

# Encouraging The Formation of Reading Habit In Children

....Being a paper presented by the Head, Rivers State Branch of the National Library of Nigeria MISS M. G. UMO, at a workshop on School Library Methods organised by the Lagos State School Library Services Yaba.

Teachers, librarians and parents are today very much concerned about the poor reading habits of their children. The cry to develop reading interest has resounded in all nooks and corners of this country - in the homes, in the classrooms and even in places of work.

This cry has invariably elicited a very passionate question in the minds of those who love and care for the all-round development of these youths. The question "what can we do to help?" is not only pathetic but also goes to support the extent of the sympathy this lapse in our children's reading habits has been able to whip.

The problem of children's backwardness or lack of interest in reading is not peculiar to Nigeria, it could in fact be said to be universal but the degree varies from one country to another, and from one cultural background to another.

Since this is an agreed fact, the problem has to be tackled in such a manner as not to deviate from the cultural and educational backgrounds of those affected.

It is usually said that one who wears a tight shoe knows best where it pinches. In the same vein, the Nigerian mothers, teachers and librarians are yearning collectively for some ideas on how to encourage our children to read.

This is so because they know the adverse effect of this deficiency first in the lives of the children and also in the progress of a country like ours where all hands have to be on deck to hope for a well-balanced development such as we have been dreaming of.

To effect whatever changes we can in order to encourage the love for reading, we have to borrow ideas from the developed parts of the world, and adapt them to our own background.

We now know what the problems are and we do agree that as long as

life lasts, man can develop ways of improving the present situation. We may then want to enumerate some of the methods of combating poor reading habits and thereby encouraging our primary and post-primary children to cultivate the habit of reading not only textbooks for examinations or projects, but books for pleasure, intellectual and cultural advancement.

Before I attempt to suggest ways of encouraging children to read, I should first endeavour to identify the various types of reading habits which tantamount to "poor reading habits". There are basically two groups of these poor readers viz the "reluctant readers" and the "backward readers".

The two terms should not be confused in any measure or thought of as being synonymous in their interpretations. While a "reluctant reader" has normal intelligence and could read if he is induced, encouraged or prodded into reading the "backward reader" does not have the intelligence to learn to read easily.

In any of the two cases, however, the main thing is stimulation. Children need all the incentives and encouragement they can get from the adults who introduce them to books.

Their potentiality has to be stirred into life and these can only be achieved by careful manipulation of the following methods.

- (a) Book talks - visits to classrooms etc.
- (b) Story telling. (Scheduled story hours in libraries or classrooms).
- (c) Book sharing in libraries.
- (d) Display or exhibition of well written and illustrated books.
- (e) Use of book related - media e.g. slides, films, reading packages, films-trips etc.

- (f) Film shows, TV talks etc.
- (g) Puppet shows
- (h) Other library activities e.g. library week or book week, book rooms - for permanent display of new or enticing and well illustrated books with few words and bold prints.

Now that we have collected the desired recipe, it is now incumbent on us to prepare the dough appropriately in order to achieve the desired result. In this respect I will expatiate on some of the points mentioned above so as to provide a mini-manual or guideline to a para-professional in the field of children's work.

Meanwhile I will like to emphasize here that the writer does not in any way claim to be an expert in children's work. Nor does she claim that this little write up is all-encompassing as to preclude the infusion of new ideas emanating from the day-to-day experiences which some of her colleagues are privileged to have, and the changes in individual or environmental conditions.

Book talk, according to Amelia Munson, falls into place between story telling and reviewing, it partakes of both and is unlike either. By definition, a booktalk is a formal or informal presentation about a book or group of books designed to entice children into reading them.

Some people describe book talk as an art or a device by which the librarian or teacher tries to interest young people in all books generally or some books in particular through a talk so carefully prepared as to seem spontaneous.

In this type of talk, he/she gives the subject the flavour and the appeal of each book presented. One of the axiomatic things about book talking is that the talk should not reveal everything about the book.

Some suspense should be created during the presentation so as to allow the children become anxious and desire to know what happened in the end.

Book talks can be conducted in the classrooms or in a library, or even in a cultural centre by the librarian or teacher. In this case the librarian and the class teacher fixes a date and a time. This can be arranged specifically to introduce new and interesting books or could be combined with a particular lesson in view.

There are two types of book talks, e.g. short and long book talks which are determined basically by the length of time expended for any particular one.

A short book talk only involves one title and lasts from thirty seconds to one minute, while a long book talk lasts between ten and fifteen minutes and it usually emphasizes a particular aspect of a title for instance the general theme or the illustrations, etc.

The Objectives of book talking are varied and consists of:-

- (a) Selling of the idea of reading for pleasure
- (b) Introducing new ideas and new fields of reading
- (c) Developing appreciation of style and character portrayal
- (d) Raising the level of reading by introducing the best books which the audience (i.e. children) can read with pleasure, and which may not otherwise have come to their notice.
- (e) Humanizing books, the library and the librarian.
- (f) Keeping librarians/teachers from becoming hypocrites who despair of their patron's reading tastes while never reading for themselves or for their patrons.

In order to achieve the desired goal in book talking, a careful planning involving correct choice of books and media is necessary. The teacher or librarian must be patient and understanding while trying to discover the children's level of interest.

While making the presentation the intonation and the diction of the presenter is very vital. Anything abnormal or dull is bound to put kids off. The book chosen for this talk should not

be too simple as to lower the ego of the recipient or too advanced as to put them off almost immediately. Rather they should contain information which is on the same level as the children's maturity or slightly above, but presented simply enough for the children to read and understand.

I like to sound a note of warning here that the librarian or teacher could overdo things. Hence the best thing to do is to discipline oneself - by minimizing the amount of adjectives and high sounding words one uses.

Children want to know what happens in a book, what is so exciting about it that they should want to read it. Don't let them feel pushed to read. In short allow the books sell themselves. If it is a long book talk, it is usually not advisable to try to memorise, since there is a tendency to forget vital points, thus making the idea disjointed.

You would agree with me that most parents are usually too busy, especially in these days of rat-race for wealth and prestige, to find time to stay with the children, let alone to tell them stories which induce children to reading such books.

The television in the metropolitan homes have taken the place of the moonlight story hours which our grandparents or elders in the family in villages or small towns used to give. You may say that there were no books to supplement the stories told, yet one cannot say that such stories were not beneficial in their own rights.

Story telling is an organised method of introducing the idea in a book in a narrative manner with the aim of developing a liking for a particular character or theme of the book. Story hours should last between twenty-five and thirty minutes.



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On the other hand, if one feels comfortable memorising, there is no hard and fast principle since some level of individualism usually comes into play

#### Story Telling

The usefulness of story hour to children cannot be over emphasised. Most people feel that story telling should only be organised for pre-school children but studies have shown that story telling can also be extended to primary and post-primary children provided the story teller knows the correct technique to apply to a particular level of understanding.

The duration, however, depends on the age of the children. The younger the children, the shorter the period of story telling. This is because children of ages 3 - 6 have a short span of memory.

#### Book Shareing

Book sharing is almost similar to book talking; the only difference is that certain portions of the book to be introduced should be read aloud by the teacher or the librarian.

Besides, by this method, children are taught how to handle books pro-

perly, looking at them carefully and eventually reading them. In book sharing, however, the book chosen for this purpose should not be too voluminous but should be thin with good colourful illustrations, especially if it is meant for primary school children.

You may begin to wonder why consideration is given to the size of the text? The simple truth is that if the book is not too big, handling, as well as flipping through the pages for relevant illustrations to support the points raised, will be easy to come by.

As was mentioned earlier on, it is not enough to only surround children with books if they must learn to use books, and read them for pleasure. Some inducement is necessary. Therefore when an adult handles a particular book, talks about it as if there is something tasty or spicy about it by choosing the right kinds of words to make the children really hungry for the book, then children are enticed.

Furthermore if books meant for children are unattractive, children will certainly be indifferent to them. Hence when a classroom is bestrewn with tatty books looking like the remnants of a defeated army, children are hardly likely to show interest.

Most of the school libraries in this country are known to have remnants of old textbooks or the like. This is by no means attractive, and therefore should not be recommended.

One of the best methods of sharing books with children is to gather them in the library, select books ahead of time, read off portions and show the children some pages of illustration. By so doing the teacher purposely encourages the children as she opens the books, smooths the glossy pages before she begins to read.

The sense of his/her own enjoyment is so apparent that the children are bound to be influenced or hypnotised by it. Make sure that you have been able to bring out the main points of interest which you feel they too will enjoy when they read on their own.

#### Display or Exhibition

Another way of encouraging children to learn to read is to make available in an eye-catching position, books with attractive covers, clear prints and good text. Displays can be categorised

in the following areas:-

- (a) Picture books - black and white or coloured illustration with big prints.
- (b) Fiction
- (c) Non-fiction
- (d) Adventure books
- (e) Spooky books - ghostlike, frightful books, etc.

Book exhibition can be done in a semi-permanent manner such as having book-corners in the classroom for a week or a fortnight, or displaying in glass cases mounted at the children's eye level. The display should have bold labels.

#### Use of A – V Materials

From my brief experience as a teacher and as a children's librarian even in the developed part of the world, filmshows, TV - book related programmes puppet shows or the use of slides and filmstrip as a prelude to reading a particular book has yielded so much results that I would not hesitate to recommend them to prospective teacher/librarians.

Here again, certain things must be guarded against if the desired objective is to be achieved adequately. These include "overdoing". There is the temptation of using these new media to kill the actual reading interest in children. This can be taken care of by careful review and selection of the media to stimulate reading interest. Much as it should only be demonstrative, it should not lack the vital ideas meant to be portrayed by the book.

The pictures should be clear, the episodes consecutive, the playing-time brief and the language appropriate for the age group. As one media-minded educator once said, teachers and librarians must also accept new roles. They must become learning facilitators and minimize the observable roles of keepers of books."

Another point in overdoing can be controlled by the frequency of use of these resources. If they are constantly used to introduce book materials, children's interest will be killed. What a careful teacher/librarian should do is to space out the use of the various media and alternate them with any of the points discussed above.

The careful manipulation of the various ways of combating poor read-

ing habits among our children in itself, can be very exciting to a regular group of children. Moreso, children's participation can be periodically tested through book reports, or quizzes which may invariably attract some physical rewards.

#### Library Week

Library week or other library activities in which books are used is an invaluable method of inducing children to read for pleasure. By library week is meant a week set aside by a particular library during which books and other materials are put on display.

It normally occurs during the same time every year. During the library week, books and other reading materials should be on display according to certain groupings e.g. subject area, by author, illustrator, etc.

Children should be allowed to participate actively in the selection, organisation and arrangement of the books. They should be led into understanding the rationale behind the choice of particular groupings for the display.

As one writer once said, "one of the best ways to get appropriate reading materials for children is to make them (i.e. reading materials) with their help". In the same vein, children can be made to help in the making of tables or signs for the exhibitions, or even in setting up stands etc.

They can also be encouraged to accompany visitors who invariably would be their parents while moving around the exhibition stands with the teacher or librarian assisting where necessary.

#### Lending books out to Children

The era of stocking books without being used or of librarians being mere custodians of books had gone. Whatever books are provided in the school library should be properly used so as to justify the money, time and effort expended on them from the publisher through the librarians to the shelves.

One best way of doing this especially in the realm of fiction, non-fiction, biographies etc., is to allow children take them home for a week or so. Since there may not be many copies of a particular book in a school library the lending time should be limited to about three days to one week so as to give everyone an opportunity of reading through. Periodically child-

ren should be asked to report on the books they have read to the class teacher.

Some librarians fuss about getting books soiled. Experience has it that "a well used book" is known, usually from the tattered and faded cover.

This, however, is not saying that books or other library materials should be rough-handled or treated carelessly. Rough handling or mutilation is an offence in itself in libraries. Care of books should be emphasised to the children during their story hour or book sharing, periods, even if no specific period is assigned for it on the school time table.

Therefore the librarian or teacher in charge of the library should work hand in hand with the class teachers. Lists of materials lent out to the children in their specific grades should be made available to the class teachers for use during some of their English periods as this will not only facilitate the teacher's work, but will help develop some good human and personal relationship between the librarian and the teachers.

#### What parents can do to help

Ideally, parents should get interested and involved in their children's development if and when the environment is conducive to it. To do this, parents should endeavour to see and talk with their children's teachers who are in a better position to know the children's reading standards and who also would be the best advisers as to which book is good for each individual child.

Teachers may find this a little difficult task indeed but as the old adage goes "What is worth doing is worth doing well". In short, this is a way of assisting parents to assist the children, and in turn the teacher too is helped to achieve better results.

The value we place on children's reading and their after effect in the over all education of our children deserve more painstaking than is normally offered.

Teacher/Librarian or Library Assistants should compile a short annotated bibliography once a week in the following age groups 4 - 5, 6 - 8, 9 - 12, 13 - 19 for parents to take away.

The books so recommended should be either available in the library or in nearby bookshops for easy acquisition by parents. When the librarian has adequately played his part, the parent

would be required to complement the effort by accomplishing the following:-

- (a) Read aloud to the child everyday (usually at bed time)
- (b) Find books and stories that match his interest.
- (c) Surround him with good books.
- (d) Read novels themselves to set examples, and
- (e) Parents can help bring school libraries up to the recommended standard through forming friends of the library, and financially supporting the existing libraries or establishing new ones.

#### Conclusion

I have tried through this brief paper to enunciate what in my opinion, can be considered as curative measures for the poor reading habits among our children. I have endeavoured to explain as best as I can, the various methods of administering these measures in order to achieve our desired goals.

It is now left for us, librarians, library assistants, teachers and parents in whose hands the successes of failures of our children rests, to experiment these known facts without further delay.

It will not be wise to wait until a well rounded collection or a professional librarian is appointed to man the school collections before implementation begins.

It is therefore the express duty of the already existing library assistants or teachers who are currently taking charge of school libraries to attempt to use some of the points discussed in this paper to realize some benefit.

The point discussed may not lend themselves so easy for use if we (librarians, library assistants and teachers) do not cultivate the habit of reading widely and or hunting for fresh ideas elsewhere whenever we are in doubt.

It is a known fact that the book collection in any school situation in this country is not sufficient to cater for the children. It may be mentioned here that where insufficiency arises, inter-library cooperation between various school libraries can be practised in a small scale.

By this method school 'A' can con-

veniently borrow or lend books on other library materials from school 'B' for a period of 2 - 3 weeks. Exchange of books is another way of tackling this problem. With the introduction of the book mobile the problem should be further minimized. What school 'A' does can be traded in for what 'B' has in order to make sure that the ideas contained in these books go around.

Much as we all want to be great advocates of our black culture and therefore endeavour to sell the books written by our black authors, we should not lose sight of the fact that at present or in five years time the country cannot boast of being self sufficient in the supply of good quality books in the sense we know it, to our children.

We should therefore not hesitate to order books from other parts of the world, books which are well produced and which will not be detrimental to the preservation of our cultural heritage. It is easy to make our choice of books to tally with both our educational and cultural backgrounds from the brief reviews given in the Publisher's catalogues etc.

So once again, teachers, librarians, library assistants and parents, the ball is in your court.

#### **A GUIDE FOR BOOKTALKERS**

1. Do not wait until the eleventh hour to prepare.
2. Make sure you know how to get where you are going to speak.
3. Organize your books and equipment.
4. Do not begin to speak until the audience is ready to listen.
5. State clearly the author and title of each book you talk about.
6. Speak slowly and clearly.
7. Try not to be monotonous.
8. Stand firmly without rocking and try not to lean.
9. Do not illustrate a book with an example or incident applicable to a class member i.e. a rich class versus poor class people.
10. Try to know the characters' names - in the book.
11. Be flexible enough to wind up quickly.
12. Try not to use difficult words.