

BALANCING THE LITERACY EQUATION: THE PLACE OF SCHOOL LIBRARY MEDIA RESOURCES (SLMRs)

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Abstract

This paper highlights the role of school library in literacy attainment by attempting to construct a conceptual nexus between reading culture and reading skills of pupils. It further explains the components of learning process, literacy attainment, literacy needs and outcome. The indispensability of the school library media resource as a learning and literacy enabler was brought to fore, while the need to facilitate and encourage the use of school library media resources was also emphasized. It concluded with advocacy for school library project, training of library personnel and adequate funding of school libraries that would be capable of producing desirable literacy outcome.

Keywords: Literacy equation, School library media resources

Introduction

Literacy is at the centre of national development. It is the tool for capacity building that can fuel citizen's potentials to acquire and extend the frontier of knowledge that will enhance their understanding in every field of knowledge and ultimately serve as catalyst for academic, social and economic performance. Information literacy is critical to development. Information literacy is an understanding and set of abilities that enables individuals to recognise when information is needed and have the capacity to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information. Broadly, information literate person is one who knows what and when he needs information, and is then able to identify, locate, evaluate, organise, and effectively use the information to address and help resolve personal, job related, or broader social issues and problems.

The literacy level of a society is a key economic and social indicator. It embodies the skills and cumulative learning—the "human capital"—essential to economic growth (Becker 1964; Romer 1993; Schultz 1963). It is related to higher earnings and tax revenue, reduced crime rates, less unemployment and dependence on social welfare, and lower health care costs (HRDC, OECD and Statistics Canada 1997). The term "literacy" means more than the ability to read and write—it refers to a person's ability to "use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (OECD and Statistics Canada 1995). Therefore, literacy also embraces concepts of "cultural capital" which pertains to certain values, forms of communication, and organizational patterns (Bourdieu 1977),

Reading, literacy and information literacy are essential for development of the human mind. An essential pedagogical perspective is the reliance on school library media resources for the development and attainment of students reading skills. This is because the school library offers a platform for learners to have access to materials that promote

reading, literacy and information literacy. The library helps students from low socio-economic background have access to printed, non-print and electronic resources that help in developing their quest for knowledge. Even those who are not scourged with such socio-economic incapacitation could not purchase and possess all types of learning resources that they would ever need. The school library therefore comes as a necessary interventionist facility for literacy attainment of all categories of learners. The school library provides access to a wide variety of materials that meet the various intellectual thirsts of young minds. Thus literacy attainment is closely correlated to availability of up-to-date library resources.

It can be posited that a reading society is a developing society. A trite saying that readers are leaders is true for the society at large. Reading is a cure for ignorance and a precursor to information acquisition. Going by the fact that information has been advanced as one of the factors of production and agent of development, it stands to reason therefore that literacy promoted by reading attainment is indispensable for societal growth and development.

Maduabuchi (2009) emphasized on the importance of literacy as touching on the total development of the man. Schematically, Figure 1 depicts Maduabuchi's view. The total person can be conceived and perceived as a person who possesses all and some other more literacy types characterised in the figure.

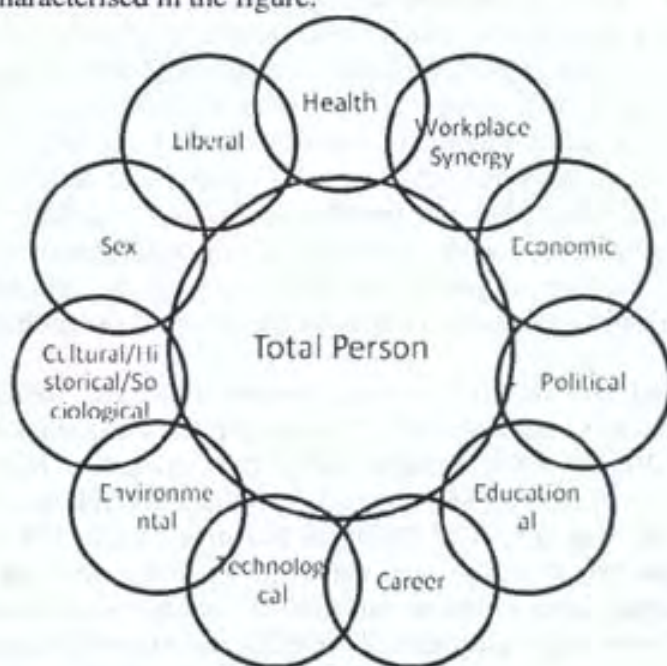


Figure 1 Total Person's literacy composition

The literacy types shown in the figure can only be attained not by experience or by feeling or seeing but predominantly by reading. Reading, therefore, is essential for the person. The persons make the society. By extension the development of the society is highly dependent on the literacy attainment of its citizens. Maduabuchi (2009) illustrated

the misalignment that could result when reading, the bedrock of literacy attainment, is relegated to the background. "It is the first button in the garment of education and when wrongly positioned all the rest of the garment will be misaligned" Maduabuchi (2009).

Literacy challenge in Nigeria

Literacy in Nigeria dated back to the era of colonial rule when it became imperative for the colonial masters to communicate with the indigenes on matters of governance. The great feat accomplished by the colonialists through literacy served as motivation for the Nationalists to invest heavily on education as soon as Nigeria attained independence. Abiodun-Ekus and Onukaogu (2009) reported that the tempo of literacy development in Nigeria went low as soon as the military took over power from the political class that fought and won independence for Nigeria. The military institution was mainly concerned with consolidation of power and amassing of wealth at the expense of education. There was vacillation between military and civilian rule over a long period. This resulted in socio-political instability, economic retrogression and avarice cupidity in the nation with attendant backlash effect on education and hence literacy attainment of citizens.

It is worrisome to discover that over five decades after independence, Nigeria cannot boast of any clearly articulated policy statement on reading. Additionally, there has not been any reading curriculum that can direct the path to developing reading skills at both primary and secondary school level. This negligence has grave consequence in the sense that average Nigerian is not developed to his full capacity and most students are not benefiting optimally from the formal education till today.

Besides, poverty has been identified as one of the banes of development in Nigeria. Understandably, poverty and illiteracy are closely related. By extension literacy development is critically at risk in a poverty ridden economy. Agbaje (2007) and Ikpaahindi (2012) reported that Nigeria is among the first 20 countries with the widest gap between the rich and the poor. Ikpaahindi further reported that an estimated half of the populace live on less than a United States Dollar per day, while about 70% live on less than two Dollars per day. These categories of people find it difficult to provide basic necessity of life. This position is further strengthened by the submission of Okpala (2009) when she characterised the challenges to reading in Nigeria. In her words:

A person that cannot provide basic physical needs cannot buy books, especially books for pleasure. In extreme cases poor parents may not be able to send their children to school. Those that manage to would most likely require their children to help out after school, thereby limiting time available for reading (Okpala, 2009, p. 97).

The goal of literacy attainment could not however be unattainable if and when the school and the society rise to the challenge of filling the gap created by the poverty level of the majority. Unfortunately public library has been known to be underfunded and have not risen to this challenge. The school library could be a most fitting avenue through which literacy could be pursued.

Language has also posed a great challenge to literacy development of Nigerian youth. The language of tuition is foreign. Most books are written in this second language. Children must therefore gain mastery over the language before they can venture into voluntary reading. However, this is not peculiar to Nigeria. Day and Bamford (1998) commented that learning to read in the second language does not encourage reading. Consequently, literacy attainment becomes a tall goal to achieve.

West Africa Examination Council, (WAEC) (2004) attributed the poor performance of candidates in science subject, to their failure to interpret questions correctly and give answers in clear terms. This stems not from cognitive deficiency but primarily from literacy imbalance. Therefore, deliberate efforts must be geared towards developing literacy skills if the citizens are to become empowered agents of national development.

Illiteracy has made it impossible for many Nigerians to discover the hidden treasure in books. It hinders them from discovering their hidden talents and how best they can harness their intellectual endowment for personal advantage and for the nation. Given the importance of reading for personal wellbeing, career progression and societal development, it is imperative to inculcate reading lifestyle in the students. This would make them invest their time on reading to acquire general knowledge. This, however, depends on their personal preferences and information needs.

Role of school library in literacy attainment

The school libraries play a vital role in the attainment of literacy in any given society. Its variegated resources in form of print books, monographs, serials, e-resources and human resources are crucial to literacy development. It should therefore be given a prime place and attention, if we are to reap the full benefit of literacy. School library is essential to every long-term strategy for literacy, education, information provision and economic, social and cultural development.

The school library is the repository of essential stratagem and incentives for learning to learn. It is a laboratory consisting of learning enablers. Considering Government declaration on commitment to achieving the goal of Education, school library media resources must be put in place and where the traditional forms of school library exist; efforts should be geared towards serious upgrading so as to enable users acquire self learning skills that would enhance lifelong learning. Literacy attainment in Nigeria is a lofty goal that is achievable if the library resources are developed and deployed towards its realization. Dike (2003) aptly captures the essence of school library:

If we want children, and all citizens to acquire literacy, we must provide reading materials the abundant and pleasurable reading materials found in libraries. If we want learners to develop skills for lifelong learning, we must give them opportunities to enquire, to search, to explore, to practice, to solve problems. Such as are found in libraries. If we want to introduce them to the world of knowledge and teach them to handle information in many forms, we need the resources of a well – equipped library

There are three essential requirements of a school library that would perform the function of literacy enabler. These are the collections, the furnishing and the professional support. This is illustrated in the figure below.



Figure 2 School Libraries as Literacy Enabler

i. The quality and character of the collections

It is required of a school library to be stocked with learning resources that are not only up to date, but also address contemporary issues. Currency of information is one of the indispensable qualities of a good library. Oyediran-Tidings (2004) reported that library users sometimes visit the library to seek for current information, in order to update their knowledge. Students, usually seek to familiarise themselves with contemporary issues, so as to competently get involved in debate or compose a good essay on such issue. Moreover, there could be opportunity for them to speak out through radio programme, on any contemporary issues affecting the society. Then, availability and accessibility of detail information on the issue becomes highly imperative.

ii. Comprehensiveness/composition of the collections

Beside the currency of library resources, comprehensiveness is another indispensable quality. School library resources must reflect the subject specification or curriculum of all the subjects being offered at the various levels of a school setting. Omekwu (1986) believes that people generally visit the library to obtain information relevant to job at hand, the major pre-occupation of students is their academic and hence the composition of the school library collection should be relevant in every form. By so doing, library patronage will be high and students' academic performance will be encouraging. The good performance of those who have cultivated the habit of utilising library resources to enhance their academic performance will not only sustain their reading interest, but also attract their peers to the library. It is highly imperative to recognize the fact that various

levels and types of reading materials including fiction, nonfiction such as biographies, dictionaries, encyclopaedias, thesaurus, interesting histories, inspirational books, motivational books etc should be part of library collections.

iii. The quality and character of the furnishings

Ergonomics of school library furnishings is often neglected and or given little attention in literature and writings of school librarians. Facilities in the school libraries must be attractive, aesthetically pleasing, safe and user friendly. The suitability of the furniture and fittings of a school library is a major factor that can motivate and sustain students reading interest. Student's ease should be put into consideration in the design of the school library furniture. Children' age range, height and weight should be given a considerable attention in order to create pleasurable environment that is reading friendly.

It is common knowledge in early childhood education that colourful learning materials and aids have been veritable means of getting attention of children. Manufacturer of early childhood furniture have also catch up with this fact to manufacture and market such colourful furniture as innovative furniture materials for children. It is doubtful if school libraries have not been sluggish in adopting the same psychology of colourful furniture in school libraries.

Comfort and conduciveness of the reading environment is indispensable for learning as well as reading. People of all ages, irrespective of age, gender and status seek to be comfortable especially while undertaking a rewarding task that requires concentration and comprehension. Literacy development is not left out of such worthwhile task. A conducive library is indispensable to the literacy development of school children.

iv. The quality and character of the support staff

Information professional with adequate training in school library collection and management will make a lot of difference in enhancing the literacy attainment of student in any particular setting. Excellent Librarians possessing sterling qualities are wonderful enablers of literacy development. Neurman (n.d.) found out that "Librarians made an effort to know the children, called them by their first names, developed a personal relationship that went beyond the child, to the family and the kin. Librarians do not just point to materials, but taught children how to use them, not in a formal way, but by showing and demonstrating the activity themselves." In essence, Librarians are literacy enablers, helping children to move beyond their current abilities. International Reading Association (2000) reported that "credentialed school library media professionals promote, inspire, and guide students toward a love of reading, a quest for knowledge, and a thirst for lifelong learning".

Components of Learning- Literacy Attainment Process

Learning has been defined as a relatively permanent change in human behaviour as a result of exposure to experience and environment. It has also been defined as the outcome of teaching or what is done with information acquired. Acquisition of the information is dependent on the level of literacy. A literate individual is better positioned

to learn better than an illiterate person in terms and dimensions of depth, scope and speed. Additionally, learning and literacy are to a significant degree intertwined and interrelated.

Psychologists perceive learning to be a process of gaining something from the experiences the learner has been exposed to over a period of time. The learning process takes place in an environment. Consequently the learning process involves both the experience and the contextual environment in which the learner finds himself or herself. Learning as a process implies that series of acts are involved, such as reading, which is itself dependent on literacy level, in order to achieve it. It is a process that leads to a relatively permanent change in behaviour resulting from exposure to conditions in the environment and experience or practice. Though, the process or mechanism of learning cannot be observed directly, yet the overt or covert responses serve as evidence of the learning experience.

Hilgard and Bower (1975:17) defines learning as "the change in a subject's behaviour to a given situation brought about by his repeated experiences on that situation, provided that the between change cannot be explained on the basis of the subject (e.g. fatigue, drugs, etc)" Hilgard and Bower's definition contain some essential components of learning such as change, and exposure to repeated experience. The change could be related to growth and functional developments or on the other hand, related to modification of behaviour consequent to past experience.

It has generally been accepted by psychologists and educationists that learning is an on-going process and that it involves mental activity. Reading is one of such mental activity which involves the coordination of visual and nervous systems. Nwadinigwe (2000) specified that this complex process is the means by which knowledge, skills, habits, facts, ideas and principles are acquired, retained and utilized in the bid to adapt to the environment and to modify the existing behaviour. Allpoint (1961) believes that theories of learning rest on conception of the nature of man. Theories of learning rest on the actual nature of man. The actual nature relates to the active, passive or reactive, or interactive or adaptive nature of man. There is the view of the nature of human motivation as a driving force behind the learning activity and process.

The environment has been found to be an important factor in the learning process. Learning environment is the totality of factors within the school setting, external to the learner, that tend to influence the learning outcome. Such environmental factors may be authority pattern, social and emotional relations (Morphy, 1959; Miller, 1981). The components of the environment are: (1) The physical environment consisting of physical conditions and instructional facilities (2) Social environment (3) Personality, attitude and value of teachers and students.

For the purpose of this paper, the physical environment is germane. The physical condition ranges from the built environment context, the topography, landscape, blend between nature and man-made structures, the physical structures such as classroom, library, laboratory etc) that aid learning process. The instructional facilities complement

the condition of the physical environment. These instructional facilities include materials to be learned, the curriculum design and strategies, the teaching strategies and the measurement and evaluation of learning.

Learning involves interaction between instructors or instruction and learner. The instruction will ultimately produce an end result showing that learning has taken place. In classroom environment, teachers interact with learners. The interaction involves the use of learning resources pulled together or packaged to achieve a pre-determined goal. Learning is a process that brings together cognitive, emotional and environmental influences and experiences for acquiring, enhancing, or making changes in one's knowledge, skills, values and world views (Illeris, 2000, Omorod, 1995). Impliedly, learning is motivated by the need to acquire, enhance or make changes in one's skills, values i.e. individual or societal and world views.

Learning needs as enumerated by the World Declaration on Education for all (UNESCO, 1992) comprise both essential literacy attainment tools (such as reading skills, oral expression, numeracy and problem solving) and the basic learning content (such as knowledge, skills, values and attitudes) required by human being, to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities to live and work in dignity to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions and to continue learning.

Literacy Enablers

Obanya (2001) informed that UBE has borrowed heavily from internationally accepted conceptualizations of basic education. The conceptualizations lay emphasis on three essentials of learning. They are:

1. education as a broader concept, a closely systematically woven relationship between in school and out-of school learning;
2. the consolidation of literacy, numeracy and life skills that are psychologically fulfilling and socially useful;
3. the skill of learning – how-to learn

The concept of UBE stresses, not just access to all, but beyond access such as equity, efficiency, relevance and quality. To achieve the 'beyond access' goal, library development according to Obanya (2001) is one certain way to follow. It is therefore to propose that library resources development in literacy attainment process is not just an attempt to create a vacuum where none exists, but necessary enabler of literacy without which learning is incomplete.

In a traditional learning process the interaction is between the teacher / instructor and the learner. The learning need dictates the teacher's / instructor's basis of designing the instruction pedagogy based on the learning content. The learning content is enshrined in the curriculum design. The learning outcome, which incidentally is interrelated and intertwined with literacy outcome moderates the literacy/learning need and this could be conceived as going on in a cycle (see figure 4).

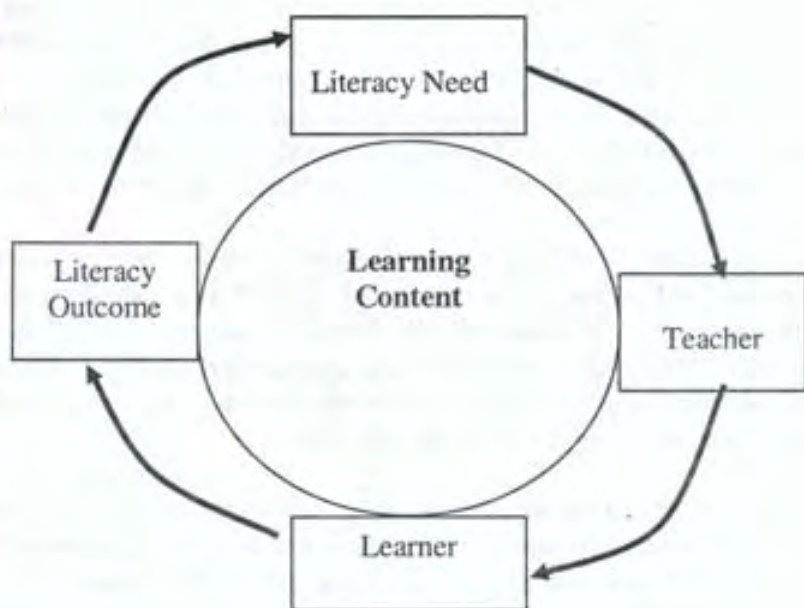


Figure 4: Model of Literacy/Learning Process

The forgoing scenario places the burden of impartation of knowledge on the teacher / instructor, while the learner is at the receiving end. This scenario makes the learner passive receiver, rather than active learner which the principle of education for All (EFA) is attempting to enshrine in learning process.

It is in this sense that the conceptual model of balanced learning process in figure 3 is relevant. In a balanced learning environment there is a learning enabler, which has a multi dimensional linkage to all the process of learning. It enables the teacher to impart knowledge in such a way that a lasting impression will be created. On the other hand the students are as well enabled to learn how to learn through availability of the enablers

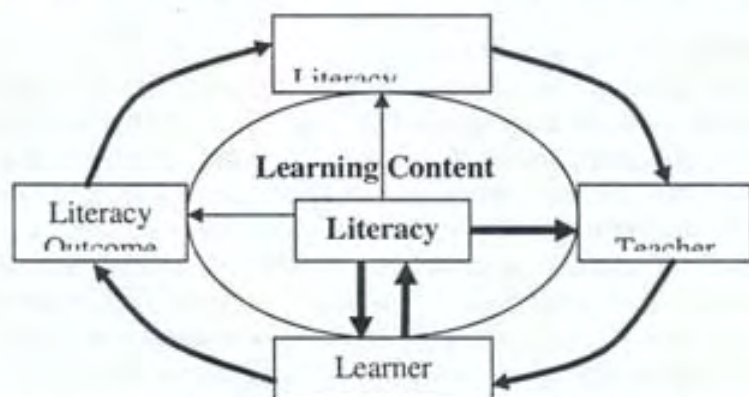


Figure 5: Conceptual Model of Balanced Literacy/Learning Process

The library as a spatial enabler is there to guide on learning how to learn, as being emphasized by UBE. Furthermore, the literacy resources that have been put in place

serve both immediate and future literacy attainment purpose. Future learner would also have the opportunity of utilizing the enabler. According to Obanya (2001) there are features that turn the library media from a physical enabler to a pedagogical enabler. The features listed include; the capacity of the library to guide the learner – user, the capacity of the available materials to broaden the horizon of both teachers and the learners, and the relevance of available resources to the immediate and future use of the learner.

The foregoing has reinforced the indispensable role of library not only as pedagogical enabler of learning and literacy attainment but an essential variable in the literacy equation. This enabler is relevant to all stages of literacy development. At the elementary stages of literacy, it is the school library media resources, while at the senior level it is the academic library or special library for advanced and specialized fields such as law, medicine, agriculture, and military among others.

The Universal Basic Education through its lofty goals has brought the school library media resources to a central focus. Effective learning and literacy attainment can only take place where there are learning enablers, of which the library is a vital part. Considering Government declaration on commitment to achieving the goal of education, school library media resources must be put in place and where the traditional forms of school library exist; efforts should be geared towards serious upgrading so as to attain the height of acquisition of self learning skills that would enhance life-long learning and literacy improvement.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper has indicated that the school library resources constitute is an indispensable literacy enabler in the learning and literacy attainment at early stages of intellectual development. If the educational institutions will be positioned to play its role properly the following issues must be brought to the front burner of educational policy of the government, administrators in early childhood education and early childhood researches. These are School library project development, Training of school library personnel, funding for school libraries, and Policy directions/research directions.

School Library Project Development

Anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that privately owned schools invest in school library than government owned and managed schools. Consequently the literacy level of the products of these privately owned schools are higher than those from the government schools. Majority of government owned schools have grossly underdeveloped school media resources and supporting personnel. The privately owned schools cannot be said to have attained the international best practices in school library development. Consequently there is need to aim at such international benchmark in order to beef up the tempo of literacy among students whose reading skills are increasingly threatened by other technological distractions. The government schools require a further commitment of owners and managers in developing the school library. If the teachers' goal of learning outcome is to be achieved there must be the deployment of the school library as literacy enabler.

This paper strongly propose a robust school library development project to include up to date school library buildings stocked with current literature to stimulate reading culture in students. This development should also require creating stand alone reading periods during the school hours. Print and electronic resources to support students learning, wider reading and reading for pleasure and enhance active development of literacy skills should be acquired and made available to students at all times. Incentives for attaining international standards could be used as motivating factors to encourage school management in this drive. The Nigerian School Library Association, as custodian of school library values, could develop advocacy programme/project to promote rewards for schools and administrators as well as policy makers that work towards national and international benchmarks on school library development.

Training of school library personnel

As expected training institutions have critical roles to play in development and growth on any profession, idea or cause. The Nigerian Library schools should therefore rise to the challenge and play leading roles in projecting libraries as agents of change in literacy attainment. This may require curriculum review and upgrading to meet emerging issues and challenges thrown up by societal values and technological developments impacting on literacy related developments. It is doubtful if the total number of school media library specialists available in the country today can go one tenth of schools in need of their services. Consequently there is need to encourage and produce more school media library specialists

Library schools should be prepared to provide training to teachers and even parents as Para- school media practitioners to complement the services of school library professionals, where in the time being they may not be available to fill the gap. Library school educators should aim at turning out Librarians/school library media specialists who are skilful in raising a generation of happy and skilful readers.

Increased funding for school libraries

The policy of the government to devote 10 percent of the annual budget of educational institutions in the tertiary level to acquisition of library resources and equipment is laudable in policy but less in practice. The same policy direction is desirable for school libraries, going by its indispensable position as literacy enabler. Government should ensure that funds allocated to library projects are judiciously utilized for the same. A strong voice of advocacy from a body like the Nigerian School Library Association could swing the pendulum of policy positively in the right direction.

Policy directions and research directions

Following the close association between literacy and reading culture and reading skills, institutions have seen the need to engage in programmes to improve student reading skill, through developing a culture of reading. The quality enhancement plan by Methodist University (2009) was arrived at through research focusing on the declining culture of reading. The "get between the covers!" plan involves making reading a stand -alone

course and not just an aspect of use of English course offered as general course in the University. There is need to engage in practical research of such nature and dimension in order to help policy makers and administrators develop programmes that will enhance the students reading skills as essential literacy attainment strategy. In this regards the skill of school media researchers will be required. Collaborative research effort by school library media specialist becomes highly desirable and imperative in pursuing this goal.

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