

Reader Development and Reading Promotion

**Recent Experiences from
Seven Countries in Africa**

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Introduction

Diana Rosenberg

The promotion of books and reading, through displays, booklists, author visits and other such tools, has long been an activity carried out by libraries. But active involvement by librarians in the reading development of children, young people and adults is something that has become part of library programmes only within the last decade. And although reader development has dramatically increased in recognition and growth in recent years, it is not yet universally regarded as a core aspect of service provision in libraries. What is meant by the term ‘reader development’ in libraries can be unclear. One definition offered by Rachel Van Riel, a director of one of the UK’s first reader development agencies, is ‘active intervention to open up reading choices, increase readers’ enjoyment and offer opportunities for people to share their reading experiences’.¹ It thus differs from book promotion in that it is not just the book that is promoted but also the reading experience: it sells the reading experience and what it can do for you, rather than selling individual books or writers. It recognizes that reading has a crucial role to play in creating independent learners, underpinning literacy skills and educational attainment, and helping people understand themselves and others better. It starts with librarians introducing very young babies to books and carries on throughout the ages. Reader development services are essentially pro-active. It is acceptable for librarians to actively encourage reading and help with reading choices.

Carnegie and SCECSAL

The Carnegie Corporation of New York’s current programme supporting the development of public libraries in Africa recognizes that it is critical to establish a reading culture in Africa. Reader development lies at the

¹ Quoted in T. Forrest, ‘Who’s afraid of those declining adult issues: Books and reader development’, *Library Association Record* (2001), 103(3), 168–9. <<http://www.la-hq.org.uk/directory/record/r200103/article5.html>>.

heart of the programme. Therefore the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) – which is contracted by Carnegie to provide technical support and advice to the public library programme – saw the meeting of the Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern African Librarians (SCECSAL), which took place in April 2002 in Johannesburg, as an ideal opportunity to raise the profile of reader development in Africa. SCECSAL meets every two years and is key to library networking in Africa. It attracts large numbers of librarians from both the host country and the rest of Africa.

An afternoon workshop on Reader Development and Reading Promotion was therefore organized. Its aim was to showcase some of the reader development initiatives taking place in the Gauteng Province of South Africa and it was ably facilitated by the Gauteng Department of Sport, Recreation, Arts, Culture, Library and Information Services, through its officers, Branham Francis and Adrienne Warricker. They arranged for the delivery of four presentations, each covering a different age group or aspect of reader development, together with displays of reading and promotional materials. The workshop proved very popular and attracted over 160 participants. These included public librarians from eight other countries in Africa and librarians from public libraries in receipt of Carnegie grants from within South Africa, sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation. The original intention had been to follow the presentations with group practical projects. The numbers attending made this impractical, so each presenter led the audience through a practical project and discussion followed.

The enthusiasm generated by the workshop, and requests for a follow-up, has led to this publication. It includes accounts of the four South African projects presented at the workshop. In addition, the librarians who were sponsored to attend from outside South Africa were invited to write about a reader development project organized by their own library system. Six have submitted chapters. The SCECSAL workshop allowed librarians from many countries to learn about and discuss some of the reader development activities taking place in South Africa and return home with new ideas and plans. It is hoped that this book will widen that audience and give the rest of the world an indication of what African libraries are doing in this area.

Reader development in Africa

Finding out about reader development activities that are being undertaken by or with public libraries in Africa is not easy. The Indaba held at the

Zimbabwe International Book Fair in 2001 had as its theme ‘Changing Lives: Promoting a Reading Culture in Africa’. Discussion revolved around publishing, writing and scholarship as well as three sessions, sponsored by the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) Working Group on Books and Learning Materials, on strategies for targeting readers, strategies for promoting readership, and policy implications for developing a reading culture. This all-embracing approach gave ‘a daunting picture of what needs to be done to encourage book reading by young people especially and adults as well’.² The ADEA Books Working Group has also started a *Compendium of Successful Reading Projects* in Africa; it was reported at the beginning of 2002 that over 30 entries had been made.³ Once the *Compendium* is made available, it will be used to promote African exchanges of information about strategies that have proven to be effective in the promotion of reading.

The experiences recorded in the chapters that follow cover predominantly work with children. The range includes:

- a reading awareness programme aimed at mothers, their new born babies and toddlers (Born to Read);
- reading competitions for primary-school children (Want to Read and Zambia’s Readathon);
- a reading enrichment scheme for various age groups (Want to Read);
- implementation of book-based literacy instruction in South African schools (READ);
- a five-day reading clinic in Ghana;
- book boxes for primary schools in Kenya.

A project in Uganda shows how libraries can develop a love of reading in children, even when library facilities are very limited.

Reading tents are an increasingly popular way in Africa of encouraging reading for pleasure, both among children and adults and often in conjunction with book fairs and library weeks. Two experiences, from Tanzania and Zambia, are recorded here.

Only three of the chapters cover adult reader development:

- ways of promoting reading to adult learners (Project Literacy);
- Women’s Reading Corners, organized by Zambia Library Service;
- the Bagamoyo Community Reading Tent, aimed at both young and old.

² A. Niven, ‘Concluding remarks’, in *Indaba 2001: Changing Lives: Promoting a Reading Culture in Africa: Harare, Zimbabwe, 4–5 August 2001*. Harare: Zimbabwe International Book Fair Trust, [2001], 307.

³ *ADEA Newsletter* (2002). 14(1), 21.

Availability and accessibility of relevant books

Limited in number though these experiences are, some commonalities can be noted and conclusions reached. One is that the precondition and base of all reader development activities is the availability and accessibility of relevant and appropriate books and reading materials. It is impossible to inspire interest, involvement and confidence in reading without the right kind of materials being available. Such books must first be written and published, distributed widely and then made accessible through libraries or other outlets. Only then can a reading culture begin to be fostered. All the programmes featured here see this as a challenge and a major problem.

The schools book-box service of Kenya and Oyo State Library Board in Nigeria have therefore concentrated their initial energies on making resources accessible. Lack of appropriate reading materials, especially in local languages, is raised as a problem by nearly all the programmes. In Zambia women stopped visiting the Women's Reading Corners because there were no materials there in Zambian languages. In Kenya, the need to acquire or to translate more materials into local languages was recorded. The needs of those attending the reading tent in Bagamoyo were not adequately met by the resources available. READ in South Africa has long recognized that quality reading material is essential and therefore embarked on its own book development and publishing programme. To keep adults reading, supplementary materials in local languages is a must. The chapter describing the work of Project Literacy records the difficulties faced in persuading commercial publishers to get involved in a market where it is expensive to develop original material and sales are low.

Partnerships

The importance of building partnerships with other interested sectors is also revealed by most programmes. The library is only one player or stakeholder in reader development. There is a need to form alliances with all those who promote reading or reap the benefits of a literate population. Activities directed at children rely on a strong relationship having been created with the education sector. Library/school co-operation is at the heart of Want to Read's programmes to develop and enhance reading skills. Teachers as well as library staff acted as resource persons in Ghana's reading clinic. The book-box service to primary schools in Kenya relies on class teachers to assist in the selection of appropriate materials and organize their use in the classroom. It is the schools that organize

the groups of children which attend the Saturday library sessions at Mbale Library, Uganda, and also act as resource persons.

But it is not only the education sector that is important. For work with infants, partnerships need to be made with the health sector. The Born to Read programme was launched at a hospital and follow-up was made at clinics. Health providers and community librarians worked together. The publishing and book-trade sectors are obvious partners. In Tanzania the library service joined with the Book Development Council to organize the Bagamoyo Community Reading Tent.

Partnerships with the commercial sector are not so apparent in the programmes described. But this could be an important avenue to explore, since most programmes itemize lack of funds as crucial in limiting the effectiveness of their work. Elsewhere – for example, in UK – reader development partnerships with business have proved successful. Certainly the Born to Read programme sees its partnership with the corporate sector as bringing many benefits. Community libraries established a programme with the *Star* newspaper to assist mothers in reading. In addition the baby products company, Johnson and Johnson, sponsored the programme and agreed to conduct workshops on pregnancy, breastfeeding and general health-related issues.

Training

It is sometimes considered that librarians and teachers by virtue of their professional education already have the skills necessary to engage in reader development. But the need to provide training in this area is evident in many of the programmes described. Indeed, lack of appropriate skills is often cited as a limiting factor. The head of Oyo State Library Board summed up the feelings of many when he said: ‘Our librarians are already trained and know what to do in public librarianship, but they still need workshops and seminars to share experiences and perfect their arts.’

The account of the Want to Read project includes issues that must be considered when designing a programme to train librarians involved in reader development activities with children. Such staff must have both book knowledge and programme-specific training. It is necessary to have read a book before one can promote it effectively. Yet it is surprising how few librarians themselves actually spend time reading and enjoy it. In addition, any training programme must include knowledge about child development as well as recognize the limited time that is available in a busy library system to devote to training.

The experience of READ shows that making relevant books available

and accessible in schools is not enough to achieve success in literacy education. Its approach depends on a rigorous teacher training and monitoring programme, including both pre-service and in-service training. It works with whole school communities instead of individual teachers. The full continuum of courses is implemented over a period of two years. To assist teachers implement and sustain the book-based approach after training, READ has also set up a monitoring and mentoring programme.

Monitoring and evaluation

It is important to be able to measure the outcome of any reader development activity. Only if a framework for auditing outcomes is established and performance indicators devised will there be an opportunity for librarians to reappraise their activities and consider options for doing things differently. Without being unfair to those programmes that are still in their infancy, it would appear that rigorous monitoring and evaluation of reader development activity in Africa is generally lacking. For this to take place, measurable outcomes must be established at the start of any programme, indicators devised to measure these outcomes, and quantitative and qualitative data collected on a regular basis, allowing for a final evaluation. Then it will be possible to conclude that a particular activity has effected change in reading habits and abilities.

For example, reading tents have become a very popular type of reader development activity in Africa. Yet accounts usually concentrate on describing the various activities that took place and the numbers of people attending. Actual tangible outcomes are rarely analysed.

There remains, therefore, a need to develop ways of measuring the effectiveness of different reader development strategies.

Policies

It would appear from the accounts collected together in this book that few libraries have established reader development policies. Too many initiatives are one-off events and are not integrated into other elements of the library's agenda and services. Rarely have libraries developed a holistic approach to both children's and adults' reader development. Oyo State Library Board's account of its activities emphasized the problem caused by not having a separate unit of the library charged with undertaking reader development. Instead, staff have to shift from their normal schedules to undertake *ad hoc* responsibilities. In other parts of the world, libraries have established Reader Development Librarian posts so as to formalize the centrality of this work in the structure of the library.

Networking

A recent conference on reader development in the UK concluded how important it was for librarians to be able to meet colleagues having similar issues and concerns in relation to reader development activities. This sort of networking is much more difficult to effect over the continent of Africa, but it is by sharing experiences and learning about successes (and failures) elsewhere that librarians will be enthused to try something new. Such a result is recorded by Zambia Library Service. The idea for a reading tent came from a member of staff who attended the International Zimbabwe Book Fair and saw such a tent in operation. It was then introduced to Lusaka in 1997 and the following year spread to two other provinces.

It is hoped that this book will also assist in the sharing of reader development experiences and result in new initiatives.

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