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HARNESSING THE STORY HOUR PROGRAM FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF READING CULTURE: THE ANAMBRA STATE PUBLIC LIBRARIES

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Abstract

One important venue of developing reading culture in children is through the public library services to children, that is, the story hour program which helps children enjoy reading, giving them opportunities to spend lots of time with reading and learning resources. In essence, the research sought to examine the program of story hour of public libraries in Anambra State. In the study, descriptive survey research design was adopted and all the eleven public libraries in the state were sampled. Four research questions were used to elicit facts for the study. Questionnaire was designed and distributed to all the 11 officers in charge of the children's sections of the 11 public libraries in the state. Observation checklist and oral interview were also employed for data collection. Obtained data were collated and analyzed using frequency tables and simple percentages. A 50% positive response was accepted as positive for observation checklist. The result showed that only two public libraries (18.1%) out of the eleven in the state offer story hour program. All the libraries have print resources for the program but audio visual resources are virtually not available in any of the libraries. It was recommended that the State Library Board should intervene in the children departments of public libraries and the activities therein, in order to ensure effective library services to children.

INTRODUCTION

Story hour program is a major program of activity in the children's department of the public library. It presents to them books, stories and language as well as the opportunity for social interaction with other children. According to Miller (2003), the concept of story hour stemmed from the envisioning of libraries in the solution of

illiteracy. The idea is to engage children with exploring and developing intellectual and social activities with conditions that are most conducive to their fullest possible expressions. These activities of story hour program help to spur young children's love for books and reading, thereby, inculcating in them early literacy practices for reading culture and life-long learning. A child's ability to develop reading culture is the center of the child's educational prowess. That is why children are guided to develop reading culture through various activities of story hour such as interactive games, riddles debates, music, drama, craft, storytelling, rhymes, quiz, spelling contexts and reading session (Hashbrouck, 2002). Ugwuoke (2004) recommended that question and answer session should be part of story hour program which according to him stimulate children to read not only for passing examination but to acquaint them with class room curriculum. The essence is to provide the avenue through which children are nurtured with reading resources and strategies to inculcate reading culture. The importance of public library services to children is noted by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization/International Federation of Library Association (UNESCO/IFLA) (2004) in its public library manifesto to include:

creating and strengthening reading habits in children from an early age; stimulating the imagination and creativity of children and young people; supporting the oral tradition; supporting and participating in literacy activities and programs for all age groups and initiating such activities if necessary.

To ensure that children's needs are provided in line with the stipulation of library manifesto, story hour program is provided to give a progressive description of learning and reading skills of children, thereby, filling a need and hunger for learning. The availability, accessibility and easy retrieval of print and non-print resources in story hour program go a long way to enhancing reading habits in children. Story hour program resources are carefully selected to induce reading culture and produce excitement that keeps the children captivated without losing focus. Achebe (2007), pointed out that the children's librarians use their valuable expertise and teach children learning and reading skills they need to succeed throughout their academic pursuits and beyond.

There have been evidences that resources for activities of story hour program help children to inculcate reading habits. Among the evidence is the study of Berglund (2009), in Mondavi public library story hour program during summer reading program which showed the valuable and reliable library resources were used for achieving

reading development. The findings also revealed that participants brought in their reading record each week to impress the librarians and to receive prizes. The participants were amazed at the number of books read and improvement in reading skills that were made during the program. In the study by Celano & Neuman (2001), on the role of public libraries in dissemination of library resources for children's literacy development in Pennsylvania, a survey of 25 libraries were selected throughout the state. The findings revealed that 94% of the libraries offer story hours, 75% said their circulation of resources increased between 6% and 10% during summer program. Another finding was a compiled paper chain of 3,500 links that wrapped around the entire children's section, showing the titles of books each child had read that summer. Preschoolers averaged over a hundred picture books in the summer months. Conversely, Rockwell, Hoge & Searcy (2000) asserted that story hour program helps to imbibe in the children that reading and writing serve varieties of functions: they inform, they entertain, they direct and they serve as means of recording ideas for later use.

However, some constraints affect the success of story hour program. Morner (2009) identified space constraint as a problem which affects collection, office accommodation for staff, seating arrangement for readers, furniture and equipment. Aliyu & Muawiyya (2007) informed that paucity of fund in libraries, especially those owned by the government posed challenges to story hour program. In addition, Azubuike & Mbachu (2009) noted that lack of professional librarians affect the services of these libraries.

Indeed, there is need to harness the story hour program for the development of reading culture as it is a very important measure to children's learning and educational system. This is because the growing problem of poor performance of students in schools is alarming. A growing workforce unable to read well enough to perform jobs in a highly technological society is a threat to that society. The level of importance attached to story hour program in the public libraries will determine its aims to wean children from dangerous to healthy living and from wrong attitude to reading to positive reading culture (Ike, 2007).

Statement of the Problem

The aim of story hour program is to inculcate in the children that reading and writing are valuable, useful and enjoyable activities through simple practices. The children departments of public libraries are meant to render this service but many public libraries go contrary to the UNESCO/IFLA Manifesto (2004) which strongly

recommended creating and strengthening reading habits in children from an early age. However, preliminary observation showed that many public libraries do not render children's library services. There is need for its confirmation, empirically. This is necessary as the effect of this neglect has resulted in many children graduating from the primary school unprepared to cope with challenges of reading at the higher educational level (Kolawole, 2009). This paper, therefore, sought to investigate the story hour program as it enhances the development of reading culture in Anambra State Public libraries.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the story hour program in Anambra State public libraries. Specifically, the study intends to:

1. Identify the various activities of the story hour program in public libraries of Anambra State Library Board.
2. Ascertain the resources available for the story hour program in state public libraries.
3. Find out the extent to which resources are made accessible to children for story hour program in Anambra State public libraries.
4. Identify the various problems that affect the story hour program in Anambra State public libraries.

Research Questions

1. What are the activities of story hour program in Anambra State public libraries?
2. What resources are available for the story hour program at the state public libraries?
3. To what extent are the resources made accessible to children at the state public libraries?
4. What problems affect the story hour program in Anambra State public libraries?

Method

Descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The work covered all the public libraries in Anambra State, comprising the State Central Library in Ifitedunu and three divisional libraries in Ifitedunu and three divisional libraries in Onitsha, Nnewi and Abagana. Others are branches communities libraries in Amichi, Ihembosi, Ozubulu, Ajali, Adazi Nnukwu, Nkpologu and Atani. Questionnaire, interview and observation checklist were the instrument for data collection. The researcher directly

administered the distribution and collection of the questionnaire, observation technique, including the interview in each community. All the copies of the instruments administered were recovered and used in the study. Research questions 1, 3 and 4 were analyzed using tables, frequencies and simple percentages while research question 2 was subjected to - observation checklist. This was developed to enable the researcher observe children departments and the resources used in the story hour program. Thus, the provision of the common base (100) was used for the work. Decisions were taken at 50% bench mark. All items that were rated 50% and above were regarded as being positively rated and all items that fell below 50% were taken to have been negatively rated.

Results

S/N	Items	Frequency	Percentage
1	Reading aloud	2	18.1
2	Story telling	2	18.1
3	Individual reading	2	18.1
4	Reading and spelling	2	18.1
5	Teaching of reading skills	2	18.1
6	Questions and answers	2	18.1
7	Singing and poetry	1	9
8	Debate	1	9
9	Essay competition	1	9
10	Music and dancing	1	9
11	Drama	1	9
12	Film show	1	9
13	Craft activities	1	9
14	Others	-	-

Table 1 shows that the activities of reading aloud, storytelling, individual reading, reading and spelling, teaching of reading skills, question and answer are done in only two libraries – Onitsha and Amichi (18.1%). While one of the libraries (Onitsha) does all

the activities listed, the other library (Amichi renders six activities out of the thirteen recorded.

The interview revealed that Nnewi, Ihembosi, and Ozubulu libraries were offering the program in the past. The interview also revealed that some public libraries in the state have never rendered the service of children. Hence, the activities of story hour program are currently going on in only two public libraries out of the eleven libraries in the state.

Table 2: Observation Checklist on resources available for story hour program

S/N	Name/location	Story books	Picture books	Text books	Reference books	Computer	Video/DVD player	CD/Cassette player	Musical instrument	Radio	Availability of children's department
1	State Central library Ifitedunu	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	-
2	Onitsha Divisional Library	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	X	X	X
3	Nnewi Divisional Library	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	X	-	X
4	Abagana Divisional Library	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	X
5	Community Library Amichi	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-
6	Community Library Ihemosi	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	X
7	Community Library Ozubulu	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	X
8	Community Library Adazi Nnukwu	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	-
9	Community Library Nkpologu	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	X
10	Community Library Atani	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	-
11	Community Library Ajali	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	Not in use
	Total	10	10	10	10	1	0	0	2	2	6
	%	90.9	90.9	90.9	90.9	9	0	0	18.1	18.1	54.54

NOTE: **X = Resources displayed**
 - = Resources not displayed or seen

The result of the Researcher's observation is presented in Table 2. The Table shows that 90.9% (10 out of 11 libraries) have all the listed print resources available and displayed except the library in Amichi. The percentage of public libraries in the state using audio visual resource of computer as shown in the table is 9% (1 Library – Adazi Nnukwu) while the percentage of libraries with musical instrument and radio was 18.1% (2 libraries – Onitsha and Nnewi). None of the libraries has audio visual resources of video/DVD and CD/cassette players. Meanwhile, 54.54% of the libraries have children's departments.

Also observed was that ten libraries (90.9%) have desks, chairs and good flooring for effective story hour program. However, eight libraries: Onitsha, Nnewi, Abagana, Amichi, Ozubulu, Adazi Nnukwu, Nkpologu and Atani (72.7%) have enough space for demonstration. Only one library has settee and cushion (Adazi Nnukwu). Using the 50% benchmark, the result implies that print and infrastructures are the major resources available in the state public libraries for story hour program.

Table 3: Accessibility and retrieval of story hour program resources

S/N	ITEMS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1.	Resources are displayed	9	81.8
2.	Resources are kept with librarians and issued on request	3	27.2
3.	Locked in drawers for fear of mutilation	-	-
4.	Children are allowed to pick books freely	8	72.7
5.	Children are given books on librarians instincts	4	36.3
6.	Children are not allowed to handle books but can be read aloud	-	-
7.	Children are allowed to borrow books	1	9
8.	Children are not allowed to borrow books	10	90.9
	Others	-	-

From **Table 4**, resources are displayed for retrieval in nine libraries: Onitsha, Nnewi, Abagana, Adazi Nnukwu, Nkpologu, Ozubulu, Ihembosi, Ajali and Atani (81.8%). While three libraries (27.2%) indicate that resources are kept with the librarians and made accessible on request, eight libraries (72.7%) agreed that children are allowed to pick books freely and four libraries (36.3%) indicated that children are given books on librarians' instincts. From the table it could be seen that only one public library allows children to go home with books. The other ten libraries (90.9%) do not allow any form of borrowing. No public library locked books for fear of mutilation nor prevent children from handling resources.

The interview revealed that the strict measures on borrowing are for safekeeping of library resources. The result of the interview showed that some children's books are actually kept with the librarians for safekeeping, as some children are very careless. The interview also revealed that only three public libraries – Onitsha, Abagana and Adazi Nnukwu work on Saturday s thereby making their libraries resources available and accessible result of the findings in research question 3 as represented in the table showed that public libraries in Anambra state impose strict measures on children's borrowing of books.

Table 4: Problems affecting the story hour program

S/N	ITEMS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1.	Inadequate funding	9	81.6
2.	Lack of professional children librarians	7	63.6
3.	Non-availability of relevant resources/infrastructure	7	63.6
4.	Unawareness of the program by parents/guardians	5	45.4
5.	Lack of motivation by teachers/parents	2	18.1
6.	Others:	1	9
	a. Unconducive environment	1	9
	b. Geographical location		

The result in the table above shows that nine libraries (81.6%) have problem of poor funding as the greatest constraint impeding the story hour program. Next to this is lack of professional children librarians and non-availability of relevant resources by seven libraries (63.6%) respectively, as indicated in the table. Five libraries (45.4%) believed that unawareness of the program by parents and guardians contribute to the problem while two libraries (18.1%) voted for lack of motivation by teachers and parents.

The other problems: unconducive environment and geographical locations were peculiar with Nnewi and Ozubulu libraries, respectively. The interview revealed that some parents in the rural areas need their children on Saturdays for farming and other family chores, thereby making it difficult for story hour program to function effectively. Thus, the findings here show that inadequate funds, lack of professional librarians and non availability of relevant resources affect the success of story hour in Anambra State public libraries.

Discussion of Findings

From the findings, it is apparent that the activities of the story hour program are non-existent in the state public libraries except in Onitsha and Amichi (Table 1). This revelation contradicts the United Nations number 1 key manifesto of public libraries establishment and standard (2004) which advocated for creating and strengthening reading habits in children from an early age. The role of the availability of story hour program activities is for all round development of children, particularly in providing a good reading model and establishing physical closeness to learning materials (Kupetz & Green, 1999).

However, that libraries in Onitsha and Amichi render this service shows the disparity among the libraries in the state with respect to children library services. This disparity could be attributed to having no imagination, no zeal and no creativity as Ike (2007) commended.

The effective display of print resources for story hour program is reflected in many libraries (Table 2). This buttresses the fact that these libraries acknowledge the role of children's literature which Smith & Hepworth (2006) stated, gives a sense of familiarity and acts as starting point to children as they are used in class work and school activities. But the situation of audio-visual resources is worrisome. All the public libraries in the state lack audiovisual resources. Only the libraries in Onitsha and Nnewi have musical equipment. The radio set seen in Onitsha and Amichi were noted to be personal belongings to some staff of the library. This contradicts what Miller (2003) said about the importance of audio visual resources. According to him, non-print resources provide broader access to today's wealth of information in children's department.

The result of the study also shows that the state of the infrastructure in children's sections of Anambra State public libraries (90.9%) have good floor, enough spaces, seats and desks. This agrees with the views of Morner (2010), who stated the importance of space, seats, furniture and other equipment in rendering effective services in the story hour program.

The absence of children departments in libraries in Ifitedunu, Adazi Nnukwu, Amichi, Atani and Ajali is worrisome. This contradicts Kell (2009) assertion, that children department creates a welcome and airy feeling, showing commitment to reading and growth. The findings also reveal that 90.9% of the libraries do not allow borrowing of

library resources. This strict measure in borrowing indicts Ranganathan's theory of library, which stated that books are for use, every reader his book, every book its reader, save the time of the reader ... (Qvortrup, 2007). The rationale behind borrowing of resources after story hour program is to enrich children's life and keep them occupied with reading materials. Therefore, the absence of borrowing merely makes the libraries to be more of book keepers rather than making resources easy and free for the children.

Problems affecting the success of story hour program were highlighted (Aliyu & Muawiyya (2007) and Azubike & Mbachu (2009) and analyzed in the study. Results show that inadequate funding, lack of human and material resources, unawareness of the program by parents/guardians and lack of motivation by parents and teachers affect the success of this program. Apparently, the embargo placed on employment in Anambra State limited manpower; which is the adequate requirement in these libraries. If the scenario is not changed, public library services to children cannot fulfill its objective of inculcating reading culture from an early stage. The ultimate consequence would be failure to contribute to education in boosting and supporting literacy. (Goods & Kniffel, 2009).

Recommendations

The following recommendations are provided to further enhance story hour programmes in public libraries in Anambra State.

- i. The Anambra State Library Board should as a matter of urgency intervene in the children sections of the public libraries in the state and the activities therein. This should ensure effective library services to children.
- ii. The staff of the State Library Board should come to terms with Saturday library work for that is a free day for students, specially, devoted to promote and cultivated desirable reading culture.
- iii. The provision of audio-visual materials will widen the children's horizon and adds excitement to the hour.
- iv. The state public libraries should endeavor to allow children borrow books as this would make them appreciate the library resources. It would also keep them off movies and ensure effective learning experience in their homes.
- v. The state government should address the manpower needs of the children sections of the public libraries by employing adequate and qualified personnel to man the story hour program.

Conclusion

Certainly, the study has highlighted the opportunities the opportunities of harnessing the story hour program. It can then be concluded that the libraries have adequate print and infrastructural resources for story hour program but the staff are unable to take up the responsibility of being creative and rendering the services as it should. There is no gain saying the fact that an effective story hour program has a magic to attract children to books and book related materials. What the situation requires is the immediate intervention of State Library Board in addressing the neglected sections of children's departments in the state public libraries. This hopefully, will stimulate the intellectual, cultural, emotional and social awareness in children for reading is basic to academic success, effective citizenship and a fuller personal life.

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