

Review

Reading culture, cultivation and its promotion among pupils: a Kenyan perspective

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Promotion of a reading Culture aims to publicize reading among members of the general public. It is an activity that is meant to popularize reading and make it a lifelong hobby. The main objective of cultivating and promoting a reading culture is to make reading a habit that is appreciated and loved by citizens. It is therefore important to create awareness on the importance of reading for leisure and not necessarily to pass exams and to develop reading as a habit and culture. Without the opportunity to read widely, what is taught in the classroom cannot be reinforced. Consequently, pupils cannot develop skills of locating, selecting, organizing, manipulating, evaluating and processing information. Research has shown that those who read for examination lapse into illiteracy when they fail. In Kenya, most schools rely on library lessons to promote and cultivate the reading culture. Furthermore there are no policies in the Kenyan education system that encourages the promotion of reading culture. The reading habit is therefore promoted in a vacuum. Due to lack of a firm government policy, most schools have no libraries and adequate reading materials. This paper discusses the reading culture in Kenya and analyzes the efforts that are being undertaken to promote and cultivate the habit and there in suggests strategies which should be put in place in order to develop a reading culture in Kenya.

Keywords: Reading culture, library, reading habit, reading.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is something many, who are literate, take for granted. But if one thinks about it and tries to define it, one may have difficulty verbalizing his/her thoughts. Sybil (1984:9) defines reading as a process of communication through which most formal learning takes place. It involves understanding written language and respond to the author's message. Therefore, this means that when one is reading one has to be thinking, predicting, questioning, evaluating and defining and redefining. Manzo et al (200:25) defines reading simply as unlocking and constructing literal interpretive and applied meanings from coded message. It is the act of simultaneously reading the lines reading between the lines, and reading beyond the lines. The first part of the definition: 'reading the Lines' refers to the act of decoding the words in order to construct the author's basic message. The next part 'reading between the lines' refers to the act of making inferences and understanding the authors implied message and finally 'reading beyond the lines' involves the judging of the significance of the authors message and applying it to other areas of background and knowledge.

In this regard, reading can be described as an active process, which involves the cognitive processing of information in written form. It is the process of constructing meaning from written text. It is important to note that neither of these definitions focuses on the sounding out of words. Sounding out words is an important skill but very secondary to the act of comprehending and thinking. Comprehension and thinking is what reading is all about.

There has been a lot of controversy in the past about how children learn to read. As time goes by and as the results of more and more research studies become available it has become increasingly evident that there is no 'best' way of learning to read and that almost every method practiced can be successful. Sometimes it is not so much the method used as it is the teacher, his/her personality and his/her 'rapport' with the child, (Drummond, 1979).

Drummond (1979) argues that there are all sorts of factors involved in learning to read. But the one important point that emerges from this controversial field is that a child best learns how to read not so much by adapting

the methods of the teacher but by having the methods adapted to him/her. Teachers who know more ways a child can learn to read are in a far better position than those who know only one way. Furthermore, the child will best learn to read from the teacher who maintains close relationship with the child and knows how to localize the difficulties the child might be having and devise activities to help overcome these difficulties.

Goodman (1980) on the other hand, asserts that learning to read involves almost a simultaneous processing of the ideas by written materials; the interpretation of the sentence patterns expressing these ideas and recognition of the words within the sentences. It is highly complex task. The various abilities involved in learning to read are intelligence, language, facility visual abilities, auditory abilities, physical factors, environmental influences and emotional factors.

BACKGROUND

Promoting a reading culture has long been a major theme of various countries in the world yet despite the all these efforts one common threat emerges: no country is satisfied with the number of active readers among its population. It is felt in most countries that the methods and teaching used to boost reading must be tried again and again in order to bring people and books together in a lasting fruitful relationship. Eisemon (1997) argues that if reading is left to continue unabated, the number of illiterates would tend to increase in future. Makenzi (2004:2) observes that illiteracy, the converse of literacy is difficult to measure and although statistics on the world's illiterate populations are relatively easy to obtain, little is known about the millions of literate adults who rarely pick up a book or open a magazine or about school children for whom reading has come to mean textbooks and little else. The causes of this phenomenon are still difficult to determine because there are many kinds of reading. Besides, reading habits vary considerably according to age group, educational level and socio-cultural background.

In Kenya, Much has been said about developing a reading culture but very little has been done in this direction. Odingo (2002) observes that the Kenyan Culture encourages people to spend leisure time in sporting activities, recreational places (bars, hotels) and churches and mosques rather than spending it on reading. According to him, the absence of a reading culture has hindered Kenyans from appreciating the value of books. It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks ways of cultivating and promoting a reading culture in Kenya.

Promoting a reading Culture/habit

Promotion of a reading culture aims to publicize reading

among members of the general public. It is an activity that is meant to popularize reading and make it a life long hobby. The promotion of a reading culture cannot take place in a vacuum. It has to be initiated. Enabling a population to read requires a publishing industry, which must engage a cadre of appropriate writers and produce their work in a pleasing form. A system of distribution, which may include bookstores, libraries and newspaper deliveries are needed. Educational programs that will teach the young sufficient coding skills and knowledge about subject-matter to enable them learn through reading are also required, (Gordon, 2003).

Okundu (2005) points out that inculcating a reading culture should be introduced at an early age among children. This is because reading and reading culture develop over a prolonged period of time and an early promotion will be able to mould them into lifelong readers. The challenge is therefore to ingrain the habit of reading in children so that it is as important as sports and any other hobbies. Perhaps then, the impact of negative media influence will be directly reduced.

Importance of Developing a reading Culture

Most countries on the African continent and also in the entire world have been very particular on the development of a reading culture among their citizens. UNESCO manifesto of 1994 states that constructive participation and the development of democracy depend on satisfactory education as well as on free and unlimited access to knowledge, thought, culture and information. The efforts of developing a reading culture cannot be ignored. Makenzi (2004) describes reading as an instrument for acquiring lifelong learning and reading skills. On the other hand, Wawire (2010) argues that's reading is important because it is central to development. It is essential to full participation in modern society. It adds quality to life and provides access to culture and cultural heritage. Reading is important because it empowers and emancipates citizens. It brings people together. Reading is essential because books are the key to the world: both the real world and the fantasy world. Therefore, it should be encouraged in the society. Research has shown that those who read for examinations lapse into illiteracy in the end. Rosenberg (2002) adds that without the opportunity to read widely, what is taught in the classroom is not reinforced and the quality and performance of the benefit of education are endangered. Without wide reading, pupils/students cannot develop skills of locating, selecting, organizing, manipulating, analyzing, evaluating and processing information.

It is felt that a huge population of illiterate population can pose a serious problem in a country. The negative trend can lead to a split in the country between those who have access to information and those who do not. This

can affect the people's ability to make informed decisions. For instance, how can a voter in a country make a carefully considered political choice if he/she does not have free access to information? How can one promote the cultural heritage without the written word?

Promotion of a reading Culture in Kenya

The promotion of a reading culture in Kenya is not a new concept. Many activities and programmes have taken place to promote the concept since the beginning of the 20th century. For instance, many scholars, NGO's, publishers, book industries, international bodies, such as United Nations, have since as early as the 1980's been agitating for the development of a reading culture in Kenya and the world at large. The Kenya National Library service Board Act (Chapter 225 of 1986) empowers KNLS to stimulate public interest in books and promote reading for knowledge, information and enjoyment. The other body that is aggressively trying to promote a reading culture is the National Book development Council of Kenya, which works in collaboration with other interested bodies. The promotion of a reading culture in Kenya is mainly conducted using the reading tents. According to Makenzi (2004) the reading tent is an old concept but new approach for promoting reading and enhancing literacy in both the rural and urban poor communities in most parts of the world. The reading tent approach focuses mainly on promoting reading for leisure and making books and other reading materials accessible to children in areas that lack adequate library services. The reading tent approach has been used in Kenya since early 1990's as an attempt to enhance reading skills and habits among children. The aim of this approach is to promote a love for reading and to develop a reading culture among children. Various organizations and institutions are using this approach to promote reading. Among them are Egerton University Reading Tent Project (EUTRP), Kenya National Library Services (KNLS), Kenya library Association (KLA), Reading Association of Kenya (RAK), and Kenyatta University Basic Education Resources Center (KUBERC). Most of these organizations run the children's reading tents (CRT) activities under the umbrella of the National Book Development Council of Kenya (NBDCK). The National book development council of Kenya has been running children's Reading Tent activities since 1997 under the banner of the National book week celebrations which is an annual event of NBDCK.

Strategies Used to promote a reading culture in Kenyan Primary Schools

Primary education in Kenya is in essence the first phase of our formal education system. It usually starts at six

years of age and runs for eight years. The main purpose of primary education is to prepare children to participate fully in the social, political and economic well being of the pupils.

Prior to independence, primary education was almost exclusively the responsibility of the communities concerned or non-governmental agencies such as local church groups. Since independence, the government has gradually taken over the administration of primary education from local authorities and assumed a greater share of the financial cost in line with the political commitment to provide equal educational opportunities to all through the provision of free primary education.

Since the year 2003, there has been a remarkable expansion in primary education, both in terms of the number of schools established and in the number of children enrolled. This was after change of the new government when free primary education was introduced. The National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) government won the December 2002 transition elections on a number of reform platforms, including the introduction of free primary schooling. The enrolment in the country's 18,000 primary schools has increased, with about 2 million more children joining school.

Since primary schools in Kenya comprise the first phase of formal education, it is normally at this stage that pupils are introduced to read and it is at this age they are made readers. Although there are no policies on cultivation and promotion of a reading culture, nevertheless some efforts are underway to foresee the attainment of reading culture.

In Kenya much of the responsibility designed to cultivate and promote a reading habit is entrusted to language teachers. This is normally done through the use of library lessons. Library lessons are designed to allow pupils have a silent reading session in class or in the school library. The library lessons were put in place in primary schools as per the requirement of the Kenya Ministry of Education. They are usually programmed in such a way that each class from standard one to eight have two library lessons per week, comprising Kiswahili (maktaba) and English library lessons.

Schools with libraries allow their pupils to read in the library during the lessons. The pupils normally go to the library, select books from the shelves and read them during the lessons. The library lessons are organized in such a way that during Maktaba lessons pupils are required to read Kiswahili story books while during the English library lesson they are required to read English story books. In schools with no library, the responsibility of selecting reading books is left to the language teacher who selects books from the school store and takes them to class for the pupils to read. This denies the pupils the freedom to choose their reading books.

Despite the fact that schools use library lessons to cultivate a reading habit, there are no guidelines provided on the establishment of libraries. Besides, it is not clear

how schools assess reading habits among the pupils. In view of the fact that library lessons are not clearly enumerated, most schools see no point of participating in such activities. Most schools see the syllabus as too demanding. They see no need to conduct library lessons when they are not examined. Some schools especially public primary schools see no point in conducting such lessons, because of lack of school library. Only schools that have libraries have well-organized library lessons.

Although KNLS endeavors to promote a reading culture through reading tents and book week celebrations, few schools participate or collaborate with them in this direction. KNLS coordinates the following activities with schools this among them includes, the training of teachers/librarians on how to handle and organize informational materials in the school store/library and also the participation of the schools in the annual book week, where various reading activities are carried out.

In Kenya, there are no policies on promotion of reading habit in primary schools. There is also lack of sectoral policies in form of legislation, regulation or guidelines. Even though schools are mandated to promote a reading habit through the use of library lessons, there are no guidelines on how to go about the activity. In this regard, library lessons are neglected by most schools. Furthermore, there are no official policies requiring primary schools to have libraries.

School libraries are not given any official support from the government. With the introduction of free primary education in Kenya, the government has been assisting public primary schools to acquire textbooks and other informational materials. However, the development of the school libraries has been left in the hands of the schools, parents and well wishers.

The Kenyan educational system has no clear cut relationship between educational system/objectives and post reading culture. Most pupils in schools usually read books so as to pass exams. Therefore, pupils equate reading with tests or exams and hence likely to stop reading once they have accomplished their goal. Guthrie (2000) relates this type of reading with the extrinsic motivation, where pupils are motivated to read so as to be recognized in society or to compete with others. In such a situation, when a child achieves his/her goals, voluntary reading is likely to end. In addition, the Kenyan educational system also introduces pupils to textbooks/course books and other examinable subjects at a very early age, even before they have developed the habit of reading.

The educational system is also considered a great hindrance in the use of libraries as well as the promotion of reading culture. This is in view of the fact that the educational system places more emphasis on reading for academic purposes instead of reading for leisure or broadening of knowledge. The system is also much dependant on the teacher as the source of information. Consequently, pupils rarely use libraries. In the end,

pupils do not appreciate the value of libraries as well as reading for fun or general knowledge.

Future Trend

In an attempt to develop a reading culture, the following issues ought to be taken care of by both the government and other stakeholders.

Restructuring the education system: The current Kenyan education system is considered as a hindrance in the promotion of a reading culture, Kenya's education system over emphasizes examination and grades right from primary schools to the university education. This has led teachers and school administrators into all sorts of unprofessional activities in order to make an impression on the public, and in the process, 'murdering' the little ones, forcing them into long hours and days of rote-learning which from a scientific point of view is of no lasting value. The education system should therefore be restructured in such a way that it does not over emphasize on examination and grades. The education system can for instance introduce general subjects, which are meant to test the pupils reading habits and knowledge gained from topical issue. This can be done at the elementary level of the educational system after which examinable subjects can be introduced later. Such a system can be of great importance because it will reduce the ease of 'drilling' the pupils from an early age, which is the order of the day in many schools.

The government under the ministry of Education should consider employing more teachers in schools in schools to cater for huge number of pupils enrolled in primary schools. With the introduction of free primary education teachers become more over worked therefore, are not able to dedicate their time to other non examinable activities such as cultivating a reading habit. Employing more teachers will enable teachers to spread themselves to cover non-examinable areas.

Constructing school libraries: In Kenya there are no official policies requiring schools to have libraries. The establishment of school libraries is left to the schools. Despite the lack of school libraries, the ministry of Education has incorporated library lessons in the school timetable. Therefore, it is important that the government develops a policy, which requires all schools to have a library. If schools have libraries, they can be able to:

- to give the pupils a wide and easy access of informational material
- Introduce the pupils to books at a tender age
- Develop the pupils ability to utilize libraries
- Reduce the pupil's dependence on the teacher as the only source of information
- Enlighten the pupils about the importance of information and easily develop the reading habit/culture

Employ school Librarians: Most Kenyan primary schools that have libraries do not have trained staff.

School libraries should have full time librarians. The librarians should probably be employed by the government under the Teachers Service Commission. Having a full time librarian would be an asset to schools as well as boost to reading. This is because pupils will be able to have free and easy access to reading materials. Librarians will be able to use their professional skills to avail pupil's informational materials.

Enactment of a policy: The Kenya Government through the Ministry of Education should enact a policy that gives emphasis on the promotion and cultivation of reading in schools. This policy should be formulated in collaboration with various concerned parties, such as schools, publishers, public libraries, curriculum developers among others.

A policy should be enacted that provides guidelines and regulations on what ought to be done to cultivate and promote a reading habit. Otherwise, if left in a vacuum, a reading culture will continue being elusive and achievement of the UN's Millennium Development Goals will be difficult to attain. Promotion of reading is a prerequisite to the achievement of the MDGs.

Providing reading books/informational materials: Schools should play a leading role in the provision of reading books to pupils. The schools should source out ways and means of acquiring more reading books. They should show pupils the value of information by availing them books. In schools where there are no libraries, the authorities should devise ways, which can enable the pupils get access to reading materials.

Parents too should play a role by encouraging their children to read. Parents should assist schools by supplementing what the schools have. A cost sharing effort between parents, schools and the general public will enable the pupils have access to a wide range of reading materials.

CONCLUSION

It is important to encourage a reading habit so that people grow up mentally to be able to fulfill their potential at every level from village to university. It is observed that the education sector in a country should provide a fairly good information infrastructure, which can form a solid base on which information services can develop. The importance of the information resources is that they are vital for educational development and also, the development of a reading habit. There is a need, therefore, to improve access to books and other informational resources to the various user groups at the right time and appropriate form.

The task of promoting a reading culture in a country or society is not an easy one. Therefore, all the parties in both the educational sector and the private sector should coordinate their efforts to achieve this goal. Neither a subsistence farmer nor a graduate chemist can fulfill

his/her potential without the cognitive growth that comes from reading widely. People will not read more than their immediate needs if they are not exposed to reading, such growth is every person's right.

To develop a reading habit and forge the link between people with basic literacy skills and books, it is necessary for libraries and other stakeholders to reach out to the people. Librarians will have to take books to the people rather than waiting for people to visit them if they really want the people to read. It is also necessary to provide materials, which are enjoyable and entertaining so that people may be motivated to read.

Librarians must learn to step out of their secure domains and get closer to the grass roots. If we give people what they want rather than what we think they should have they will start reading. Their literacy skills will grow and yield fruit rather than wasting away for lack of use. Finally and most important of all, it is necessary to spread the word, to create a general awareness of books to the mental growth of the individual and to the economic growth of the nation. It is necessary most of all to give books to the people, to give plenty of books, which are both easy and interesting, and to provide theses in a manner that is culturally acceptable. Once people develop a reading habit, they will pass it on, the demand for books will grow and the citizens of a nation will be able to realize their ambition.

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