

## Reading Advocacy In The Post-Covid-19 Era

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### Abstract

*This paper presents opinions on how school librarians could advocate for reading among students in situations where there is no access to a school library. Taking a clue from the COVID-19 Pandemic experience, the paper suggests possible ways through which school librarians could encourage students to engage in active reading irrespective of the lack of commitment on the part of concerned stakeholders. Existing literature were reviewed, conclusion was drawn and recommendations were made based on the literature reviewed.*

**Keywords:** Reading advocacy, posts COVID-19, students, school librarians.

### Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the lapses and inadequacies existing in the education sector of Nigeria. The country has been lagging in the adoption and use of digital resources to facilitate learning. The closure of schools due to the outbreak of Coronavirus-19 in Nigeria as in most parts of the world resulted in a setback for students in the country because there were no facilities in place to teach students remotely. The demand for remote learning occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated reading advocacy. The purpose of which is to ginger students to adjust to changes that COVID-19 has brought to teaching-learning and prepare them for the transition from the analog method of learning to the digital method to suit the current trend in education the world over. Before now, many students in Nigeria have depended on the school for nearly all learning activities and aids. So, it was quite challenging for them during the lockdown to learn through other means which are mostly digital particularly when facilities for such learning are not accessible to them. Consequently, many of the students lost the knowledge and skills they acquired in school earlier in the year during their long stay at home.

However, the changes brought about by the pandemic have come to stay, therefore, the students cannot run away from the present reality of learning remotely because it is the new normal in the post-COVID-19. This brings about the necessity for reading advocacy as reading is the key to successful learning. Reading advocacy entails pleading for support for the provision of resources that would encourage and sustain reading among students. It also involves activities that would attract support for reading engagement among students. Although reading advocacy could be employed for the promotion of reading in the school, however, it is particularly useful for the promotion of remote reading. The burden of execution of remote learning falls heavily on school librarians as collaborators with teachers in implementing the curriculum. Therefore, the school librarian is expected to champion the cause of reading advocacy to the advantage of the students. Secondly, as literacy advocates, the onus of reading advocacy falls on the school librarian to ensure that students are adequately prepared and provided with the necessary resources needed

for learning remotely. Thus, this study provides an overview of reading advocacy for students in Nigeria by school librarians in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era.

Reading advocacy is making case for and providing support for the ability to read fluently and effectively among students. It also involves activities that would promote and encourage reading such that in the long run, reading would become a daily activity among students. Understanding that reading is crucial to the ability to learn effectively has enhanced the importance of advocating for effective reading ability. It is public knowledge that COVID19 primarily affected public health, but the spillover effects on education stemming largely from extended school closure cannot be overemphasized. It was reported that COVID-19-driven school closures obstructed close to 46 million students in Nigeria and more than 1.6 billion students in more than 190 countries from learning activities within the four walls of schools (Nigeria Education in Emergencies Working Group, 2020; United Nations, 2020). The low rates of infection among students notwithstanding, school closure was a critical pillar of the social distancing tools to mitigate the spread of the virus and avoid an acceleration of cases that could put a strain on health services (United States Center for Disease Control, US-CDC, 2020). The position of education as a continuous process of lifelong learning was under threat by the long-term closure of schools. Thus, ensuring continuous reading despite school closure brings about the need for reading advocacy.

Reading advocacy is a necessity in addressing the education gap brought about by the COVID-19 school closure to prevent further setbacks for students. The necessity of reading is borne out of the fact that reading is the bedrock of learning and a critical tool for academic success. Meanwhile, extended interrupted education that disengages students from the learning process has the potential of reversing the gains in learning results. An even higher cost comes from the disengagement of students with learning challenges. Besides, no students can boast of having all the educational books/resources needed for lifelong learning; thus, they all need to depend on the school library. Longer school closures without adequate provision for continuous learning could result in an increased rate of out-of-school children, particularly those from lower-income groups. Complete school closure or reduced learning duration in school also increases the burden on school librarians who need to stay alert or find new arrangements for students to continue to read even if they have to stay at home. Reading advocacy is hereby proposed as one of such new arrangements that school librarians could employ to keep the students reading and learning actively irrespective of inability to access school due to barriers occasioned by pandemics such as COVID-19 or any other circumstances.

### **COVID-19 and Nigerian government plans for the post-COVID-19 pandemic era**

Coronavirus is a virus that is normally transmitted between animals and people. The Coronavirus disease is caused by a new strain of Coronavirus called SAR-COV-2; a virus that has not been previously identified in humans is a communicable respiratory disease that causes illness in humans. The disease which was first reported by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on the 31st of December, 2019 in Wuhan, China, is still being studied by scientists who think that the virus was acquired by humans from animals and is transmitted from an infected human to other humans (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, 2020). The confirmation of the index case of the disease in Nigeria on 28 February 2020 led to the government's decision to close all schools in the country for the time being to forestall the uncontrolled spread of the disease. The lockdown

of the country froze among others, academic activities, therefore, the government put up a plan to alleviate the effect of the pandemic on the citizens.

However, the education sector was not given adequate attention as the sector was not attended to until much later. Even then, the on-the-air programmes embarked met with different challenges that prevented many students from benefitting from the programmes. The cold response of the government to the education sector at the time could imply that the economy and other sectors will suffer a setback in not distant future because education is the bedrock of any society. No matter how laudable the plan for other sectors of the country may be, it is almost certain that the plan will not work if education is not adequately put into consideration because it is on the wings of education that other sectors can fly. Therefore, for there to be continued learning, the school librarians as literacy advocates need to take up the challenge notwithstanding the government's cold reaction to education at this crucial time. Reading advocacy is a necessity especially for students to be adequately equipped with resources that will make learning continue even outside the school and prevent further increase in the rate of out-of-school children and young adults.

### **Overview of reading advocacy**

Advocacy is an act of promoting the interests or cause of someone or a group of people; lending them a helping hand to find their voices (Christman and Sayko, 2017). According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2021), advocacy also means taking action to create change and taking steps to tackle an issue. It is the act of pleading for, supporting, or recommending which may involve lobbying to raise awareness, influence, and change policies or situations for individuals who may not be able to speak for themselves (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2013). There are three types of advocacy which are self-advocacy, individual advocacy, and systems advocacy. The reading advocacy here is the system advocacy which is aimed at harnessing the necessary resources and putting the resources in place for students to use to achieve lifelong learning. Reading advocacy is not a new phenomenon even though it is usually resorted to when all other options of getting the appropriate stakeholder in education to do the needful have failed. Oftentimes it may be unpalatable because of the rigours involved, especially when the desired result is not fully achieved. This does not imply that it is a fruitless effort; it only means that the school librarians must understand the demands of advocacy before embarking on it. The school librarian should understand that reading advocacy is an act of supporting or speaking out for someone else's educational needs or rights in reading, writing, and language.

Reading advocacy involves focusing on the educational needs of a student, issues for many students, and/or ways to teach and learn so that attention could be drawn to the needs and consequently support could be garnered to meet the needs and satisfy the focus audience who in this case are students. Literacy on its own is a fundamental human right and the basis for any individual's ability to learn. It is essential for social and human development and also provides individuals with the skills and empowerment they need to transform their lives. This will in turn result in an improved standard of education and the ability to earn a higher income (Christman and Sayko, 2017). However, for reading advocacy to succeed, the school librarian who is championing the cause must possess good listening skills, must be patient, articulate, organised, flexible, positive, knowledgeable about the need for literacy, and must possess the ability to motivate people to support the reading advocacy cause (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2013). The need for reading advocacy among students in Nigeria, especially in this era of education

challenge brought about by Coronavirus-19 cannot be avoided. This is particularly important because more than ever, the outbreak of the disease all over the world has brought to fore the inadequacy existing in the use of digital facilities in the education sector of the nation. Before now, digital facilities are put into little use especially in learning because, many students in the country lack access to the facilities. United Nations Children's Fund (2017) reported that two out of five youths in Africa are not online.

This lack of connectivity to digital access is a deprivation of African youths to new learning opportunities, communication, and skill acquisition for relevance in the twenty-first-century workplace. Going by the present situation of lack of access to digital facilities in Nigeria, it could be implied that some of the 46 million students who were locked out of school due to the pandemic in Nigeria as reported by Nigeria Education in Emergencies Working Group (2020) were excluded from digital access to learning. This number of students was put in a disadvantaged position to compete with their peers from other parts of the world where access to digital facilities is readily available. Other challenges have necessitated the need for reading advocacy among the students; these include their inadequate commitment to reading which has been a major challenge in education (Ukoha, 2015). It is a major challenge because, without reading, learning cannot take place. Significantly, many students in Nigeria have indicated that their non-commitment to reading was born out of the lack of access to a library and adequate relevant reading resources (Anyaeibu, Umejiaku, and Nwafor, 2016).

Therefore, access to books and other reading resources is a major hurdle that needs to be crossed in advocating for literacy among students in this era. Non-commitment to reading by students at this time of restriction on the duration of time students can spend in school could spell doom for them if the necessary step is not taken to encourage reading to boost literacy among them. Thus, reading advocacy is essential in enlightening students to improve their reading to make up for the time not spent in school to ensure that they cover all the topics in all their subject areas. Also, inadequate reading could result in students' deficiency in information literacy. Being information literate in this era is very important as this will help the students to adequately sieve information to identify genuine and reliable information out of myriads got from various sources (Naik and Padmini, 2014). Without being information literate, they may fall prey to much wrong information being passed on social media which could affect their health and wellbeing if such information is not well scrutinized before they are put into use. Furthermore, reading advocacy may enhance the information literacy skills of the students. This is because, the more the students read, the more enlightened they are likely to become, and the more equipped to sift information to detect which is useful and which is not.

There is also the need for school librarians to embark on reading advocacy to bring the library to the students who due for one reason or the other may not have access to one in their locality. This is necessary because social distancing at this time will limit the number of students who can make use of the library and this will deprive many students of the opportunity of reading in the library. So, reading advocacy is needed to ensure that no student is denied the right to read as stipulated in the case for children's right to read by International Literacy Association (2018). Moreover, observation has shown that the government is not likely able to provide schools with all the facilities that will encourage students to get more involved in reading. Therefore, to assist students in getting access to reading materials that will stir up their interest in reading, reading

advocacy is of utmost importance. For this reason, school librarians have to think outside the box to design reading advocacy programmes that will inspire and challenge students to take reading more seriously. More so, a study by Merga (2019) has revealed that a lack of motivation to read is one of the reasons why students are less engaged in reading activities.

Besides, today's reality has thrown a challenge to school librarians to be more proactive in proving their worth to students, parents, school administrators, and even the government to maintain their relevance in the education sector (EBSCO, N.D). To make reading advocacy the game-changer in promoting literacy among students, the school librarians as literacy advocates must be passionate about reading so that they could encourage students to get involved in reading through their reading activities (Havran, 2020). That is, they must be avid readers whose reading activities would throw challenges to the students. They should be able to defy all odds to provide students with a print-rich environment to entice them to read; read with them and encourage them to read as well. They need to be resilient in their action as they are likely to encounter challenges that could discourage them. It is also important that the School Librarian is equipped with adequate knowledge of the different challenges that have been hampering the development of literacy among the students. This will help them to embark on the right advocacy programmes capable of bringing about improvement. Besides, they should be ready to approach the appropriate individuals, offices, establishments, philanthropic organisations, charitable foundations, and ministries for support in the advocacy (National and State Libraries Australasia, 2012).

Besides, individuals who may feel threatened by the advocacy programme should be identified and given a role to play to avoid them opposing the programme. For instance, content area teachers and school principals may feel threatened; thus, they should be carried along in the programme so that they can cooperate with the school librarian in achieving success in the advocacy programmes. More so, advocacy is a marketing strategy the school librarian needs to employ to show the importance of school library and school library programmes (EBSCO, N.D). This is important, particularly at this time when students can access reading resources without getting to the library and this is being misinterpreted to imply that the school librarians are not so needed anymore. Although the school librarian has the traditional role of developing reading and initiating reading promotional activities to create awareness of books and reading programmes; they are also adopting digital technology to meet the needs of the school community to inspire them to read (Williams, Wavell, and Morrison, 2013).

### **Reading advocacy Initiatives for students in the post-Coronavirus-19 era**

Provision of access to books. The first step in advocating for reading is the provision of access to books and other literature. Easy accessibility and availability of physical and virtual reading resources at the point where it is needed are crucial to getting students to read (Williams, Wavell, and Morrison, 2013). Students are motivated to read when they have access to literature that suits their reading enjoyment (Sims, 2012). In providing access to reading materials, the school librarian should take the reading needs of both boys and girls into cognizance (Ashcroft, 2017). The fact that libraries and reading materials are inadequate or in many instances unavailable in schools in Nigeria (Nwosu, 2015, Ukpebor, 2017) should not be allowed to deter students from reading. This is the point where a partnership with charitable individuals and foundations, private and public organisations, ministries, and other identified potential donors comes to play. The

school librarian needs to build a partnership with influential stakeholders for reading advocacy to succeed (EBSCO, N.D.). One such is the World Literacy Foundation (<https://worldliteracyfoundation.org/about-us/>) which aims at providing books and educational resources for children's reading enjoyment.

Interestingly, Nigeria is one of the countries covered by the activities of the foundation in Africa. The foundation has a digital learning initiative aimed at facilitating access to educational resources for children in remote communities, and the foundation is willing to reach out to more schools and communities (<https://worldliteracyfoundation.org/africa/>). There is also a collaboration between United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and HITCH a non-governmental organisation that partners with 'Teach for Nigeria' (another Non-Governmental Organisation) to evaluate and select educational videos which could aid curriculum delivery. HITCH is an e-learning tool that provides access to video resources designed for students in Nigeria to continue to learn without restriction even when school is not opened physically United Nations Children's Fund, 2020). Thus, whether students are in school or outside of school with this type of resources, learning continues. Others include the Ovie Brume Foundation which can be reached through (<https://oviebrumefoundation.org/en/education-unit/>), Coca-cola Foundation, Save the Children, and a whole lot of others. Political office holders such as Senators, House of Representatives, and House of Assembly members of the Senatorial Districts and constituencies of the school location could be approached to make provision of educational resources to students as a part of the constituency project.

However, in contacting the potential partners in the advocacy initiative, the school librarian should carry along the appropriate stakeholders in the school to avoid misunderstanding of purpose. Broomley (2008) had predicted that people will read only digital text, this reality is now starring everyone in the face by the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic. Thus, when soliciting books and other educational resources, it is important to request digital educational resources so that students can have access to them in the comfort of their homes thereby avoiding or limiting physical contact with others. The teacher-librarian can also provide and direct the students to websites where they can access educational materials online. Such websites include, Audible for Kids which is a special collection of audiobooks made available in six languages and free for children to listen to during school closure.

There are also, Bookshare, Tales2Go, and Epic which are all free for students to access directly or through the teacher-librarian. Partnership with the parents of the students is crucial to the success of the online reading, so, the School Librarian has to partner with the home (National and State Libraries Australasia, 2012) especially as some of the students may need the computer gadgets of their parents for the programme since they may not own one personally. In providing access to reading resources, School Librarians need to partner with teachers in building classroom libraries and empower them to be proficient in technology uses which include using the online catalogue and subscription databases (EBSCO, N.D.) to advocate for reading among the students. Since the number of students that can read in the library at a point in time has been limited, to ensure that none of them is denied the opportunity to read; it was suggested that class teachers get the books out of the library to classrooms where the students can then have access to them (Merga, 2019).

### **Remote reading**

Reading advocacy can be extended to remote areas where Internet facilities and electricity could not be reached through radio and television. In such areas, reading programmes could be aired on radio and/or television. Library booths could also be set up for pupils and students to get access to reading and academic information at their leisure in remote areas. Radio and television could serve as e-reading resources for pupils in remote areas because of their coverage and affordability to people in these areas, more so, pupils enjoy being read to. Interesting reading programmes which could be aired daily or weekly could be used as a reading advocacy tool for pupils in remote areas. The programme could be handled by the school librarian through the pre-recording of reading a book that would be aired in parts. It could also be a form of book preview to arouse the interest of pupils who could be encouraged to get the book to read on their own. The remote reading would be capital intensive as it may involve paying the radio or television station to air the programme. Thus, the school librarian will need to partner with the government, philanthropic individuals, or corporate bodies who could sponsor the programme so that pupils in remote areas will have access to qualitative reading and learning via radio and television.

Library booths that could be funded by local government could also be provided in appreciable quantity for pupils in remote areas to be allowed to read. The pupils should be spaced in the booths following the COVID-19 guideline. Moreover, since the reading booths will be shared by several pupils, other COVID-19 protocols such as social distancing; washing of hands; wearing of masks; robbing of hands with sanitizers, and so on should be observed. Besides, the kind of reading materials that will be used in such places should be special materials, such as digitized and/or Nanotech materials either in electronic or physical format. The physical format could be digitized books/materials that can be disinfected after use to guard against the spread of infections (COVID-19). The library booth is very crucial in making sure that pupils get access to reading materials considering the challenges faced by pupils in developing countries like Nigeria. According to the statistics by United Nations Children Education Fund (UNICEF) (2020), only 30% of the low-income countries could execute distance learning platforms, meanwhile, before the beginning of the pandemic, one-third of the world's young people were already digitally excluded and Africa and the bulk of this is from Africa.

### **Reading Advocates**

Reading advocacy can also be done through the appointment of reading advocates. Due to the enormity of the job of school librarians in executing advocacy, support partners who could volunteer as literacy advocates should be identified and appointed. The school librarian could search for such persons among parents or teachers who themselves are avid readers and will be willing to be involved in reading to a small number of pupils. Being an avid reader will imply that such a person will be able to provide the pupils with a literacy-rich environment where access to books and an environment conducive to reading will not be a problem. The reading advocates' job will be to model a love for reading in the pupils by showing an example as a reading role model, by reading to them on regular basis and encouraging them to read through the provision of books, sharing the story in the book she has read with them and referring them to books that will interest them. The literacy advocate could also engage the pupils in conversation to build their vocabulary to enhance their reading potential. Due to the peculiarity of the time where social distancing is important to keep COVID-19 away, the number of pupils that will be served by a reading advocate should be limited to 10. For this reason, the school

librarian would have to identify as many reading advocates that will be sufficient to cater to the pupils.

### **Reading Stations**

Reading stations could be another initiative that could give pupils in both remote and other areas the opportunity to read despite the challenge of Coronavirus-19. Foote, Falk-Ross, Szabo, and Sampson (2008) explained that reading stations equip students to learn together within an environment thereby promoting cooperative learning skills in addition to independent learning propelled by self-monitoring and problem-solving. However, due to the peculiarity of the time, to avoid crowded reading stations, the reading station can be transformed into what is termed a listening centre by the International Library Association (2019). In the station, audiobooks can be provided and read for pupils to enjoy. By so doing, pupils would not be crowded and they will still enjoy the presence of one another without necessarily moving closer. The pupils could be allowed to ask questions on the audiobook they listened to, and as this is done, they would benefit from one another and achieve better vocabulary development. Reading/listening stations could be set up in schools by teachers with the help of a school librarian. It could also be set up in communities by reading advocates still with the help of a school librarian. However, the school librarian will need to collaborate with philanthropic individuals, foundations, and/or organisations to fund the programme. Foote, Falk-Ross, Szabo, and Sampson (2008) however suggested that quietness should be maintained in the station and movement should be restrained, and this is good because it will reduce the risk of exposure of the pupils to one another and thereby reduce the risk of spreading the Coronavirus-19.

### **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 Pandemic experience exposed the inadequacies in the education system in Nigeria, especially in terms of the provision of reading resources to students. The pandemic also exposed the need for government and other proprietors of educational institutions to make resources available in schools to promote reading. In addition, the pandemic further revealed the importance of making provisions for reading resources for students' use outside of school. Meanwhile, when government and other stakeholders are not forthcoming in the provision of resources, the school librarian is expected to take up the challenge. The school librarian as a passionate promoter of reading is encouraged to provide reading resources for students through advocacy initiatives to ensure that students are inspired to read. This becomes more crucial, especially in situations such as Coronavirus-19 which resulted in the long-term closure of schools and, the limited amount of time students spend in school to prevent the second outbreak of the Coronavirus-19. Besides, UNESCO recommended the adoption of hi-tech, low- tech and no-tech solutions to solving the problem of learning that arose from the impact of Coronavirus-19 so that students can continue to learn without many limitations (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Concerned stakeholders should work in line with the recommendation to make adequate preparation against future unforeseen circumstances such as the pandemic. The challenge of access to technological learning among many students in Africa in addition to the non-existence of school libraries and inadequate funding of school libraries makes it even more difficult for the school librarians to make a visible impact on students learning. Therefore, the school librarian could take the advocacy initiative further to include the provision of technological tools which could be used to promote reading and learning. Reading advocacy is a necessity to supplement



government effort at providing students opportunity to read to learn, and enjoy. It is envisaged that reading advocacy would bring a lot of changes to school library services and result in improved performance for students if the advocacy programme is pursued with utmost interest and enthusiasm.

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