Full Length Research Paper

Promoting literacy in school libraries in Sierra Leone

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Abstract

Exposing pupils to effective learning through literacy promotion can prepare them with a wide range of learning strategies but this complex activity is over-looked in secondary schools in Sierra Leone. Teaching in secondary schools in the country is largely based on the continued use of textbooks. It is no gainsaying that most pupils cannot maximise their learning potential nor read effectively at levels necessary for understanding the type of materials teachers will like them to use. A way out of this is the promotion of literacy in secondary school libraries. Invariably this article looks at literacy from a broader perspective, noting Sierra Leone’s educational system, literacy demands on secondary school pupils and justifying the need for the promotion of literacy by the school librarian. The article provides suggestions for the promotion of literacy in school libraries in the country.

Keywords: Sierra Leone, school libraries, school librarians, literacy, information literacy, information access, literacy promotion

INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone’s current educational system is composed of six years of formal primary education, three years of Junior Secondary School (JSS), three years Senior Secondary School (SSS) and four years of tertiary education-6-3-3-4. (The Professor Gbamanja Commission’s Report of 2010 recommended an additional year for SSS to become 6-3-4-4). The official age for primary school pupils is between six and eleven years. All pupils at the end of class six are required to take and pass the National Primary School Examinations designed by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) to enable them proceed to the secondary school divided into Junior Secondary School(JSS) and Senior Secondary School (SSS). Each part has a final examination: the Basic Education Certificate Examinations (BECE) for the JSS, and the West African Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations (WASSCE) for SSS, both conducted by WAEC. Successful candidates of WASSCE are admitted to tertiary institutions based on a number of subjects passed. This system of education was adopted in 1994 aimed at developing the human resources needed to meet the development challenges of the country. Its implementation strategy emphasized the need to reduce wastage and enhance articulation between the different layers of the system. The education system is marked by increased enrolment in schools but is not without serious challenges. For instance there is massive over-crowding in classes with inadequate physical infrastructure such as buildings, classrooms and furniture, and teacher accommodation. Also, there is not enough teaching and learning materials to meet demand. Government provides basic textbooks in core subjects like English Language, Integrated Science, Social Studies and Mathematics but these are often stolen and sold in street corners. In private and public schools, pupils buy textbooks but these are expensive and many pupils cannot afford to buy them. Pupils often resort to using the provisions of their school libraries. Alternative low-cost pamphlets are sold written mostly by inexperienced teachers with material drawn from old textbooks. Besides, most pamphlets are based on public examinations like BECE and WASSCE rather than the teaching syllabi and are of poor quality; others contain substantial amount of plagiarized material from standard textbooks. In addition the science and technical subjects suffer from a shortage of equipment and where
this is available teachers and technicians trained to use it are not available. In fact the cost of some of the equipment is a restraining factor.

Literacy is at the heart of world development and human rights. Wherever practised literacy activities are part of national and international strategies for improved education, human development and well-being. Oral societies rely heavily on memory to transmit their values, laws, history, music, and culture whereas the written word allows infinite possibilities for transmission and therefore of active participation in communication. These possibilities are what make the goal of literacy crucial in society. Literacy hinges on the printed word. Most pupils are formally introduced to print when they encounter schoolbook. In Sierra Leone for example, teachers are not available. In fact the cost of some of the materials teachers would like them to use. Thus the performance of pupils at internal and public examinations is disappointing. Further pupils’ continued queries in the library demonstrate that they do not only lack basic awareness of resources available in their different school libraries but also do not understand basic rudiments of how to source information and materials from these institutions. What is more worrisome is that pupils do not use appropriate reading skills and study strategies in learning. There is a dearth of reading culture in schools and this cut across the fabric of society. In view of the current support the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) to establish literacy standards in school this situation has proved frustrating as teachers do not know how to better help pupils to achieve this goal. Thus they look up to the school librarians to play a more proactive role.

**SOME VIEWS ABOUT LITERACY**

Havelock (1982) posited that the introduction of the Greek letters inscription around 700 B.C. “was to alter the character of human culture, placing a gulf between all alphabetic societies and their precursors. The Greeks did not just invent alphabets; they invent literacy and the literate basis of modern thought” (p.82). There are no simple universal definitions of literacy in popular thought or scholarly theorizing. Often we hear people talking about computer literacy, Internet literacy, scientific literacy, media literacy and multicultural literacy. In developing countries for example, literacy is associated with the ability to read and write, and numeracy. Graff (1987) asserted that “literacy is said to correlate with economic growth and industrialisation, wealth and productivity, political stability and participation” (p.382). In Sierra Leone, for example, literacy is not only limited to the ability to read, write and numeracy but a literate person is associated with the possession of skills and knowledge and how these could be applied within his local environment. For instance a literate person is believed to be able to apply chemical fertilizer to his crops, fill in a loans form, determine proper dosage of medicine, calculate cash cropping cost and profits, glean information from a newspaper, make out a bank deposit slip and understanding instructions and basic human rights.

Lytle and Wolfe (1989) categorised literacy into four metaphors namely: literacy as skills; literacy as tasks; literacy as practices; and literacy as critical reflection. Literacy as skills refers to basic academic skills of reading, writing and maths, measurable through standardized achievement testing and often seen as comparable to years of schooling. Literacy as tasks refers to the ability to function effectively in life contexts; that is, applying literacy skills to negotiate various practical tasks of day-to-day life. Literacy as practice expands the concept of literacy to include understanding of the social and cultural contexts within which literacy is used. In this metaphor literacy consists not only of the requisition of skills for the individuals but also knowledge of the norms and protocols for how and when to use these skills. Literacy as critical reflection is perceived as “a process of interpreting the world and developing a consciousness of commonly held values, behaviours and beliefs as socially and culturally constructed”(p.11). In this metaphor the development of reading skills, writing and mathematics ability to perform functional tasks and specific cultural practices may not be very crucial as the process of growing a new perspective on society and one’s position and power within it. For Au (1993) literacy is the ability and willingness to use reading and writing to construct meaning from printed texts in ways which meet the requirements of a particular social context. While Venezky (1995) maintained that literacy differs from simple reading and writing in its assumption of an understanding of the appropriate use of these abilities within a print-based society. Literacy therefore, according to Venezky, requires active autonomous engagement “with print and stresses the role of the individual in generating as well as receiving and assigning independent interpretations to messages” (p.142).

Information literacy is key to raising institutional standards overall by improving the quality of research and learning, more so when learners are divided in small groups where they could get hands-on-practice using library resources (Birks and Hunt,2003). For Verlander and Scutt (2009) the context in which information literacy developments have taken place is changing. According to them information literacy approaches have come to place a greater emphasis on long-term learning capabilities that are influenced by institutional values around empowerment, participation, and choice. de Kock (2010) argued that although information literacy encompasses a wide range of skills, it has always been closely tied to technological changes, how they impact the information
LITERACY DEMANDS ON SECONDARY SCHOOL PUPILS

Information literacy is a complicated matter. On the surface, it may seem a fairly simple business of acquiring a set of skills technologies that help guide one through today's information landscape. The field of information literacy is further complicated by the fact that building information literacy skills among individuals will rarely have any meaningful effect by itself. In order for meaningful changes to come about, individual skills are only a piece of the puzzle, along with a range of other meaningful changes to come about, individual skills and the ability to perform various life tasks using these skills. Literacy produces people who are innovative, achievement-oriented, productive, politically conscious, less likely to commit a crime, and more likely to take education seriously.

In everyday situations school pupils are expected to be able to identify and seek information they need. Providing a variety of reading and writing experiences using varied materials in the school library can help develop pupils' literacy ability. The mode of assessment in schools in Sierra Leone includes class exercises, tests, written and practical assignments, as well as written examinations to see pupils through to their next levels. These pupils, for example, need to read content books and supplementary materials in school for homework. Pupils have even more literacy needs in their activities outside school. They need to read signs found in their communities, job applications, road maps and signs, labels on food and medicine, newspapers, public notices, bank statements, bills and many other functional materials. Failure to read and understand these materials can result in their committing traffic violations, having unpleasant reactions to food or medicine, becoming lost, losing employment opportunities and missing desirable programs. Equally so pupils need to write to their relatives and loved ones, instructions to people who are doing things for them, notes to themselves about tasks to be completed, phone messages for colleagues and many other items. Mistakes in these activities can have negative effects on them. Good literacy skills are especially important to pupils who plan to pursue higher education studies. The job market in the country calls for pupils to be literate. For instance most jobs advertised these days require people who have completed their JSS. The fact is that workers need to be able to understand graphic aids, categorized information and skim and scan to locate information. Also the nature of reading in the workplace generally involves locating information for immediate use and inferring information for problem solving. The reading and writing of a variety of documents like memos, manuals, letters, reports and instructions are necessary literacy skills in the workplace.

METHODOLOGY

In order to gather information for this article literature searches were undertaken on various databases like the Library and Information Science Abstracts and Information Science and Technology Abstracts to review the existing journal literature on some methods involved in promoting information literacy especially in schools. However, literature searches revealed that there was a limited amount available and as such literature searching was broadened to include education research databases such as ERIC (Education Resource Information Centre). Further reading was also done of documentations held in some school libraries in the country especially with regard the techniques involved in promoting information literacy in schools. Due to poor organization of records in school libraries retrieval of valuable records on information literacy was found to be problematic. Besides, there is a dearth of empirical studies on promoting information literacy in schools. A common trend found in these studies is that the teaching of information literacy should be done by teachers other than doing so in concert with the school librarians.
particular needs and take responsibility for their own learning. As information literate, pupils will be able to manage information skilfully and efficiently in a variety of contexts. They will be capable of weighing information carefully and wisely to determine its quality. Pupils do recognise that having good information is central to meeting the opportunity and challenges of day-to-day living. They are also aware of the importance of how researching across a variety of sources and formats to locate the best information to meet particular needs.

Literacy activities in schools in Sierra Leone are the responsibility of content area teachers, reading consultants and school librarians. Of these the role of the school librarian is paramount. As specialist the school librarian is expected to provide assistance to pupils and teachers alike by locating materials in different subjects, and at different reading levels by making available materials that can be used for motivation and background reading. The school librarian is also expected to provide pupils with instructions in locating strategies related to the library such as doing online searches and skimming through printed reference materials. The librarian is expected to display printed materials within his purview, write specialised bibliographies and lists of addresses on specific subjects at the request of teachers. He should be able to provide pupils with direct assistance in finding and using appropriate materials; recreational reading can be fostered by the librarian’s book talks or attractive book displays on high-interest topics like HIV/AIDS, child abuse, child rights, human rights and poverty alleviation.

In view of this the fundamental qualities expected of the good school librarian include knowledge of his collection and how to access it; ability to understand the needs of his users more so those of pupils; ability to communicate with pupils and adult users; and knowledge of information skills and how to use information.

WHAT ROLE FOR THE SCHOOL LIBRARIAN?

Pupils’ success in school depends to a large extent upon their ability to access, evaluate and use information. Providing access to information and resources is a long-standing responsibility of the school librarian. The school librarian should provide the leadership and expertise necessary to ensure that the library becomes integral in the instructional program of the school. In school the librarian is the information specialist, teacher and instructional consultant. He is the interface responsible for guiding pupils and teachers through the complex information resources housed in his library. He is looked up to assist and guide numerous users in seeking to use and understand the resources and services of the library. In this respect the school librarian should inculcate in these users such skills as manual and online searching of information; use of equipment; developing critical skills for the organization, evaluation and use of information and ideas as integral part of the curriculum (Lonsdale, 2003). The school librarian should be aware of the range of available information retrieval systems, identify that most suitable to the needs of pupils and provide expertise in helping them become knowledgeable, if not comfortable, in their use. Since no library is self-sufficient the school librarian can network with information agencies, lending/renting materials and/or using electronic devises to transmit information (Tilke, 1998; 2002).

As information specialist the school librarian should be able to share his expertise with those who may wish to know what information sources and/or learning materials are available to support a program of work. Such consultation should be offered to the whole school through the curriculum development committee or to individual subject teachers. The school librarian should take the lead in developing pupils’ information literacy skills by being involved with the school curriculum planning and providing a base of resources to meet its needs. He should be aware of key educational initiatives and their impact in teaching and learning; he should be familiar with teaching methods and learning styles in school; over all he should maintain an overview of information literacy programmes within the school (Herring, 1996; Kuhlthau, 2004).

Kuhlthau (2004) opined that information seeking is a primary activity of life and that pupils seek information to deepen and broaden their understanding of the world around them. When therefore, information in school libraries is placed in a larger context of learning, pupils’ perspective becomes an essential component in information provision. The school librarian should ensure that skills, knowledge and attitude concerning information access, use and communication, are integral part of the school curriculum. Information skills are crucial in the life-long learning process of pupils. As short term objective the school librarian should provide a means of achieving learning objectives within the curriculum; as long term information skills have a direct impact on individual pupils’ ability to deal effectively with a changing environment. Therefore the school librarian should work in concert with teachers and administrators to define the scope and sequence of the information relevant to the school curriculum and ensure its integration throughout the instructional programs (Tilke, 2002; Birks and Hunt, 2003). Pupils should be encouraged to realise their potential as informed citizens who critically think and solve problems. In view of the relationship between the curriculum and school library, the librarian should serve on the curriculum committee ensuring that information access skills are incorporated into subject areas. The school librarian’s involvement in the curriculum development will permit him to provide advice on the use of a variety of instructional strategies such as learning centres and problem-solving software, effective in communicating content to pupils (Herring, 1996; Birks...
Literacy could be actively developed as pupils need access to specific resources, demonstrate understanding of their functionality and effective searching skills. In this regard pupils should be given basic instruction to the library, its facilities and services and subsequent use. Interactive teaching methods aimed at information literacy education should be conducted for the benefit of pupils. Teaching methods could include an outline of a variety of aides like quizzes and workshops of differing complexity level to actively engage pupils in learning library skills and improving their information literacy. Classes should be divided into small groups so that pupils could have hands-on-experience using library resources. Where Internet services and information are available in the library online tutorials should be provided. Post session follow-up action will ensure that pupils receive hands-on-experience using library resources. Teaching methods should be constantly evaluated to identify flaws and improve on them.

Further the school librarian should demonstrate willingness to support and value pupils in their use of the library through: provision of readers’ guides; brochures; book marks; library handbooks/guides; computerization of collection; helpful guiding throughout the library; and regular holding of book exhibitions and book fairs. Since there are community radio stations in the country the school librarian could buy air time to report library activities, resources and services. He can also communicate to pupils through update newspapers. Pupils could be encouraged to contribute articles on library development, book reviews and information about opening times and services. The school librarian could help pupils to form book and reading clubs, organize book weeks and book talks using visiting speakers and renowned writers to address pupils. Classes could also be allowed to visit the library to facilitate use. More importantly the school librarian should provide assistance to pupils in the use of technology to access information outside the library. He should offer pupils opportunities related to new technology, use and production of varied media formats, and laws and polices regarding information. In order to build a relevant resource base for the school community the librarian should constantly carry out needs assessment, comparing changing times.

The Internet is a vital source for promoting literacy in the school library. The school librarian should ensure that the library has a website that will serve as guide to relevant and authoritative sources and as a tool for learning whereby pupils and teachers are given opportunity to share ideas and solutions (Grey, 2001; Hering, 2003). Through the Internet pupils can browse the library website to learn how to search and develop information literacy skills. In order for pupils to tap up-to-date sources from the Net the school librarian should constantly update the home page, say on a daily basis, if necessary. Simultaneously the school librarian should avail to pupils and teachers sheets/guides to assist them in carrying out their own independent researches. He should give hands-on-experience training to users to share ideas with others through the formation of “lunch time” or “after school support groups”. Such activities could help pupils to develop ideas and searching information for a class topic and assignment.

Even the location of the library has an impact in promoting literacy in school. The library should be centrally located, close to the maximum number of teaching areas. It should be able to seat at least ten per cent of school pupils at any given time, having a wide range of resources vital for teaching and learning programs offered in school. The library should be characterised by good signage for the benefit of pupil and teacher users with up-to-date displays to enhance the literacy skills of pupils and stimulating their intellectual curiosity.

CONCLUSION

Indeed the promotion of literacy should be integral in the school curriculum and that the librarian should be able to play a leading role to ensure that the skills, knowledge and attitudes related to information access are inculcated in pupils and teachers alike as paramount users of the school library. But the attainment of this goal is dependent on a supportive school administration, always willing and ready to assist the library and its programs financially. To make the librarian more effective he should be given capacity building to meeting the challenges of changing times.

REFERENCES


