

SEEN and HEARD: Challenging the perceptions of children in libraries in sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract:

Younger children have often been discouraged from using public libraries in sub-Saharan Africa as they are perceived as noisy, disruptive and messy. With the typical African public library user being male aged over 16¹, using the library as a place to study for secondary or tertiary level exams, and with many libraries housing tired and tattered copies of story books shelved out of reach and library staff wary of engaging with younger users, it's no wonder that "children's exposure to libraries is limited..."² in many countries.

Since 2009, Book Aid International (BAI) and library partners have been challenging the perceptions (of librarians, library users, teachers and children) that the library is not a place for children, by creating child-friendly spaces. Training library staff to run children's libraries has been the most effective way of changing perceptions. Book Aid International have developed a series of training resources to facilitate the transformation to vibrant children's libraries.

Keywords: Children, Libraries, Training, Reading Promotion

Introduction

Book Aid International has been donating books to libraries in developing countries for sixty years, and has to date sent over 30 million books, with a further 600,000 new books planned to be sent this year. It had long been recognised and was again highlighted in the 2012-13 BAI participatory review³ of work undertaken in five countries that books are better used and library users' experience is improved when library staff are well trained.

¹ Perceptions of public libraries in Africa, EIFL, 2011

² IBID

³ Talking to users: a review of our work in five countries

Library Services for Children

As BAI developed the programme strategy for 2014-16 it was recognised that the development of library services for children is the area where the greatest impact could be made. This had been a successful focus area for BAI since 2009 and one which could be scaled up. BAI receives about 400,000 quality children's books each year from UK publishers. These books provide the foundations for a strong children's library programme. What we have found missing was the creation of a place where children felt welcome and safe, this is both a physical environment and a welcoming atmosphere with fun activities that support reading for pleasure and learning.

Training

Training for library staff working with children has been a major focus for BAI for the past five years. Many of the library staff trained initially by BAI have further developed the activities promoted during the trainings and expanded their repertoires far beyond anything initially envisaged. These new ideas have been added and incorporated into a set of training materials aimed at improving library services for children in public and school libraries.

The Book Aid International training package aims to:

- Consolidate Book Aid and partners' knowledge and expertise on working with children in libraries
- Create a flexible suite of materials that can be customized by in-country trainers to suit local conditions
- Continue to improve and update training materials and share them through an on-line platform for Book Aid staff, facilitators and trainees

"Today the role of libraries and professional librarians is changing worldwide. They are no longer passive keepers and preservers of books, rather, they have evolved to become facilitators of information and lifelong learning opportunities with an emphasis on service, identifying user needs and communicating solutions."

UNESCO, 'The role of libraries in the creation of literate environments.'

Feedback from a number of lessons learned workshops from Book Aid children's training was analysed and used to improve the training.

The training package consists of –

- A series of slides for the facilitator, both digital and in hard copy. These slides can be contextualised for the local situation and slides can be removed if they are not relevant. Extra modules can be added such as the local curriculum content so librarians can align their activities to what students are covering in the curriculum.
- A facilitator's handbook that outlines the objectives for each module & what materials are required to teach the module. Facilitation tips and techniques are also included.
- Additional materials such as laminated photos and story sacks are also provided.
- A trainee's handbook that the student will take home with them including information sheets that provide additional information and supplementary activities.

There are also activities designed around specific children's titles. Multiple copies of these titles will be included with the training package. Titles include: We're going on a bear hunt by Michael Rosen and Helen Oxenbury; and Handa's surprise by Eileen Browne. A very important component of the training is that at least half a day is spent practicing specific activities with a group of children; the training is designed to be very practical and hands-on.

This training is aimed at those already working in libraries; the level of qualification will vary from country to country so the material can be tailored for the appropriate level.

At this stage there are two modules; a beginner and an intermediate, each of three days. The two workshops are run about eight months apart so the participants can practice their new skills and return with new ideas and discuss any problems they may have encountered.

The main areas covered in the training are

- 1) Organising the library
- 2) Managing the children's library
- 3) Reading promotion
- 4) Working with schools

Feedback from librarians who have completed the training include:

"I had not worked with children before and I was quite moved by how one can do a lot in the children's library apart from just books" Librarian, Namibia

"I am so surprised that some branches have an attendance of 600 children in a day, while I am only getting 6 children a day, this has greatly challenged me and I must know how the others are achieving their numbers so that attendance in my library can also change" Librarian – Kenya

"First, as a librarian I thought I was a person whose work is to arrange books. I discovered I am very powerful person in the community. A library is not about books alone. It is about what you are doing to the community ..." Librarian – Kenya

We want children to be seen and heard in libraries – this is what they have to say about the new children's corners.

"It is to the library that I come every day after school and even during holidays with my brother to read, play, make friends and grow up as a child with lots of great ideas."

"The library has improved my reading and composition and I am now top of the class. I want to continue coming to the library and read more interesting books so that I can tell stories to my children when I grow up and become a teacher."

Roll-out

Book Aid International, in commemoration of our sixty years will be developing in partnership with our long term partners sixty children's corners in sixty libraries in six countries (Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Cameroon, Zambia and Zimbabwe). The training materials will be available for all our partners to use and adapt as they wish. We plan to

develop a cadre of trainers in each country to roll out the training and to ensure the sustainability of the training process.

School libraries

The initial training package was designed for children's services in public libraries and for outreach services from public libraries to schools. The need for similar training materials for school libraries has been recognised and the next phase of development will supplement these materials to support school libraries. Resources developed by partners on Book Aid projects will be incorporated into the final product. There will be resources developed for both primary and secondary libraries, as well as special training for children who act as library monitors.

Future

The next phase of this project will see the development of an area on the Book Aid website for partners to share training tips and ideas. New modules will also be made available via this platform. There has been interest in further modules on child protection and working with children with special needs. There will also be further training on digital resources as we pilot different digital options for children.

A longer term goal is to work with relevant bodies to get accreditation for the training in children's services. This will greatly help to raise the profile of those working with children in libraries and to further develop children's library services to best serve children.

Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge the work Judith Henderson, Project Manager, Book Aid International, Karen Sharkey, former Head of Programmes, Book Aid International and Pam Dix, consultant have undertaken in the development of the Book Aid International training materials.

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