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Can Reading Research in Africa be done in isolation? The influence of Literacy, Education, Publishing and the Book Industry on Reading in Africa

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The phrases 'ours is not a reading culture' and 'African Society is an oral society' are often used in discussions of literacy, of publishing, of education levels, of book publishing and bookselling and of availability of reading material in Africa. The discussions often center around the vicious circle that afflicts African reading, writing and book industry i.e no reading material; therefore no reading culture; therefore no market for reading matter; therefore no publishing and therefore no reading material and therefore no reading culture – this, like any circle could be started at any point of the circle. The lack of a reading culture is indeed true and affects social and economic development of many communities in Africa. However, for most parts of the continent, what is lacking is empirical data on reading and reading habits. Much of what is being said is based on assumptions. Most of the research that reveals anything on reading is inevitably often part of a larger study of related fields such as literacy, publishing, book promotion and book policy. The general trend is that reading itself as a main area for research and covering its different aspects seems to be rarely done, if at all. This in itself may not be necessarily bad and perhaps the question that needs to be asked here is how the research that is done can be expanded and be of benefit and lead to reading promotion and sustainability of a reading culture.

This presentation, which concentrates on East Africa, but which is applicable to many other parts of Africa, attempts to point out that reading research is so intertwined with research on literacy, especially adult literacy; on book publishing and distribution; on book affordability and availability; on language policy etc, that it would indeed be unwise to do research on it without linking it to other related fields. It is also argued that in order to draw up a workable plan to improve on the reading environment in Africa, the basis of these plans must be based on accurate information. Any research should therefore be comprehensive and cover all the different issues that influence and affect reading and the reading culture.

Reading research as part of research on Literacy

The average literacy rate for Sub-Saharan Africa is 59.6%. This is according to the human development index of 2001. Many countries have carried out mass adult literacy campaigns in an attempt to improve their people's ability to access government social programmes. The evaluation/research/studies that are necessary to gauge the success of such campaigns, inevitably always include a section on what use the literacy programme graduates have made of their newly-acquired skills. A recent evaluation of the Functional literacy Programmes in Uganda included in its study, questions about the use of newly-acquired reading and writing skills. It asked respondents what type of material they read and whether they used libraries or simply read home reading like newspapers. In a somewhat related development, the forthcoming Pan-African conference on Reading to be held in Abuja, Nigeria, in October this year, has as its main theme '**Reading for all: Building communities where literacy thrives**'. Whether in research, planning or general discussions, the effect that literacy has on the reading habit in Africa and many other parts of the world can never be taken for granted, and reading therefore always forms part of any research on literacy.

Publishing and availability of Reading material

The African Publishers Network (APNET), an organization that unites publishers across Africa and whose vision is 'the transformation of African Peoples through access to books' was founded in 1992 and has during its existence carried out several studies on the publishing and book industry in Africa. In one such study carried out in 1998 in various countries of Eastern and Southern Africa, the issue of a reading culture among Africans was discussed at length with those interviewed and the study concluded that it is difficult for the publishing industry to grow where the culture of reading is almost non-existent. Closely linked with publishing is the availability of suitable reading material to the people. In many of their discussion, publishers have acknowledged that suitable reading material must be made available to the general population, if the culture of reading is to be developed and nurtured.

The Book Development Trusts of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, organizations concerned with the development of the book trade has indicated that they hope to carry out research on the reading habit in East Africa, whose results, it is hoped will assist them shape the future of their industry.

The School Curriculum and the home environment

Recent studies on curriculum development have also included the question of reading as an activity for students and how the general physical facilities at home and the attitudes of parents affect children's future reading. The emphasis on passing exams in many countries means that children end up regarding reading as a chore rather than an enjoyable activity. A 1997 UNESCO Research Project on improving reading skills in Primary schools in Uganda examined how the home environment affects the reading capabilities of children in primary schools. The findings revealed that attitudes of parents affected children's reading and that children from homes where parents were literate were more likely to enjoy reading and to be encouraged to read than in homes where parents were illiterate. In addition to that in some discussions and studies, the language used as a medium of instruction especially in primary schools and the availability of further reading material in the local language has also been identified as having a big influence on students' future interest in reading.

In most of the examples given above, research on reading forms part of a study of something else related to reading and as a result not all that would be useful to know about the reading habits of a group of people, a society, a nation are ever brought together. In literacy, for example, studies mostly concentrate on reading by adults. Even then, it is usually on adults who have acquired literacy in adulthood. They rarely take into consideration adults who have gone through formal education, are highly literate, can

afford to buy reading matter and perhaps most importantly can also influence their children and other adults into reading. In publishing and the book industry, the emphasis is on getting a market for the industry's product. Studies would therefore be on who reads what is available, rather than what to produce for the clientele. It would be interesting to know exactly how big a market there is for books written in local languages, and whether their publication are likely to contribute to the eventual build up of a big local market.

On the school curriculum, studies are concentrated on reading by young people. What they would like to read after leaving formal education could also form part of a general study on reading.

Although conclusions are drawn at different times about the different aspects of reading, the combined efforts of all those who could make a change (Librarians, teachers, publishers, parents, booksellers, community leaders) have not been mobilised. A 1993 study of different aspects of the book trade in East Africa, recommended that a wider research be carried out on all issues that affect the book trade. On reading, it was suggested that facts and figures on the following be obtained:

- Estimated reading population.
- Number and regional distribution of literacy and post-literacy centers.
- Financial resources assigned for setting up literacy and post-literacy centers.
- Financial resources allocated for reading promotion.

To this could be added

1. Literacy and how it affects one's ability and desire to read.
2. The number of titles available on the market and what languages they are written in.
3. The effect of the cost of paper and government taxes on publishers' ability to publish.
4. The potential market of titles in local languages especially those languages that cross national borders.
5. The influence of the curriculum and the home environment on children's reading.

Conclusion

Research carried out in any discipline is not an end in itself, but as a means of finding a way towards the betterment of society. As governments in Africa attempt to better the lives of their people through improved health, nutrition, education and other programmes and through better access to information, the issue of ensuring that people do read and retain the habit of reading throughout their lives, cannot be ignored. To date the key players in this have been attempting to solve the problem from different angles. Perhaps it is time that concrete data on all forces at play were brought together so that a coordinated approach is used to ensure that Africans and their children and their children's children read and continue reading.

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