

*Satellite Meeting: Africa Section
Libraries as Centers of Community Engagements for Development
22-23 August 2018
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

Promoting literacy in rural community schools in Nigeria: a collaborative approach

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Abstract:

Literacy is an all-inclusive activity that engages community, schools and children for sustainable development. When a rural community has an information centre and a school library, the entire dwellers enjoy the dividend of equitable quality education and information. This paper shared experience of a collaborative literacy promotion and engagement of a school in a rural farm settlement in South East Nigeria. It outlined the literacy engagement, successes, collaboration, lessons learnt and challenges. It was a qualitative study and evidence based collaborative literacy activity in Community Development Primary School Nkwelle Farm in Oyi Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria. The methods used for data generation were visits to the community school, observation and interviews. The school has a population of 172 pupils with 12 staff. The study involved librarians, teachers and non-government organizations (NGOs). The community literacy engagement started in November, 2017. The findings from the first visit to the community school revealed a room scattered with books on the floor, without shelves and reading desks. The successes on the engagement included organized resources in shelves, children's love for books, collaboration

and integration of teachers. Lessons learnt were that the community school has smart children who are eager to learn and some of them have personal children's novels. The challenges were access to the rural school and closure of the school library except during reading hour. The results were analyzed in tables and dialogue form. The study recommended that Librarians should take action and strategize on implementing literacy activities in their different regions. Good practices of community engagement on literacy will add value to the dwellers and enhance inclusive children's learning.

Keywords: children, collaboration, literacy, school library, rural community engagement

Introduction

Literacy promotion is one of the keys that support inclusive engagement in rural community schools as well as drive holistic community development. The presence of a school and a functional library in any community easily announces that transformation is taking place. This is development in its entirety for all community dwellers. Supporting literacy in a child's life builds his cognitive development and enhances reading and writing skills, which invariably enriches community's growth (Christie & Roskos, 2013 and Fredericks, 2011). It is a potential for collaboration because it creates the avenue for joint literacy activities with other groups for maximum benefits. When children are taught how to read and write, they gain more insight and interact intelligibly with people. It automatically adds value to the community through informed population whose ideas and inputs improve development.

Arguably, literacy today has gone beyond simple knowledge of reading and writing. It has evolved to encompass ability to identify, connect, understand, practice, access information, create and communicate (International Literacy Association, 2018; Farmer, 2017 and Tucker, 2014). This notion has enjoined librarians to take charge and transform the communities and all sectors with the creation of biggest idea store for actions (IFLA, 2018). The action plan includes the rural school children because they are the progressive population that will ensure transformed sustainable strong communities. It translates to community development as every community wants its children to succeed. The Rural School and Community Trust (2015) recognized the powerful influence that communities have on their children. Hence, communities usually are inspired by groups and work together to build expectations for their children.

In Nigeria, there are many rural communities with schools and children who have not achieved literacy to improve their lives. These communities are characterized by development issues like low level of literacy, lack of libraries and information centres, basic health facilities, access roads and portable water (Haruna & Onyebu, 2011). The issues affect learning processes of children. However, efforts from many librarians in collaboration with non-government organizations have enabled the children to have access to literacy activities with books, learning resources and library equipments (osuchukwu, et al. 2017; iruoma, 2018 and association for reproductive and family health (arfh) (2015). Clearly, collaboration helps to promote literacy in rural schools. It bridges the gap of social exclusion for there can be no true sustainable development without community inclusiveness. It is against this setting that this paper presents literacy promotion in rural community schools in Nigeria with collaborative approach.

Background of the rural community school

The Community Development Primary School Nkwelle Farm is located in the agric settlement situated in Nkwelle Ezunaka in Oyi local government area of Anambra State, South East Nigeria. The Farm was established by the government in 1934 for agricultural purposes. It has blocks of residential buildings for farmers and staff which made the then government to set up the school for the children of the dwellers. Over the years, parts of the farm areas have been acquired for housing development. There are still old historic buildings. The settlement has grown to accommodate other people who moved in from the urban areas. There is no community library or information centre that engages the dwellers on long life learning and development. The community school has no library nor indulges in special activities that improve literacy. There are now private schools in the settlement but Community Development Primary School Nkwelle Farm remains the only government school with majority of children from average parents.

Objectives of the study

The main objective of this paper is to share experiences of collaborative literacy engagement in a rural community school. Specifically, this paper highlighted the:

1. Literacy engagement in the rural community school
2. Successes of the literacy activity in the rural community school
3. Collaborative approaches harnessed
4. Lessons learnt from the literacy engagement
5. Challenges on the literacy engagement
6. Implication of the findings

Statement of the problem

It is often hard to believe that many communities and their schools neither have libraries nor information centres where as some other communities and their schools are equipped with learning facilities with good practices of literacy engagement. According to ILA (2018) it's astonishing that in this day and age, there are still millions of people from every corner of the world who are denied access to literacy education. Yet the same evaluation tools are used to measure the school children for placement in higher schools, irrespective of their geographical zones. This is gross social injustice as the rural school children are not exposed to the same level of literacy engagement with their counterparts in urban areas. Though, there have been evidences of successful literacy engagements, there are still lots of communities and schools to be reached. This paper shared the experiences of collaborative literacy activities in a rural community school through library engagement in South East Nigeria.

Literature review

Literacy activities have the magic of making the children love reading and learning experiences. Emphatically, ILA (2018) stated that literacy is essential and creates more dynamic societies, prosperous economies and meaningful lives. Participation and engagement in rural community schools is not a new concept in literacy delivery. The U.S Department of Education (2014) has awarded several grants to communities for schools literacy activities to enhance economically disadvantaged children develop early literacy, children's reading ability and motivate children to read. Researchers and groups have also acclaimed the good practices of literacy activities in communities schools through access to library, reading groups, promoting fiction and non-fiction books, read aloud, picture books, singing, teaching of ICT and encouraging lifelong learning (IFLA Reading and Literacy Section 2018; ILA, 2018; Osuchukwu, et al, 2017 and Shenton, 2011). The essence is to build community members who can drive their own ideas and accomplish things they think that are impossible.

Evidence based researches have shown that great successes are achieved through literacy programs in the schools. The studies of Nielen & Bus (2015), Todd (2011) and Chance & Segura (2009) reported success in schools with higher standardized reading comprehension tests, reading-to-learn competencies, personal and interpersonal competencies, achievement of adequate yearly progress. Indeed, integration of rural schools and children in literacy activities dissipates exclusion and low level of education. Worldwide literacy continues to be a vital priority because literacy matters (Farmer, 2017). This assertion demonstrates the leverages on successful literacy activities in the community schools for more achievement of goals.

In the rural setting, librarians, organizations and researchers have continued to collaborate in strategizing innovative activities for schools. The Rural School and Community Trust (2015) through its LIREC (Literacy Innovation in Rural Education through Collaboration) projects in rural schools across U.S. have been collaborating to implement a multi-layered, rural-specific approach to improving early literacy, especially for at-risk children in high-poverty communities. In Nigeria, many schools have also benefitted from collaborative inclusive programs from librarians, teachers and organizations. For instance, Osuchukwu, et al (2017), Olojede, (2017) and Mohmoud, (2017) asserted that collaboration has transformed many schools through improvement of literacy activities as well as increased access to learning. It transforms into multiple effects of satisfaction from all stakeholders as students are generally focused in the learning processes.

However, challenges impinge on effective community school literacy engagement. In Nigeria, the larger population that resides mostly in the rural areas suffer from isolation, distance, lack of access to information and good school facilities. Besides, literacy activities in the rural schools have been affected by lack of school libraries, parental involvement, lack of librarians in the rural school libraries, attitudes of some teacher who are mostly scared from accepting to work in schools situated in the rural areas and supervisors unwillingness to regularly supervise such schools (Haruna & Liman, 2015 and Ofodu 2011). These factors militate against literacy development among Nigeria rural children. That notwithstanding, challenges also come from collaborative exercise where some parents do not support students' actions in reading (Domínguez, et al. 2016).

Methodology

This is qualitative and evidence based study that took place in Community Development Primary School Nkwelle Farm, Nkwelle – Ezunaka community in Oyi Local Government Area of Anambra State, South East Nigeria. The methods used for data generation were visits to the school, interviews and observation. The first visit to the school was in November 2017. Several engagement visits were made which integrated literacy activities and development of school library. The literacy activities took place during school hours in agreement with the school headmistress with different programs for different classes. The school has a population of 172 pupils with 12 staff. The partners in the project were three Librarians, non-government organization, teachers and the community. The results were analyzed and presented in tables and dialogue formats.

Results

Observation of the literacy activities in the rural community school

The very first visit in November, 2017:

- A classroom mapped out for a school library which was locked but opened on our request
- Books scattered on the floor of the supposed school library
- No shelf
- A long classroom chair with writing top
- No chart or picture on the wall

Table 1: Literacy activities in the rural community school

S/N	Existing classes	Number of classes	Literacy activities	Facilitators
1.	Pre-school	One class	Reading aloud Looking at picture books Singing	Librarians
2.	Nursery	1 – 3	Reading aloud Looking at picture books Rhymes and singing Story telling Picture recognition	Librarians and teachers
3.	Junior primary	1 – 3	Group reading Reading aloud by children Comprehension passages Questions and answers Word building	Librarians and teachers
4.	Senior primary	4 – 6	Group reading Reading aloud by children Comprehension passages Questions and answers Summary of novels read Vocabulary building	Librarians and teachers

The Table above shows the different literacy activities offered by the Librarians in the rural school. The school children were grouped according to their classes and cognitive development. The activities for the pre-school and nursery sections concentrated more on reading aloud, singing and having fun looking at pictures since many of them are still learning how to talk. The primary sections have more intense reading with comprehension passages, questions and answers, vocabulary building and reading in turns.

Successes achieved in the rural school literacy Engagement

- Establishment of the school library with donations of shelves, learning resources, text, story and picture books
- Adoption of library story hour program for all classes
- Love of books and eager to show mastery of reading by children
- Teachers were supported with strategies and resources in offering wide range of learning experiences
- Connection and network between the school and the NGO
- Connection of the rural school with the State Public Library Management
- Integration of teachers and community members in the school literacy activities

During the interview, the headmistress told us that she was invited to the state capital and was given books, learning charts, reading desks and chairs for her school. She stated:

We put up this wall shelf as you suggested when you visited earlier so that our books would not be scattered on the floor again.

The teacher in charge of the school library stated:

We chose Tuesday as our library day. When it is time I open the library for reading. We have two groups – nursery and primary sections. They come at different times and spend about 30 minutes each to look at picture books and read from the charts. Their teachers come with them to maintain order

Table 2: Collaborative activities in the rural school

S/N	Types of resources	Providers
1.	Donation of children’s books and charts	Librarians and NGO
2.	Donation of shelves	NGO
3.	Literacy activities	Librarians and teachers
4.	Refreshment for the children	Librarians and NGO
5.	Exercise books and writing materials	NGO

The Table shows the aspects of contributions by partners in making the literacy activity successful. While the Librarians and the teachers took charge of reading and learning, the NGO donated the shelves and writing materials. Donation of children’s books and light refreshments were done by the Librarians and the NGO. It was a mutual respectful collaboration that suited the partners.

Lessons learnt from the literacy engagement

- The rural community school has smart children who are eager to learn
- During the study, the researchers found out that the headmistress and the teachers in the rural community school love reading and enjoy the literacy activities. This enthusiasm was transferred to the children who also looked forward to the activity.
- Some children in the primary section have children’s novels and read them
- The community members also want their children to acquire the same equitable quality education like other schools in the cities
- The school has not organized any activities that drew parents to witness their children’s achievement in reading and learning

Challenges on the literacy activity

- The library is always closed except on visitation and on Tuesdays during the library hours
- There is no teacher or staff permanently stationed in the rural school library for regular reading hour
- Access to the rural school, especially in the rainy season was very difficult
- The children are not allowed to borrow books.

The reason according to headmistress and the teacher during the interview was that:
The children will tear or lose the books. So we do not allow them to go home with the books. They only use the books during the library period

Discussion of findings

The state of the rural community school library at the first visit was very embarrassing which created the resolve to adopt the school and take actions in transforming it. The results of the transformation with the literacy activities simply showed that Librarians can champion community development by taking action and creating opportunities that foster love of reading. The indication is that the kind of play activities in the preschool and nursery classes has the potential to engage them with meaningful context for essential early literacy concepts and skills (Christie & Roskos, 2013).

The successful literacy engagement recorded in the rural school signified that children anywhere can learn and love reading if given opportunities. This buttresses the studies of Nielen & Bus (2015) and Todd (2011) that reading comprehension, reading-to-learn competencies, personal and interpersonal competencies can be achieved in school literacy activities. Also, the successful creation of school library and the joy of creating library hours signified a milestone in rural school engagement. In view of this, strong and united library programs can curb social exclusion in reading and create informed and participative young people.

The realization that collaboration works implies that planning and implementing joint activities can create formidable team for achievement of goals. The donation of reading and library resources (Table 2) with real literacy classes with different groups made the project easier. This synchronized with collaborative activities which Osuchukwu, et al (2017), Olojede, (2017) and Mohmoud, (2017) stated as capable of transforming many schools through improvement of literacy activities as well as strategies that increase access to learning aid. The Rural School and Community Trust (2015) also described it as unique aspect that benefits everyone, especially children.

Certainly, the challenges of inadequacy of library resources, inaccessibility of school library among others are issues of concern. This definitely affects literacy development and could dampen a fertile mind of a growing avid reader. This is one good area that needs continuous discussion to ensure regular use of library. That notwithstanding, the lessons learnt from the activity are reflection of hunger for reading and learning by the disadvantaged group. School is a part of community that contributes to its growth. Hence, every avenue should be used to make rural school libraries function effectively.

Implications of the study

Literacy is vital in creating assertive minds and empowering community. If the schools and the children are parts of the acknowledged community, then they should be engaged and served with library resources. Children in rural communities cannot be allowed to degenerate into illiterate populations like some of the older dwellers who could not attain basic education. The insinuation is that if librarians do not leave the city to engage the rural communities, the rural schools without libraries will continue to function with only one wing which does not fit into global sustainable development goal 4 - equitable quality education. It could also be likened as a social injustice where only children in the cities are served with library services while the rural children continue to be segregated and marginalized. Thus, librarians must step up and take action. Literacy cannot be allowed to wobble on indifference attitudes of some stakeholders. The African communities and their children must be made to develop and shine forth like others. It has been shown that there are many sharp, intelligent rural children waiting to exhale. Africa and the world need their inputs. Thus, if Librarians conveniently forget the rural schools, communities and their children, Africa will always be

in the dark with that strong description – dark Africa. Now is the time to engage and bring our rural school children to the light. Librarians in the Africa must not go contrary to the global literacy trend and IFLA's guidelines in taking action, everywhere, anytime.

Conclusion

Every school and community is a pride of the dwellers. Literacy is one of the critical tools that can transform our community, increase its value and develop without measure. It takes a functional library or information centre to offer best practices of long lasting development opportunities. These opportunities can start from the school library with well strategized collaboration from effective organization. Hence, this study concludes that literacy engagement in community schools must be supported at all times for the development of school children and the community. Collaboration must be sought for greater impacts while challenges must not deter Librarians from contributing to building strong cities and community through literacy engagement. Nothing beats community engagement even in the school sector. So let us all get involved.

Recommendations

Based on the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Librarians should take action and strategize on implementing literacy activities in their different regions. This will make things happen in the rural community
2. Transformation of rural community schools should be given adequate priority by all stakeholders.
3. Collaboration and partnership must be sought by libraries and librarians.
4. Innovative practices on literacy can be used to catch them young and strategize on community engagement for common good.

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