

THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANS IN THE PROMOTION OF READING FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

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by

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Introduction

Reading is what occurs between two parties through words or written symbols. One party communicates ideas and the other is the recipient of that communication. Unlike other forms of communication, reading takes information from what is written down. It is not the reception of a fleeting conversation or a sweet tune to be easily forgotten, once heard, but rather of something that you can refer to again and again because it is written down. There is a saying attributed to the Chinese that goes;

‘To read a book for the first time is to make acquaintance with a new friend; to read for a second time is to meet an old one.’

This saying captures the essence of reading in that the more the activity is carried out, the more likely it will become entrenched into a person’s life. In the privacy of one’s mind, reading takes one to places that they have never been to and makes one meet people that they never expected to meet. Reading contributes to one’s self-development which in turn contributes to the economic and social development of the community and nation.

The purpose of reading

Reading is carried out for different reasons and these include:

- To get information – Something that is written down does not get distorted easily and therefore in most instances, if one wishes to get reliable information, the best place to look is in a book or some other printed matter.
- To develop oneself intellectually and expand on one’s view of the world – If one wishes to learn more about the world, to develop their language skills and vocabulary as well as develop their self confidence, then one needs to read regularly.
- For leisure – People who perceive reading as a leisure activity derive great satisfaction out of the act of reading and they lose themselves into the text that they are reading.

Of the three reasons mentioned above, reading for leisure may be the most difficult to convince a person about. This is because there are many other activities that are carried out and from which a person may choose to derive pleasure. However, if a person is aware that reading for leisure also leads to a person being informed and ultimately developing him/herself intellectually, then the argument for reading for pleasure becomes more convincing.

What influences reading?

The existence or absence of reading among a group of people is influenced by many different factors. They individually or collectively determine whether a person is a reader or not. These factors are:

Literacy and interest

In order to be able to read and understand what is being read, one must be literate, in other words be able to make sense out of a string of letters and words. According to UNESCO, 84% of the world adult population (age 15+) is literate, but in Sub-Saharan Africa, the figure is 62%.. (UNESCO, 2011) This therefore means that 84% of the world's adult population are potential readers. Non-readers can be divided into two groups, namely those who are illiterate and therefore are unable to read, and those who are literate but do not care to read. Figures of those who are literate but do not read are not easily obtainable but the use of television and other forms of entertainment would suggest that those who have very little or no interest in reading form a good percentage of the population.

Availability of reading material

The dire need for reading material of relevance to Africans came to the fore front of those in the book sector as far back as the 1980s. A conference entitled "Nothing to read" was held in Birmingham, UK in 1988 and it discussed in detail the lack of reading materials in Africa both in quantity and in the local languages. There has been a continuous discourse on the issue of the availability of reading matter and how it impacts on education over the past three decades. Progress seems to be minimal as witnessed by the fact that the same conversation is still taking place in the second decade of the 21st century. Libraries and schools often depend on donated books which are not necessarily relevant to the African situation. In many African homes, reading materials are not available because families cannot afford them.

The need to read

One has to have a need in order for them to read. This need could be to enjoy a work of fiction, to find out a fact or to pass an exam and get on in life or to gain more knowledge that will assist self-development and income generation. Many children in Africa read because their school work requires them to do so and because they have to pass their exams and get promoted to the next level. Sadly, once they get into adulthood, their reading days come to an abrupt end.

However, reading is very much needed throughout one's lifetime. A former Ugandan Minister of Education and Sports noted that,

'When individuals have finished their formal education, they still need to be able to access new information. The higher a person goes within the education system, the more essential the information conveyed through books, and those who can access the books for themselves and can read them without help, enjoy the greatest advantage.' (Nsibambi, 2000)

What starts as a need to read in order to acquire a qualification or gain knowledge in order to achieve an immediate goal eventually gives a person an extra advantage in self-development.

The relevance of the reading matter

In terms of reading for pleasure, one must enjoy what they are reading. This enjoyment is possible because someone relates it to and becomes part of the story. In Africa the issue of relevancy in association with reading is high on the list of reasons why many Africans who are literate opt not to read.

The cooperation between different stakeholders

There are many players in the field, all of whom must apply their special skills to bring about a synergy required to ensure that reading becomes part of everyone's life. The readers would benefit from a well-packaged product that is available in large quantities, is relevant to their situation, is affordable and is accessible. This situation is only possible if there is coordination and cooperation between these stakeholders. The aggregated reading and knowledge acquisition are assumed to ultimately lead to societal and national development.

Libraries and Librarians promoting reading

Whenever I mention that I am a librarian, I am more likely to get asked whether I have read all the books in the library. This is because to many people, libraries are synonymous with books and reading. Librarians are therefore key stakeholders in the promotion of reading. They do this by making reading part of their library strategy. It is embedded in their everyday work. A study of reading by the Reading Section of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions revealed that libraries and librarians perceive promotion of reading as an integral part of their work (Train, 2003). They do it in the following ways;

Working with Children

Children are perhaps the easiest and most captive audience for librarians. One often hears the phrase, 'catch them young' in reference to the need to ensure that reading starts as early as possible in a person's life. In libraries, children aged three to thirteen years are encouraged to

acquaint themselves with books so that they grow up with a love for books and reading. In East Africa, for example, under the umbrella of the East African Book Development Association and with funding from the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), librarians and other book sector players have, over the last ten years been organizing about 40 reading tents annually for children. These reading tents have in some cases led to the establishment of school libraries and in other cases, children's libraries. When organizing these events, librarians have ensured that they are fun activities that can be emulated in other settings. The testimony of children that participated in reading tents in Mpigi District in Uganda in 2009 shows that the informal setting of the event was very attractive to children and will influence their future reading habits (National Book Trust of Uganda, 2010).

Encouraging teenagers to read

Teenagers or secondary school students in Africa more often than not use the library when they are in school. They read their textbooks and will request the library to get them those that they do not have. Some of them may read fiction. Whatever their needs and requirements, this group of readers is one that the librarians need to encourage to read as most often, they are involved in other activities such as sports and television. They can be persuaded to add reading to their list of 'trendy' things to do by introducing activities such as book clubs and debating clubs in the library as well as tagging reading to another enjoyable activity. In Uganda, for example, newspapers have included pull-outs that discuss matters that affect a teenager's daily life. 'Straight talk' a pullout of one of the leading daily newspapers deals with adolescence health matters and has become so popular that a big part of it is now made up of contributions by the readers themselves. It has also led to spin off publications that tackle issues of the environment and sanitation. Librarians need to recognize that reading by teenagers need not be in the form of a conventional book but can start with other types of reading materials and this can lead to the reading of the more conventional.

Support to adult literacy

Very often, adult literacy learners and those who have graduated from adult literacy classes and are ready and eager to face the brave new world of literacy find themselves unable to continue practicing their newly acquired skills because of lack of opportunity to do so. Many times, there are no suitable materials and no person to take over their cause. Librarians are best placed to assist this category of users to continue with their reading. This can be done by encouraging literacy classes to be held in the library where this is possible and by ensuring that suitable materials for neo-literates are available in the library. In some countries, such as Botswana, the library service works closely with the Department on Non-Formal Education to ensure that adult learners and neo-literates are availed reading materials. Such materials may be in the form of fiction books at the right reading level and with suitable content. Newspapers especially in the local language should be made available in the library as these are popular with adult patrons.

Other interest groups

The potential readers could be groups other than those mentioned above. These include farmers groups, women's groups, market vendors groups, etc. Librarians need to provide reading material to these groups making them aware that by reading about their particular activities, they will be able to better their work and improve their livelihoods.

Forming Partnerships

The promotion of reading involves many different players and it would be amiss of librarians or any other group to ignore the other stakeholders in the field. These include:

Writers

Librarians need to work closely with writers to promote reading. Writers know what they wish to communicate and librarians need to work with them to ensure that the intended audience gains from the writing. This can be done by requesting authors to read to library users from their writings. Such audiences can be children, adult learners, groups of adults with special interests and others.

Publishers

Publishers are very prominent players in the book sector. Librarians need to work with publishers to ensure that more books are available in the right quantities and relevance. The publishing of textbooks for example, should be done side by side with the publication of supplementary reading materials for schools.

Teachers and other education authorities

The Librarian-Teacher partnership in reading promotion has perhaps been the most profitable of all partnership that the librarian has ever entered into in reading promotion. The activities carried out include training teachers in reading promotion. After the trainings, teachers have often gone back to set up classroom libraries in their schools and also set aside reading times for their classes. Librarians are also known to have invited teachers to regularly take groups of children to the library during certain days of the week. This is something that regularly happens in libraries across Africa.

Parents

Without the parents' consent and interest, it would be very difficult to get children to read or even visit the library. Librarians who are part of the community and easily get involved in community activities are better placed to persuade parents to let their children use the library. Librarians need to work closely with parents to ensure that the culture of reading is inculcated in the children at an early age.

Media houses

Librarians and their partners could approach media houses to assist in the promotion of reading. These promotions could be in the form of story hours for children or book clubs for adult on radio or any other form that reaches a wide audience.

Reading Advocacy

There is need for all the book sector stakeholders to carry out reading advocacy work. Librarians need to do it with policy makers, with school authorities, with parents and with others whose influence will make a difference in terms of book provision to the community and reading by the community. This advocacy could be aimed at reducing taxes levied on books, or the inclusion of reading on the school time table or the establishment of public library services within various communities.

Skills needed by librarians to promote reading

In a world where there are so many competing demands on a person's time, librarians need some special skills in order to promote reading and keep the audience captive. These include:

Outreach skills

The existence of a library does not automatically translate into its use. It is important for librarians to reach out to those who are not in the habit of reading. This requires for the librarian to go out of the library and promote reading to the non-users of the library who may not know that the facility exists.

Knowledge of the reading matter

Librarians need to be aware of the books that they are promoting. It would make their reading promotion work more credible if they can, for example, be able to recommend certain books for certain readers. It also means that funds available for purchases are not wasted on books that the community considers irrelevant to their interests.

Communications skills

Librarians need to be able to communicate their message effectively and clearly. They need to convince their potential audience about the value of reading.

Providing a conducive environment for reading

The library should be an inviting place in order to persuade the community to visit it to read. There would be no point in convincing people to visit the library and once there, they find a dimly lit room with uninteresting books and staff that is not helpful.

Reading for a sustainable future

A person who reads regularly builds a future for himself/herself and his community. What may start as a simple leisurely exercise will over time create a person capable of critical thinking and informed decision making. This person requires to be encouraged at all stages to find reading attractive and part of his/her life. The need to present reading as one package which has had input from all various stakeholders cannot therefore be over-emphasised. This necessitates the many players in the book sector not only to continue this discourse on book provision in Africa but to also find solutions to the bottlenecks that exist. The next meeting of the book sector, after the Ougadougou conference should be a celebration of achievements made and milestones reached and not a lamentation about the failures and challenges met. I, as a librarian, look forward to being part of the celebration.

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