Developing a Reading Habit in Children: Lagos State Library Board Summer Reading Programme Experience

A.O. Simisaye

M.O. Quadri

Tai Solarin University of Education Library
Ijagun, Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria

Introduction

It is a recognized fact that reading has a crucial role to play in creating independent learners, literacy promotion and educational attainment of individuals in every society in the world. In support of this assertion, Ayodele (1984) observed that reading, especially the efficient type is the bedrock to a learner’s success whether in the primary, secondary or tertiary level of education.

Fayose (1995) in her study, extensively discussed the paramount role reading plays in children's educational pursuit and submitted that it promotes a deep awareness and build the child up emotionally and intellectually. Similarly, Krasher (1993) brilliantly illustrates how free voluntary reading benefit students achievements. He remarked that; children, read more when they see other people reading; the longer free reading is practiced, the more consistent and positive the results and that people who read more, write better. He then submitted that reading as a leisure activity is best predictor of comprehension, vocabulary and reading speed of students.

Children Summer Reading programme is a children educational development scheme aimed at improving reading habits among children aged between 4 and 12 years. It is better to inculcate reading habit, right from tender age, so that children can imbibe it and grows in them as they grow up. It is in support of this that Mtshweni (2003) emphasized that it is better to catch them young. According to him, it is much easier in this stage since children's minds are like sponges, soaking up as much information and ideas.

Several studies revealed how Summer reading programmes have been used to promote reading in children. Heyns, (1978); Anderson, Wilson and Fielding, (1983), Carter, (1988); Johnson, (2000) are examples of such studies. Celano and Susan, (2001) asserted that when children participate in public library Summer Reading Programme, they spend increase time with books and become better learners. This assertion was reinforced by Mills, (2008) and Krashen, (2006) similarly averred that Summer Reading programme facilitates free voluntary reading among children.

No doubt, there is no way one can be literate without reading. It is an important language skill that a child needs to survive in the learning environment. The skill has to be developed and build upon as he/she goes along education ladder in life. It is in recognition of this that reading is being taught, promoted and advocated right from the tender age of a child in every serious nations of the world.
The importance of reading is quite incalculable. It is one of the life’s greatest pleasures that opens the door to culture, knowledge and independence. This is true as information contains in books have tremendous influences on perception, socialization and transformation of people that border to read them. Through reading, individual knowledge base is enhanced, intellect sharpened and misconceptions eroded (Nkiko and Yusuff 2006).

In realization of the adage that says catch them young; efforts are being geared worldwide to catch the interest of children in reading. In view of this, libraries, especially, public libraries have been working tirelessly to inculcate and promote reading programme in children by organizing summer reading programme.

Krashen and Fay (2000) hinted that Public library summer reading programme for children has been particularly important to children in less advantaged families, where books might not be readily available. According to him, it is very effective tool in helping to close the achievement gap between “rich and poor”. In view of relevance of summer reading programme in development of reading habit in children as highlighted above and coupled with the fact that Nigerian children are disadvantaged, in term of gaining access to books and libraries, it is then not out of place to assert that the organization of summer reading programme is one of the viable ways of reversing the poor reading habit among Nigerian children.

Background to the Summer Reading Programme

Lagos State is one of 36 states in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It was created in May 1967 and is the most urbanized State in the country. The uniqueness is not in doubt. The level of commercial activities and population are such that the state stands out distinctly. Its jurisdiction comprises the city of Lagos and four administrative divisions of Ikeja, Ikorodu, Epe and Badagry. (Lagos State Government, 2003).

Based on the foregoing, Lagos State Library Board Library Board deemed it fit to be organizing Summer Reading programme during the long vacation to inculcate and stimulate reading habit as well as encourage children to be regular library users. The idea of organizing this programme was first muted by the Lagos office of British Council in year 2004. The British Council came at the right time as the Board was ruminating on how children readership in all the branch libraries under the Board could be encourage as records show low patronage by them. The first of its kind was tagged Rollercoaster Children Reading Challenge Programme, which was heavily supported by the British Council and huge success was recorded. Ever since then, the Board has been organizing this programme annually in all the branch libraries depicted in table 1 despite declining financial support from the British Council. We felt the success story and challenges faced be shared as most public libraries in Nigeria have been organizing such programme in promoting reading habit in children. The brief description of the programme is presented below.

The State has an area of 358,862 hectares or 3,557sq km. The rate of population growth is about 300,000 persons per annum with population density of about 1308 persons per sq kilometer. In a UN study (1999) the city of Lagos is expected to hit 24.5 million population and thus be among the ten most populous cities in the World by 2015 (Akintehinwa, 2000). In its bid to have good public library system in Lagos State, the State government established Lagos State Library Board by the signing of Law No 24 1980 by the then Governor Lateef Kayode Jakande (Lagos State Government, 1980).

Lagos State Library Board, over the years found out that library use of children is quite low; this is known from the analysis of library use records of children that are usually kept by all the branch libraries under the Board. Moreover, Lagos, being the most cosmopolitan city in Nigeria and children leaving in such environment like Lagos stand the risk of being detracted from reading by many side attractions,
which are common in cosmopolitan cities of the World. This results in less time spent for voluntary reading by these children, hence, there is need to promote reading among children in the State.

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Objectives of the Summer Reading Programme

The objectives of this programme are as follows:

- Inculcate reading habit and care of books in children;
- Teach children how to use books and library;
- Sensitize the public about the activities of the Board;
- Encourage children to judiciously utilise their long vacation.

Target Group

The programme is targeted on children aged between 4-12 years of age. It is believed that a child should start developing voluntary reading habit from 4 years old and such child could be encouraged to read effectively as he/she grows up to adulthood.

Duration

The programme usually holds annually in summer, that is between July and September each year. It spans for about 7 - 8 weeks. The children are admitted into the libraries by 10.00 am and they spend between 2-3 hours daily from Monday –Friday.

Registration

As a result of limited space and resources, each branch library registered about 40 children; although some branches exceed this limit, depending on the coping strategies adopted by various branch librarians, hence on the average we have about 400 participating children in the annual programme. The registration is based on first come first serve and to give every child equal opportunity to attend, the registration is free of charge and no children is charged for the materials used during the programme. However, a registration form is designed for this purpose and parents were asked to sign the forms, signifying permission for their children and wards to participate. Children from both public and private schools were registered without any discrimination. The programmes were held in all the branch libraries indicated in table 1 below. The record of registered children and themes for the years are depicted in the tables below.
Developing a Reading Habit in Children: Lagos State Library Board Summer Reading Programme Experience,” A.O. Simisaye, M.O. Quadri. *Library Philosophy and Practice 2010 (April)*

Table 1: Statistics of registered children and books consulted in branch libraries for 2004, 2005 and 2008.

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Secretariat Library, Ikeja</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>1400</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ikorodu Div. Library</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>5630</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ilupeju Public Library</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolu Public Library</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry Carr Public Library</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>482</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolo Public Library</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borno House Library</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1672</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epe Divisional Library</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>356</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Badagry Divisional Lib</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>882</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ipaja Public Library</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>356</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>11916</td>
<td>419</td>
</tr>
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Table 2: Themes of summer reading programmes

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Rollercoaster Children Reading Challenge Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Ako Akete Children Reading Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Scouting for Nigerian Legends</td>
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Publicity and Awareness

To ensure successful staging of the programme, the general public was sensitised. The librarians and staff in various branches engaged in publicity to sensitise parents and children. This usually commence towards the end of the 3rd term (i.e., around July according to Nigerian school calendar). Library staff visited public and private primary and secondary schools with handbills and posters. They also visited homes in the localities of various branch libraries. Banners were also hanged in conspicuous places, these efforts usually pay–off as children turned out for the programme.

Activities

Activities carried out in the programme included the following:

- Book Review
- Story hours
- Dictations
- Games- word game, scramble, Ere Ayo Opon (local game)
- Library orientation- such as library ethics; library registration, types of library materials etc.
- Care of books and library materials.
- Creative Arts such as drawing, painting and decoration, singing etc.
- Essay writing and composition.
Assessments and Rewards of Participants

Participating children were assessed and rewarded at the end of the programme. At the beginning of the programme, folders were opened for every child. The folders contain records of activities carried out by every child. Every time a child visited the library, s/he marked attendance register that has been opened in all the branch libraries.

During the hours they spent in the library, the children engaged in various activities which include serious independent reading. They were given opportunities to select book of their choice from a range of books in the library collection. Every child was given Book Review Sheets in which s/he reviews the book read per day.

The review is needed to know if the books were actually read and understood by the children. There are two different types of reviews. The first one is short review, in this case, the children gave short summary of the book(s) read and indicate the author, number of pages as well as main character or subject matter of the book. Star review, is the second type of review. Out of various books read in a week, each and every child chooses star books among them and came up with a review which is more detailed than the short review. The children usually choose those books they enjoyed most as star book(s) for the week. They were also asked by the librarian to narrate the stories and tell colleagues lessons learnt from such books.

At the end of the programme, total number of books read and reviewed were recorded and kept in the individual folders of the children. The children were also allowed to borrow books home so that the interests shown on reading are taking home. Records of assessment of children in other activities such as story telling, dictation, drawing, painting and decorations, games, creative arts and essay writing were also kept in the folders and then cumulated at the end of the programme.

At the end of the programme, ten (10) star children emerged from each of the ten (10) branches. These were the sets of children that performed brilliantly well in all the activities carried out. The star children were chosen from each and every branch library using the following age categories:

- 4 – 5 years - 1 child
- 6 – 8 years - 3 children
- 9 – 10 years - 3 children
- 11 – 12 years - 3 children

Each category was assessed based on their level of age and education attained. This approach was done so that every age bracket was included in the ten (10) star children. Every star child goes home with certificate of attendance, gifts, medal and prizes. These rewards were given to these star children at the grand finale of the programme, where parents, important dignitaries in educational sector in the community were in attendance. These children used to be highly excited for being recognized and rewarded for brilliant performance and hardworking. Librarians at various branch libraries also prepared very good citations on each and every star child. These citations were read aloud when the children were called upon to collect their special gifts, medals and certificates. Parents of these children showed their joy and happiness as their children were called with standing ovation.

Benefits of the Programme

It is not out of place to say that the programmes so far have been able to succeed in meeting some of its objectives. Some of the benefits were derived from the programme are highlighted:
Stimulation of reading habit

During the programme, participating children were stimulated into reading voluntarily in these libraries. They were also encouraged to borrow books home for reading. The children were well attended to by the librarians and other library staff. The interest of children was sustained with other activities such as story hours, dictation games and arts (painting and decoration) that featured during the programme.

The refreshments served daily also go a long way in arousing their interest in the programme. Some of the children were motivated to the extent that they willingly spent extra hours in these libraries to read independently. Again, some of them willingly registered as bonafide numbers of these libraries and became regular patrons after the close of the programme. If not for this programme such children would not have developed such interest in reading and library.

Library use Education

Children were also taught how to use books and library effectively. Qualified librarians in the various branches took time to orientate children to library in form of library education. During such sessions, they were tutoured on how to use and care for books and library; types of libraries and information resources st.ocked, library organizational structure, organization of library resources; library catalogue and how to use it; library registration process and library ethics. The children showed a lots of understanding of some of these library concepts as some of them demonstrated to their colleagues how to use library catalogue to find books in the library shelves and they showed considerable improvement in term of compliance to library use ethics taught during the programme.

Judicious Use of Holidays

As set up in the objectives of the programme, the participating children were encouraged to judiciously use their holiday. They engaged in reading and other creative things in libraries spread across the state rather than engaging in frivolous things that are common in most cosmopolitan city such as Lagos. Hidden talents in some were also discovered by librarians and parents. This was made possible from other activities such as story telling, drama, poetry, arts packed in the programme.

Public Awareness of Board Activities

The programme is a plus for the Lagos State library Board as all the ten branch libraries were bustling with activities. Many parents who brought that children and wards confessed that they never know that such libraries were in their localities. The Board also used the programme to sell itself to the general public and the press. Many parents made enquires about various services rendered by theses libraries; they used such opportunity to registered as bonafide library members and from there they become regular library users.

Challenges

The programme is being faced with some challenges which are highlighted below:

Funding

Inadequate funding is a major challenge facing this programme. Initially, this was not noted in 2004, when the British council fully sponsored it.

The story has not been the same since year 2005, when the Lagos State Library Board started sponsoring the programme. The reason is not far fetched; the Board's main source of income is the State
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government. It is a common phenomenon that funding is not released on time and it may not even be released at all to the Board. This situation is quite frustrating to librarians saddled with planning and executing the programme. The inadequacy of fund was responsible for the inability of the Board to have very benefiting programmes in years 2005 and 2007. The children came around in these years and felt disappointed.

Inadequate Reading Materials

Other notable challenge includes inadequate library information resources (books and non books). The books collected were grossly inadequate. Some children who have been participating in programme right from 2004 claimed that they have read most of the books in these libraries.

Logistics

The programme also faced logistics problem. It was initially planned that children would be taking out for visits to places of interest; such as National Museum, National Library, Amusement Parks, Academic Libraries and Computerized Information System Centres. This has not been realized as there were no utility vehicles to convey children from various branches. Some children also complained that there was nobody to bring them to the library regularly during the programme. This affected the level of participation of these children in the programme and there was no mobile library system put in the place to cater for these categories of children.

Personnel

The Lagos State Library Board is not adequately staff; this has adversely affected members of staff available in branch libraries spread across the State. The shortage is prevalent in professional, paraprofessional and non-professional cadres. During the period this programme is held, the staff usually worked under severed stress as coping with children restlessness is not easy. It is also the same staff that still attended to other library users at various service points of the library and thereby increasing burdens on them..

Recommendations

Based on the experience and challenges faced by the board in organizing this programme the following are made:

- The Board should be well funded by the Lagos State. Budgetary allocation for the programme needs to be increased substantially as the Board has over ten (10) branch libraries. Funds budgeted should also be released in time to the Board.
- The Board can also approach corporate organizations (locally and international) to support the programme, so that more befitting ones could be organized in future.
- There is also the need to boost the collection of the children section of these libraries, the boost should include both book and non-book resources, local content of the stock should also be put into consideration when building up the collection.
- The problem of logistics should also be addressed. Utility vehicles should be provided so that children could be taking to places of interest, this will make the programme more eventful.
- The mobile library services of the Board should be revived so that children in disadvantaged areas of the State could also be reached in this reading crusade.
- In addition, the Board should be adequately staff with professionals and non-professionals so that they could be able to cope with pressures posed by children during this programme.
Conclusion

Voluntary reading habit is dwindling at increasing rate in Nigeria today and Nigeria child is extremely affected. It seems there is no any other type of library than the public libraries that can stimulate reading among Nigerian child. The school libraries in the country could not come to their rescue as most primary and secondary schools in Nigeria lack libraries. The little effort of the Lagos State Library Board in organizing this Summer Reading Programme needs to be commended as most public libraries in Nigeria have not deemed it fit to organize such programme for children. No doubt, the programme has succeeded in attracting large group of children each year. It has also provided us a novel perspective in stimulating reading interest of children and spurring interesting activities in these libraries. The programme also showed great challenges being faced by Lagos State Library Board in this rewarding endeavor. The challenges are not in surmounted.

The Board should be well funded to organize and improve the quality of this programme. Effort should also be geared to extend the programme to Herbert Macaulay Public, Yaba, as it is the only branch library under the Board that has been left out since the programme started in 2004. This library is the only branch serving the mainland of the state and children from this area should not be left out. The Board can also reach out to corporate organizations; (local and international) such as Embassies, companies, publishers, non-governmental organizations and philanthropists in re-awaking readership and library usage in Nigerian child. This type of programme could also be emulated by other public libraries in Nigeria so that we can succeed in bringing up children who will be inquisitive and interested in reading. It is when we do that we could be rest assured that we will have future readers.

References


