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Grace Uchechi Onyebuchi

Department of Library and Information Science, Univ. of Nigeria Nsukka., grace.onyebuchi@unn.edu.ng

Elizabeth Titilope Babarinde

Department of Library and Information Science, Univ. of Nigeria Nsukka.,

elizabeth.babarinde@unn.edu.ng

Ify Evangel Obim

Department of Library and Information Science, Univ. of Nigeria Nsukka., ify.obim@unn.edu.ng

Victoria Olayemi Fagbemi

Department of Library and Information Science, Univ. of Nigeria Nsukka., victoria.fagbemi@unn.edu.ng

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FROM LIBRARY SERVICES TO LITERACY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME IN NSUKKA PRISON LIBRARY: OUR EXPERIENCE

ABSTRACT

Prisons serve as a place where criminal behaviors are suppressed. The need for these set of individuals to gather skills which help them remain positive right in the four walls of the prison yard and after serving their jail terms cannot be overemphasized. It is for this reason that the team set out to develop a programme aimed at inculcating literacy and creative writing skills that will help them participate more effectively when they finish their jail term. The aim of the study was to explore the importance and contributions of library resources and services to the lives of prison inmates and an attempt by the team to take this to a higher level. The study also reports an ongoing project in Nsukka Prisons, Enugu State, Nigeria. The design used to elicit information about the effect of the programme was survey. The population of the study was 365 with a sample size of two groups of 15 inmates each totaling 30. The research methods used was observation and focus group discussion. The results showed an improved level of literacy, creative and comic writing skills of the participants. It was therefore recommended that literacy activities should be encouraged among inmates to equip them with skills which will enable them become independent learners and better individuals in the society.

Key words: Library services, literacy development, prison library, inmates, Nsukka, Nigeria.

Introduction

Prisons were first established to banish and confine the offender, subjecting him or her to hard labour. They are not seen as normal environments in the sense that, inmates do not get involved in normal ways of life, being confined physically in places mostly surrounded by high walls with stringent rules as means of punishment. Hence, Obioha (2002) said that imprisonment was most appropriately conceived as a formal perspective of inflicting pain on the individual(s). Prison interferes with the education of those in school or job training and limits inmates' access to information and reading materials that are available to the wider society. The inhumane and psychologically destructive nature of prison makes offenders more likely to go back to crime when released. Also, the effect of prisons may bring little or no change to hardened criminals. Rather, when brought together with lower risk offenders, the

latter may be more adversely affected through exposure to an environment typically dominated by more hardened peers. This and long periods of incarceration may lead to wasted years and increased criminality. The picture painted above is the traditional criminal justice system still practiced in various societies in Nigeria. Given the unpleasant nature of prison life and the social stigma associated with incarceration, the jail should serve as reformatory centre for the inmates.

It is necessary to understand that apart from being a place for convicted people, the concept of the prisons as practiced in most developed countries is that of reformation and rehabilitation. But, in order to perform this role, prisons need to have functional libraries where the prisoners will have access to quality information. Iloeje (2001) revealed that information is the heart of the world's development. In this vein, Evans and Suporano (2005) defined information as an essential resource to the individual, government, businesses and institutions alike as it enhances the empowerment of man in his bid to attain the goals for developmental activities. As information is vital in the life of all individuals for optimal development and the realization of socio-political and economic activities, so it is for the survival of convicted persons during incarceration. Likewise, Dike (2002) revealed that incarcerated persons have the same reading interest and, therefore, need information for their consumption like other free members of the society. One of the ways of building reading interest is through literacy development programme; an activity that exposes individuals to variety of information resources and services which in turn equip lifelong learning skills. Involving inmates in literacy development could help build their interest for learning which may be inactive in them within the confines of the prison walls. One vehicle for realizing literacy learning in inmates is comic writing activities which help to boost reading skills through the combination of text and pictures

in order to create meaning (Ngwuchukwu, Ejikeme and Onyebuchi, 2019); thereby, offering opportunity for literacy building and a bridge to more conventional literature (Bitz, 2010). Using comic writing activities to develop literacy skills in inmates keeps them occupied as well as gives them an escape from the boredom that can result from living in an institutional setting.

The aim of the study was therefore to examine the provision of library services for literacy development in Nsukka Prison Library through comic writing activities. This study represents an attempt by the researchers to report their on-going experience in the prison library. Generally, the study explored the importance and contributions of library resources and services to the lives of prison inmates and reports an attempt by the team to take this to a higher level through literacy programme. Specifically, the purpose of the study was to:

1. ascertain inmates' satisfaction with the prison library
2. identify the types of library materials and activities they enjoy most
3. determine ways that comic book writing helped them
4. find out challenges experienced from the comic writing and other library activities organized by the team
5. suggest strategies for enhancing comic writing and other library services in the prison

Literature Review

Imprisonment interrupts the education of those in school or job training and limits inmates' access to information and reading materials available in the wider society. Because prison inmates are cut off from the world, meaningful access to information is therefore vital to them (Marshall, 2011). This to say that these inmates deserve functional libraries in order to have access to information resources; since the library is the reservoir of information resources and can play an important role in reducing recidivism or return to crime after release. Access to information resources is crucial to learning for any individual and in line with this; Sussman (2014) observed that learning allows inmates to obtain the various literacy skills they need to

function well in the society once they are released. To satisfy their information and build their literacy skills to be better citizens in the society when they finish their jail terms, inmates also read library materials. Hence, prison inmates, like other free citizens have the same reading interests and information needs and as such, need to be provided with diverse resources (Campbell, 2005). They also read to acquire information for skill acquisition, health needs, entrepreneurship skill, social and entertainment purposes (Folorunsho, 2019). Since inmates read to meet the informational, educational, cultural, recreational, and rehabilitative needs (IFLA, 2005), prison library resources should include materials in different formats to satisfy these needs (Omagbemi & Odunewu (2008), including fiction and other literature, general nonfiction, magazines and textbooks (Dike, 2002). The libraries therefore play an important role in helping inmates develop variety of skills given that they are built and maintained to provide information resources for specific defined community such as prison inmates and one of the ways it can achieve literacy is through comic writing.

Comic writing builds a path for learners to develop literacy that enables them function well in the society. They assist learners in acquiring vital skills of lifelong learning by offering a combination of reading and visual stimulation (Howe, 2011). As a medium of expression, comics communicate a wealth of emotions and ideas (McCloud, 2014) meant to create impart on both the communicator and the world at large. Comic book writing helps in harnessing skills which assist individuals in realizing the aim of lifelong learning (Ngwuchukwu, Ejikeme and Onyebuchi, 2019) and research has shown that those who are thought comics exhibits potentials for information literacy skills. This is because comics have their own grammar and as such, may be created in form of mysteries, science fiction, autobiography, or even surrealist montages with the aim of producing aesthetic response in the viewer. Training inmates in comics offers an

opportunity for building their literacy abilities while bridging to more conventional literature (Bitz, 2010).

Comics promote learning to be personally as well as socially appropriate for the inmates, considering that it gives them opportunity to step out of their cell room and journey through imagination. When individuals, including prison inmates, learn comics, it creates sustained impact on their creative abilities. Onyebuchi (2018) stated that training in comics may pose some difficulties to the learners especially beginners who have not heard about nor read comic books; but as challenging as it is, when gradually learnt, comic writing is digested and thus, builds a long lasting literacy abilities in individuals who have mastered the art. Libraries could tackle the task of providing materials and services to the growing population in prisons by offering access to information and learning of comics on diverse issues, and the denial of these information resources would go against the role of the prison as reformative center.

Sadly, Popoola & Emasealu (2016) revealed that most prison libraries in Nigeria lack adequate provision of library information resources with which to pre-occupy inmates. This could hinder their literacy development especially when they cannot gain easy access to the few available library resources that are meant to motivate them to learn and meet their information needs within the prisons. This unfortunate situation has caused inmates constant psychological battles and challenges on how to survive and be reintegrated into society as better citizens. It is in the light of this that Dixon and Thorsten (2001) opined that prison libraries can provide necessary means for the inmates to improve themselves, acting as strong backbone to educational reform and better work opportunities for prison inmates upon their release. Lehmann (2003) advocated that prison library services should vary widely in level as an inclusive prison education, therapeutic learning and leisure programme. Stressing on this, the

author stated that libraries should be committed to convincing the authority on the need for prison libraries; offering to work with them to develop policy that works in favour of the imprisoned.

Background on Nsukka Prison Library

The prison library service started as portable library services, a follow up on the visit made by the University Women Association in February 2000 to offer programmes that helped prepare the inmates for life after prison. The absence of educational and training facilities in the prison makes the inmates to be idle except when they are involved in manual labour or menial jobs. In view of this, when prison inmates in Nigeria are released, they are hit with the realization that the time they spent in the prison has been wasted as there has not been any improvement in their knowledge. Instead of the expected reformation, the ex-prisoners most times constitute a nuisance to the society. In the bid to address this problem, the Children Centre (University of Nigeria) volunteers, decided to provide reading materials to the inmates of Nsukka prison.

In March 2000, a portable library collection of 105 books and magazines was donated to the prison with an understanding that it would be changed every quarter (Dike 2003). Books were also given out to the prisons on loan from time to time and gradually library use developed, enabling the inmates to have access to reading materials. The inmates, especially the literate ones showed preference for fictional materials. However, with time they started requesting for informational books and magazines. At inception, the library operated from an open space, but was later moved to the prison Chapel, as this was the only available space at the

time. The library was put under the management of a prison welfare officer with one literate prison inmate assisting.

As the number of literate inmates increased, the need to have more materials arose to satisfy the increasing interest of the prisoners as well as improve their education. Following this development, it became important to have a permanent space for the library. With this realization; Professor V. W. Dike who at the time was the Chairperson of the Children Centre committee encouraged friends of the Children's Centre to make contributions towards building a library for the prisoners. In due course the prison library was completed and this gave the inmates the opportunity to come to the library, relax and read during their free time. Although the library could not accommodate all the inmates at once, it provided a relaxing and conducive environment to read and study in groups. With the establishment of a library in the prison, both fiction and nonfiction books were donated to the prisons on a permanent basis. A prison warder became the permanent librarian assisted by a junior warder. This arrangement encouraged the inmates to read widely and some of them were encouraged to study for external examinations while in jail. This was both a morale booster and motivation; as it encouraged a number of them to gain admission into Open University while still in jail or on completion of the jail term.

With change in time and emphasis on literacy and skills development, there was need to make the activities more involving and skill-based. This prompted the decision of the Children's Centre volunteers to introduce a literacy development programme which started February and is meant to be ongoing with different packages. The first activity introduced by the group was comic writing aimed at building their literacy skills. As at 2018 when the programme started, the prison library in Nsukka had three hundred and forty (340) inmates.

Research Methods

A case study research design was adopted for the study. The entire population was 340 inmates and a purposive sampling technique was used to select two sets of fifteen (15) inmates making a total number of thirty (30) respondents. The reason for the purposive selection was based on the number of inmates that indicated interest in the comic writing programme, both for the first group and the second. To elicit in-depth information, a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) session was conducted with the selected inmates. Given that the focus of this study was to investigate impact of comic writing as part of library services on literacy development in Nsukka Prison Library. These inmates were also specifically targeted because as they were frequent users of the library, it was assumed that they should have been exposed to the use of the general library services for at least one (1) to three (3) years. Data collection for this project lasted a period of one year; as the group continued to gather data during the time of the training. Data collected was organized and analyzed in narrative form in line with the questions raised using percentages and charts where applicable.

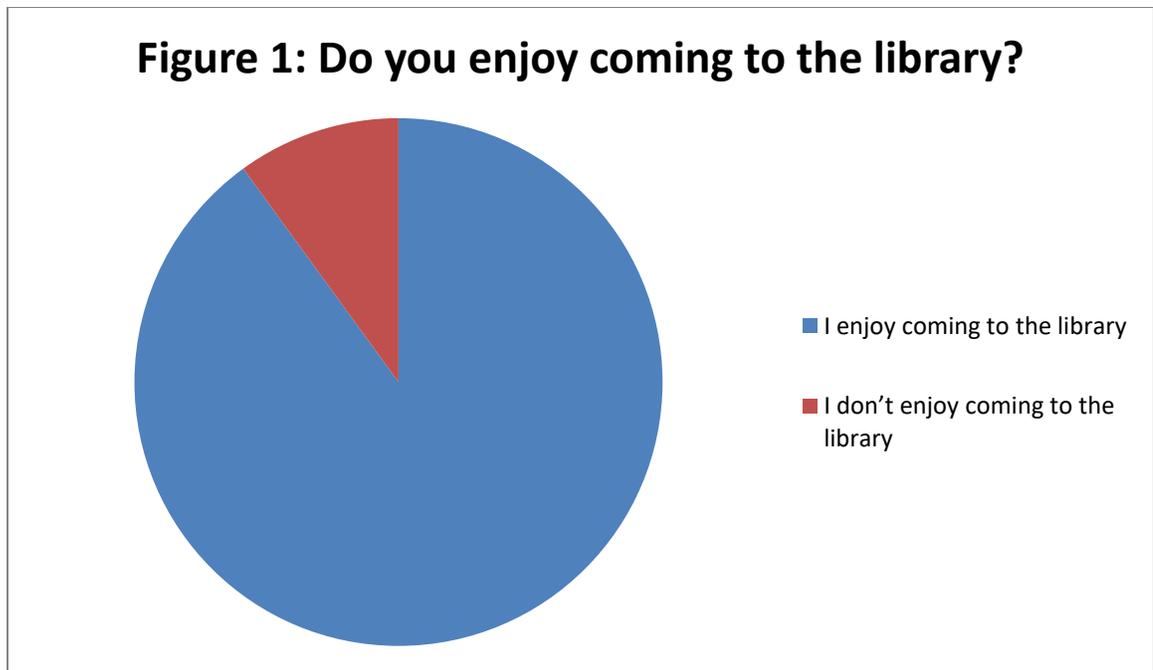
Findings

This section presents the results of the data collected according to the questions posed to the inmates.

At the end of the section, a summary of major findings were presented. The general aim was to ascertain the level of satisfaction derived from the comic writing exercise which was part of the library services. All the respondents agreed to have used library services for at least one (1) to three (3) years and in order to establish their level of satisfaction, a number of questions were asked: -

FGD question 1: Do you enjoy coming to the library?

Figure 1: Do you enjoy coming to the library?



The chart above shows the responses of inmates on whether they enjoy coming to the library or not. From their responses, 90% (27) of the inmates from the population sampled indicated: “*I enjoy coming to the library*”. This may be so because it is one of the ways to stay away from the cell for a while and also due to the fact that they will gain new knowledge and interact with the facilitators of the programme. This was part of the reasons they gave for using the library. On the other hand, only 3 (10%) of them said: “*I don't really enjoy the library*”. One of them further gave reason that he could not read.

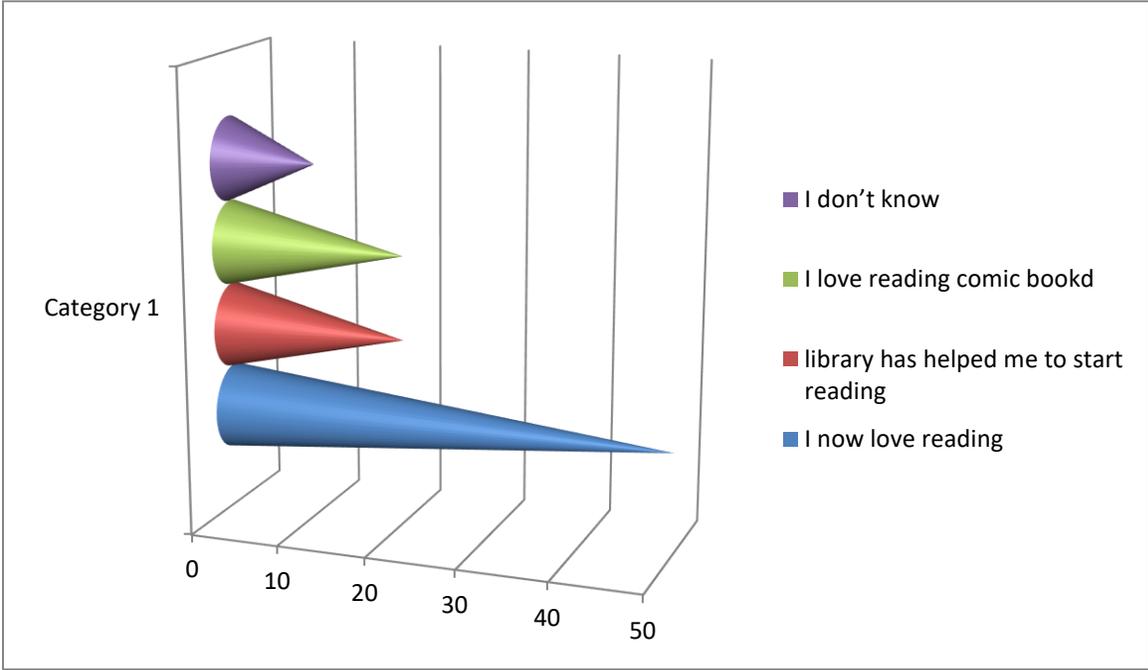
FGD question 2: What type of library materials do you enjoy most?

This question was asked at the beginning of the comic writing programme. The reason for the question at the initial stage was to know whether they prefer comics to any other activity in the library. However, 3 (10%) of the inmates preferred comic book writings while 12 (40%) loved general reading activity. Also while 6 (20%) loved reading novels specifically, 9 (30%) preferred reading informational books. In addition, most of this group said they enjoy reading story books and novels because it makes them feel happy and also look forward to a bright

future. It is important to note that the inmates preferred one library activity or the other; and that could explain why they use the library. One may infer that the reason why majority of the inmates preferred other general reading to comic book writing was that they were yet to build their creative minds and comic skills. When asked why they preferred comics, they said they preferred cartoon-like stories to other types of reading.

FGD question 3: What benefits did you derive from the library activities you were engaged in?

Figure 2: Benefits of Library Activities



From the chart above, fifty percent (50%) making a total number of 15 of the two groups indicated: “the library has helped me to develop love for reading” while 6 (20%) inmates said ‘when I came to this reprimand institution, I didn’t like reading but the library has helped me to start reading. The library materials they read include story books, newspapers and magazines. Six (20%) of them said ‘I now enjoy reading comic books very well. On the reason for that, they

agreed it was because of the comic pictures and the way the stories are depicted that makes them more interesting”. Another group of 3 inmates making ten percent (10%) said “I don’t know”

FGD Question 4: In what ways have comic book writing programme helped you?

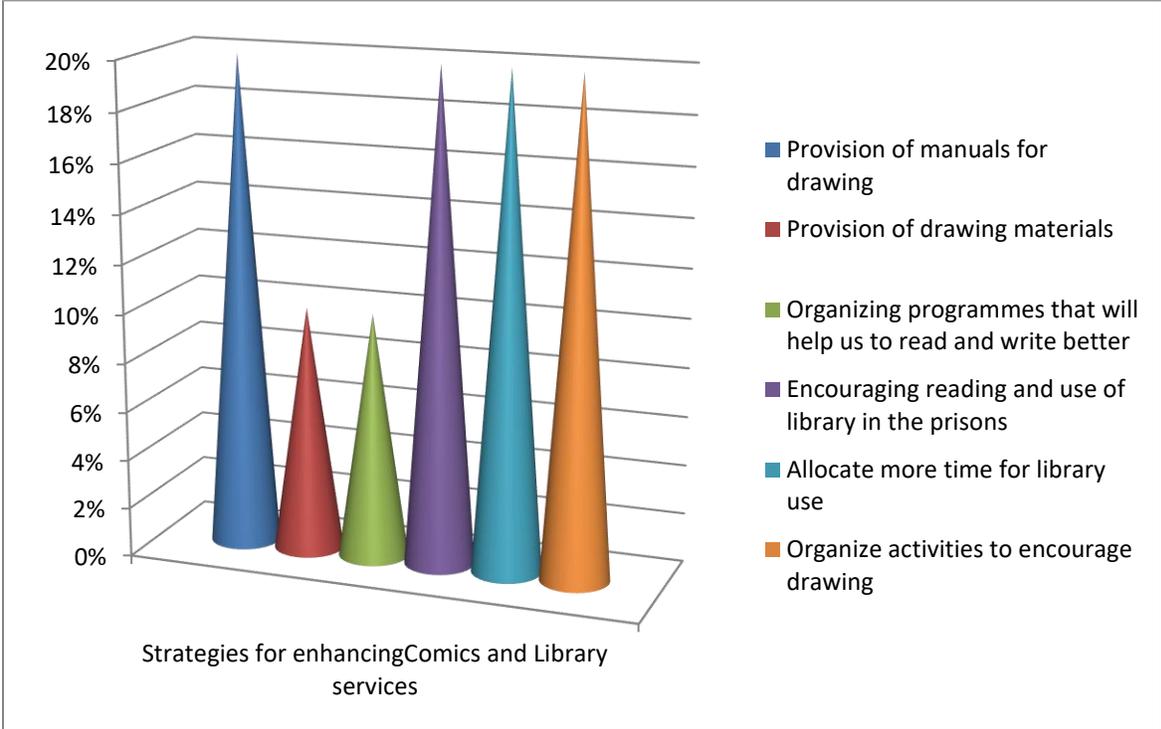
All the respondents indicated that comic book writing has helped them in one way or the other. Specifically, 12 (40%) indicated that comic book writing has improved the way they write and that now, they can write more than they used to. Most of their answer were: *“I now write better”*, *“I can now spell difficult works”*, *“I can introduce dialogue”*, *“I now know how to use exclamations to express my feeling”*, *“I now know how to read facial expression”*, *“I can now turn shape into difference figures”*, etc. Nine (30%) of the respondents also agreed that: *“Comics keeps me engaged”*. They said their reason was because they enjoy being engaged and comic writing is an activity to make one engaged. Some said it has helped them to develop skills of imagination in order create their own stories. Nine (30%) of them indicated that they love reading historic books and current affairs. The reason given for this, according to them was that, they love reading comics about other people and other places especially as it concerns exploratory and innovative adventure.

FGD Question 5: What challenges did you experience from the comic writing and other library activities?

The respondents said that they faced some challenges such as the inability to draw very well (12 respondents, 40%). Six (20%) said they found comic writing difficult at the beginning because of the insert words into balloons. Again, 3 (10%) found the activity difficult because they couldn’t read very well. Three (10%) of the respondents stated: “I don’t know the meaning

of some words” according to them, they had to use dictionary first to check the meaning of words before writing their assignment as they were having difficulty understanding some English words. Six (20%) of them said: “I found difficult linking one panel to another”. Other problems they generally encountered were problems self-expression, inability to use word balloon, difficulty in creating new scenes and problem of not being able to create original and imaginary ideas.

FGD Question 6: What strategies do you suggest are needed for enhancing comic and other library services in the prison?



From the chart presented above, the respondents stated the following as strategies for enhancing the inmates’ comic writing experiences (especially when mentioned by one of them): “I will want our library to be provided with books that shows step by step ways of drawing”. They stated that equipping their library with drawing manuals will help them learn how to draw (6

respondents, 20%). Other said: *“I want the government to provide us with drawing materials, “Activities that will help us to draw should regularly be organized” “you should also organize other programmes that will help us to read and write better”, “the management should encourage reading and use of library in the prisons”, “the management should encourage creative writing in inmates to enable them create original ideas”, and “the management should always give us more time to come to the library”.* Some of them said that they need drawing materials (10%) and that they should be given more time (20%) to come to use the library and its services.

Observed Challenges to Library Development

In spite of the effort of the Children Centre Library at ensuring that the prison inmates have access to quality information, there are still some challenges that stand as hindrance to this aim as gathered through the literacy programme. These include inadequate space and funding, as also experienced by other types of libraries. However, some other challenges are unique to the prison environment. Among these are security issues, dealing with other prison staff, extreme damage to materials and theft of books. Also related to this is the fact that the prison library is small; and as a result, the inmates can only come in small groups of about fifteen at a time and this hinders the constant usage of the library. Security was cited as being very important in the prison setting because there was always a possibility for violence in the library, and any case of unrest in the prison or the outside environment leads to prolonged closure of the library and locking up of the inmates for long hours.

Recommendation

Based on the experiences gathered by the research team, the following recommendations are made to help improve the prison library services for literacy development in Nsukka and beyond:

1. Organizing regular creative writing activities including comics to equip inmates with passion for reading and library use
2. Equipping the prison library with more relevant information materials that could help transform their ideas about life generally.
3. Encourage comic writing exercises to build skills for earning a living when they are out of the prison cells
4. Provision of a more standard library space, facilities and adequate funding.
5. Enhancing security measures to ensure the safety of library materials.
6. Allocating more time for library activities.
7. Reducing emphasis on censoring reading materials.
8. Creating room for better collaboration between the prison authorities and the prison librarians (prison welfare officers) for enhanced prison library services.

Conclusion

Library services have been seen to play a significant role in developing literacy skills of inmates. Building literacy skills in inmates gives them the opportunity to become reformed and adapt better outside the four walls of the prisons. Again, when inmates are equipped through library programme and services, they become independent, develop positive attitude towards life and in effect become responsible citizens that can add value to the society. The findings show that for the inmates to develop a responsible lifestyle in prison and out of prison, it is

necessary for them to have access to diverse library services and programmes such as comic and creative writing. This calls for the attention of all and sundry: the government agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Prison Authorities and Librarians to brace up to the challenges of literacy development in the prisons.

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