrorizing the community;
3) Human trafficking: reflecting on how superheroes helped in reducing the high rate of trafficking of children and youth, as well as drug trafficking in the society;
4) Rape: coming to the rescue of victims of rape and child molestation (helping them recover from the psychological trauma and bringing the culprit to book;
5) Poverty alleviation: bringing welfare to the grassroots, e.g., people learning trades or handiwork, or obtaining formal education (if they were still interested).

In the beginning many children found this activity difficult and tedious. This was perhaps due to their lack of background in art and writing, the insufficient attention given to creativity and thinking skills, and the short attention span often noticed in today's youth, attributed to the constant use of electronic media. However, with time, a number of the children developed interest and confidence, especially when they saw their mates succeeding. Some, especially those with aptitude in art, produced excellent work; a few failed to complete their comic books, perhaps due to the insufficient length of the vacation programme. Generally, however, children developed their creative skills and self-confidence through this activity.

Book creation
This activity emerged as a result of the enthusiasm engendered by the art learning and comic writing. The question that arose among the coordinators was, since the children had been introduced to drawing and painting as well as story making, how then could this knowledge and experience be transformed into a bigger book presentation? The question gave rise to learning how to make a book. This took two forms: making pocket books and big books.

For pocket books, children were given a plain sheet of paper, a pencil, a cleaner and a sharpener each and paired. The children in each pair were asked to interview each other on their life history—name, age, place of birth, address, phone number, academic qualifications, sex, goals and ambitions, hobbies, religion, position in the family, family background (including state of origin and other information). After the interview children were asked to make a pocket book and write a biography of the person they interviewed. This turned out to be a marvellous exercise, and the children all got

excited about the new learning activity. A greater percentage of them produced a good biography.

The second type was creating a big book. Big books have been widely used by READ in South Africa and RAN in Nigeria, among other settings, as group projects for literacy. For example, Landis, Umolu and Mancha (2010) carried out a literacy promotion project in which children developed bilingual big books in Hausa and English. The essence of the big book creation was to introduce the children to picture presentation. Pictures imprint on permanent learning and interpret events more vividly than ordinary words, and in a big book few words are needed. Pictures are made large to cover almost the whole page of the paper. The children were shown varieties of big books, taught the qualities of these books, and encouraged to make samples of big books. After being assigned to groups of five, they selected an issue of their choice for their book. Some selected topics were uses of trees, animal stories, and water. As with the comic books and pocket books, creation of big books developed their creativity, cooperation and thinking abilities, as well as their artistic and writing skills.

Conclusion

Today, more learning is taking place outside of classrooms than ever before, as Okpala (2013) aptly observed. To facilitate learning in groups, literacy learning spaces need to be created in libraries as well as schools, communities and homes. Spaces need to be created where conversation and social interaction are seen as an essential part of learning, and these places the author called relaxing and friendly. Such learning spaces provide the context for a variety of innovative group reading strategies and a nurturant environment for all round literacy development. A good example of such a space is the Children's Centre Library at the University of Nigeria.

Vacation programmes offer many diverse opportunities for literacy development through activities employing group reading strategies. The organisers of the vacation programme used this opportunity to conduct a variety of activities which are different from the conventional ones children experience in schools. The programmes were a great success, and children and even the organisers were excited as the programme came to an end. Participants acquired more knowledge, enjoyed enriching experiences, and developed their communication skills and creativity. Children also felt free to work in a team, thereby enhancing their ability to cooperate and collaborate with others. When children are allowed a space to learn with their mates and for pleasure, they build more confidence and team spirit. This, therefore, provides an example of how learning spaces can be created in libraries to advance literacy development through group reading strategies, a programme we recommend to others.

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