Enhancing Reading Through Library and Reference tools: the RAN Vacation Reading Programme.

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Abstract
One of the annual activities of the Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN) in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria is to organize and host a holiday reading programme for pupils at primary school level. During such organized activities, ‘library hour’ is one of the ‘spice’ activities which afford them the privilege of leisure reading in choice literature. The children which participated were drawn from various school and background primarily from the urban area; they were grouped according to their age, capacity, and grade level were made to participate in library-use and other literacy activities with observations made, the essence being to familiarize them with the library as a place where value is placed on knowledge acquisition using such reference materials such as encyclopedias, thesauri and dictionaries, biographical sources and gazetteers. The children generally benefited from guided reading, vocabulary and spelling exercises. They were also taken on a tour to a typical academic library to further raise their consciousness towards the efficacy of good reading materials. Study concludes with the recommendation for related activity to be replicated with children resident in sub-urban areas.

Key words: Books, enunciation, vocabulary, Library, holiday.

Introduction
Vacation periods are usually welcoming to children, being moments of fun, adventure and play. During such periods it is not uncommon to find them engaged in fun-filled activities, some of which could be anything far from what keeps them in tune with their educational growth. The outcome in such instances could lead to setbacks in study habits particularly for slow learners who may not be able to pick up with the intensity of learning as compared to the regular school period prior to vacation. An organized library or reading room set up for children’s leisure and acquisition of knowledge whether formally or informally ideally is placed to foster inquiry, curiosity and innovation. The children’s library at this juncture is geared to provide information needs for all learners from various backgrounds, especially in relation to the pedagogic use of reference material which offer factual information and supports a wide range of learning needs and personal interests through self-guided exploratory learning. A children’s learning centre ensures that books and other resources are available for all reading levels which was one of the enhancers of the Vacation Reading Programme (VRP).
These reasons and more prompted the Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN) Akwa Ibom State branch where the author served as its Programmes’ Director, to carry out a Vacation Reading Programme (VRP) which has virtually become an annual children’s event for the association.

The VRP has been a forum where various innovative literacy-based yet exciting activities take place, one of these being the provision of library services which spiced up the entire learning experience for participating children who were led through a typical library situation in the holiday programme. One of Nigeria’s National Policy on Education (2004) cited by Aina, A. J. et al (2011) advocates for the training of young minds for ‘the acquisition of appropriate skills and social abilities and competence as equipment for the individual to live and contributes to the development of the society’. This pre-supposes essentially that the development of the (child’s) mind is achievable through training, more so when conducted in an unconditional atmosphere not pre-determined by participants, thereby raising learning expectations and projected positive outcomes.

The library is not new in the educational setting, though it has been noted that in most public primary schools, a functioning library is still far-fetched. Fadero (2001) posits that (public) schools suffer consequences of inadequate provision of facilities one of which includes the provision of libraries. This and other factors prompted the inclusion of library services into the VRP which at other times was more often than not was tailored towards simple reading in general terms. This paper therefore presents a summary of library related literacy activities carried out during such periods in the recent past which on the other hand, also served as library orientation for participating children some of whom were at primary school grade level. In this regard, the programme also created the enabling child - friendly learning atmosphere and furthermore offered opportunity for those who may not have used a typical library previously.

**RAN’s Vacation Reading Programme (VRP)**

The VRP of RAN in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria was inaugurated some years ago, precisely in 2006 following the year after a state-wide training for interested literacy workers/ experts drawn
predominantly from academics in tertiary institutions and teachers from both primary and secondary schools. The event enabled children to be exposed to a print-rich environment which according to Udosen (2008) would have a rub-off effect on their reading habit as such ‘it is not a vacation lesson programme but a reading programme… and so when they cannot read…often leads to other social vices.’ The objective of this special event basically stems from the cardinal goals of RAN at the national level being to promote reading and literacy nationwide. By extension, conduct of such activities positively impact on a child’s reading fluency, an advantage asserted by Richards (2000) as being necessary for comprehension and enjoyable reading experiences. The VRP being cost-effective was held in the state capital- Uyo for four weeks, from Mondays to Thursdays each week in a conducive yet dynamic environment being the University of Uyo (UNIUYO) Staff School. The school is strategically cited in the heart of town which informed its being adopted and one of its entry points directly connect into the city to encourage attendance and participation of various children from varied backgrounds. The school also has a large playground where kids would have to play and have fun as well as a functioning library with useful text books, some of which were further augmented with resources from RAN to actualize benefit of the programme and some library reference sources brought by this author to demonstrate to children certain information search process during reading and other intellectually stimulating exercises. Four other academic instructors were also handy during the VRP to carry out other aspects of non-library literacy and educational activities based on the children’s grade level and ages as their composition was of various primary school levels. An open invitation through formal letter was distributed to various schools at random in the city a couple of weeks prior to long vacation. However, pupils from the University of Uyo (UNIUYO) Staff School were outstanding in number. The total number of registered children was estimated to be near 60 in number during the early days of the programme, but the number appreciated while sessions heightened.
The library at this instance functioned veritably as a reading laboratory; sessions carried out by this author whom by profession is a librarian. It served both learning and pedagogic purposes for the kids and became an informal training outlet for some members of the University of Uyo (UNIUYO) Staff school who were interested in library services and consequently witnessed some of the sessions. This paper is of the view that that libraries will remain what they ought to be, veritable education resource center.

Basis for Vacation Reading Programme (VRP)

Children are exposed to learning situations and various experiences when they read good books, interpret and listen discriminatory to peers and as they view their world through good motion pictures. Makenzi (2003) however opines that in a world where television has overtaken many children, it is our duty to tell children the importance of the written word to enable them read books both for information and leisure. The key role in supporting and developing enjoyment of reading and literacy in various forms cannot be over-emphasized.

School libraries model excellence through supporting and encouraging high levels of engagement with learning. It is commonly known that a library’s environment and even the physical appearance of a book and what it entails, to the extent of their accessibility essentially influences pattern of its utilization, positively or negatively. However, some school libraries neither update, weed nor own adequate resources and in so doing, hampers the intent to have a welcoming reading and learning space for children (patrons). It follows that a child does not simply develop love for books when essentially there is no encouragement to ginger same. In the same vein, children acquire habits early in life therefore, good library and reading habit as expected should result in taste for books which surreptitiously may be hard to detach from the child in the years following. Pleasure reading, Reading/Writing clubs, Special holiday programmes to mention a few could help alleviate related situation. Marinho (2003) suggests in this wise that reading many good books even superficially is better than reading just one deeply, for it may require understanding and concentration that many students (or pupils) cannot sustain. Aguolu and Aguolu (2002) state that ‘Pupils who made effective use of libraries…come to show greater appreciation of and utilize more effectively the resources of the library.’

Suffice to say, a connection exists between reading and libraries in a sense that the latter comes alive by the former and in turn becomes an enabler for reading. A well set up children’s library is an ideal place to learn how to use libraries and how libraries work. Through inculcating library literacy, students broaden their language and understanding and are more apt to interpret library terms, signage, symbols and charts. For some children, the HRP was to be their first experience of a library following the observation by this author during interactions with them.

Library and literacy project

The inclusion of ‘use of library’ has become part and parcel of RAN’s Vacation Reading Programme (VRP) and is allotted full one hour to accommodate diverse reading exercises as the
pupils may wish to, and other library-based literacy forms. Two out of four working days in each week of the activities was assigned for this and the UNIUYO staff school library served as venue. Factors which led to the programme’s activities are further discussed below:

i) Aims:

In view of the educational roles played by a school library, the following purposes were ensured while implementing the literacy sessions, being to:

i. Instill library functions and their benefits in the minds of children at an early stage.
ii. Guide the children through the various uses of information uses commonly found in the library.
iii. Ensure effective and maximum use of the select library materials.
iv. Lead children through information search and knowledge acquisition skills.
v. To create awareness of library regulations thereby safeguarding against the misuse of both services and resources.
vi. To develop cognitive ability by unraveling certain complex semantic structures thereby develop their vocabulary.

ii) Composition of children:

The VRP offered a relaxed, informal and exciting setting which gingered the children’s reading and learning readiness. Most of them were drawn from environs around the university and beyond, in Uyo capital city. Participating children numbered over 60 and there was a balanced representation of both sexes; they were grouped in categories of upper primary, mid and lower primary school levels with consideration to their age and other factors. They therefore constituted three sizeable groups easy to manage and to administer guidance relatively one on one basis. However, few students from the lower class category who exhibited higher IQ during the first few days of activities were by recommendation moved to the upper category, while two other students in upper class who exhibited really low performance were tactfully relocated to the group which they could cope and be well guided.

iii) Resources in Use

One of the ways of creating awareness about products or services for their effective use is by carrying out a ‘demo’. This became the enabling strategy used in demonstrating the use of some library’s reference resources which children are likely to come across and utilise throughout their educational lifetime, such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, biographical materials and other forms of literature.

All materials used were those produced for children’s reading level, among these were ‘Webster’s Intermediate Dictionary’ ‘Illustrated Encyclopedic Dictionary’
‘Reading essentials in Science’ ‘Child craft: make & do’.

As earlier mentioned, most schools lack standard libraries while those with libraries may be short
of audio visual materials and other electronic resources. The situation was however remedied
with applications used by instructors in their computer systems, though print resources were
predominantly used.

Activities

Reading and related activities were carried out in the classroom and at the library in the
following ways:

a) Reading exercises
b) Application of reference sources
c) Use of library
d) Library tour elsewhere

a) Reading: During actual reading in the class as directed, each child was required to engage in
‘silent’ reading of any literature of their choice while this author (investigator) would use
Unobtrusive Observation to note what goes on. Towards end of reading they would be shown
proper spacing between a book and the eye during reading and how/why they could read without
necessarily moving their lips or pointing at words.

This helped the ones who could not be involved properly to adjust subsequently. They were also
taught the parts of a book and how to link up specific information required from it e.g. through
index, content page, preface and blurb. Following this, any volunteer would be asked to identify
main idea and other relevant information with the aim of ascertaining their depth of
comprehension. Prior to this, the select reading texts had to be glanced through first by this
author/resource person to capture the story line and adequately determine a child’s response if to
be correct or not. Having to learn to relate with others never met before, the children
considerably were taken into opportunities for collaborative book sharing, reading and promotion
activities including library visits within the larger vicinity, precisely the University of Uyo
library. At other sessions, as many volunteers as possible among the children would be required to read aloud short passages from a text before others. Etim (2005) asserts that reading aloud brings literature alive and is a form of reading-enhancement as it helps children understand story action. Those who did not indicate were taken note of without necessarily drawing attention to them though intermittently, such children would be called upon to read. Experience has shown that children who do not indicate interest to read aloud before peers is as a result of shyness/lack of confidence or poor reading ability. At such situations the instructor plays the role of a confidence booster to ensure the child is applauded upon rising to speak while prompting the child with smiles to go on. Passages must be interesting and where possible captivating. At this juncture, it is often advisable that any form of error or correction be pointed out at the end of reading session just not to stall the fun and eagerness to read out. Thereafter, the affected kids may be required to read the passage(s) afresh and oftentimes, the affected person’s performance in reading would usually be much better than the previous. The VRP offered an environment where students could improve and take initiatives to work as a group. It further provided innovative learning goal platforms for participants.

b) Reference tools: Children love character studies particularly of heroes which they often wish to be like; they were encouraged to read biographical sources of Nigerian heroes. At other times the children in small groups of three to five are made to read from a text selected by the investigator which contains hard words and would be asked to say what those words mean. This used to be another exciting moment as each of them attempts to prove their strength in vocabulary. As activity progresses, any willing child among the groups would thereafter be asked to look up dictionary meaning and context of the words, while the investigator/instructor will guide them through the search. Same treatment was administered in the use of encyclopedia following a session of guidelines on their usage. In one of the days preceding weekend, the kids were given about five hard words to crosscheck their meaning in the dictionary at home. This was a deliberate attempt to encourage parents getting them a copy and it paid off, though with exceptions. Few of the kids had their take-home assignment done by others judged by the use of ‘high density’ words written which were above the kid’s level, more so by their inability to respond at all when asked afresh the meaning of those words without referring to their note. Whereas most of the reference tools utilized were of print sources, other versions in electronic formats were introduced to them.
c) **Library use:** The outcome of interactions made with children was quite revealing judged by their enthusiasm during library hour. Much of their earlier experiences were brought to the fore during the library hour as they laughed and rushed into the school library to pick any literature of their choice with zest, ranging from science fiction, animal stories, novels, comics and lots more. At some point they were hushed to be quiet and reminded of that library regulation. Several of them read more than one book in view of the earlier orientation given them on how to get information from a book. They were particularly interested in using the dictionary while reading which unfortunately was nothing near to being sufficient for their use. In the library they were also shown other non print materials such as globes, models, nature corner and pictorial representations.

**d) Library tour:** a day to the rounding up of the vacation reading programme, children were taken to the University of Uyo (UNIUYO) library to further appreciate what it is meant for. They took turns to glance through copies of encyclopedias in their various volumes with other materials and were particularly overwhelmed by the large number of collections at UNIUYO library, massive encyclopedias and the massive shelves! At that juncture some of them expressed their future desire of working in the library based on their thinking that it would accord them the opportunity of having many books to use and read as Librarian’s do.

**Pix of the author in UNIUYO Library**

**Conclusion**

Library services to users are often accompanied with the use of resources to meet learning and informational needs which as proofed during the interactive sessions with the kids, were quite useful. At the closing event, some of the parents remarked that they have witnessed a remarkable improvement in the reading attitude of their wards and observed their expression of newly acquired vocabulary learnt. It is recommended that related reading activities be carried out particularly in the rural areas where literacy level is low, with learning modules modified and adapted to fit prevailing situation.

The sustenance of literacy outreaches not only lie within the pedagogic strength and commitment of those involved but on massive support through grants and other forms by parents, individuals, NGOs, corporate bodies, educational organizations and the governments (Philip, 2014) this is
required more so as a lot of activities of Reading Association of Nigeria in Akwa Ibom state are volunteer based.

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