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Reaching out to the less advantaged: reading tents in Kenya

Margaret Makenzi

P.O Box 422

Egerton

Kenya

E-mail rtp@africaonline.co.ke / magmakenzi@yahoo.com

Abstract:

Mobile libraries have been defined as portable libraries that travel from place to place promoting reading and the development of literacy particularly in the rural and urban poor communities. The main objective of the mobile reading tent is to promote reading with an aim to develop life long reading skills and culture and to encourage literacy. Apart from the mobile reading tent, other types of mobile libraries that have been used in Kenya include, motor vehicle, bicycle, donkey and camel mobile libraries.

The mobile reading tent targets children in order to inculcate the reading culture and introduce them to libraries at an early age. Many libraries and organizations involved in the promotion and development of literacy, reading skills and books distribution are incorporating the use of mobile reading tents in their approaches and as a strategy to achieving their objectives.

In Kenya the Reading Tent Project of Egerton University, has been involved in the promotion of reading using the reading tents' approach since 1997. Other organizations that have incorporated this approach include, the National Book Development Council of Kenya, Kenya National Library Services, Kenya Library Association, Maendeleo ya Wanawake, Reading Association of Kenya and Kenyatta University Literacy Development Project.

This paper discusses the mobile reading tent approach as an effective outreach tool in the promotion and development of literacy and reading skills. The paper also shares the experiences from the Reading Tent Project of Egerton University and the organizations mentioned above in the use of this approach

Introduction

Literacy is commonly defined as the ability to read and write at a designated level of proficiency. Graff (1993-1999) more precisely defined literacy as a technical capability to decode or produce written or printed signs, symbols or letters combined into words. Traditionally, literacy has been closely associated with the alphabet and its role in written communication. However, with the rapid changing technology, it has become increasingly necessary to refer to the different forms of literacy.

Illiteracy, the converse of literacy is difficult to measure. According to the World Bank (200) statistics, many countries prefer to use self-reported data or simply consider people with no schooling or those unable to read and write as being illiterate. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 1998 figures depicted that men and women aged fifteen years and above, who were illiterate comprised 32 percent and 49 percent of the population respectively. To date, the region has generally not shown any marked improvement, save for the urban areas, which are few and far between.

This means that a significant part of the populace can neither read nor write a short, simple statement about their everyday life. Consequently the large multitude of illiterates is a source of grave concern to decision makers in many countries in the region. Similarly, Eisemon (1997:583) presents the alarming scenario with a caution that if left to continue unabated, the number of illiterates would tend to increase in future. Such an eventuality would inevitably aggravate unfavorable socioeconomic repercussions thus impeding development. Therefore urgent and innovative measures have to be invoked in order to avert the imminent downward spiral.

Due to the high levels of illiteracy in the developing world, many children do not get a positive start on reading like their counterparts in the developed world. Where as in the developed world books are easily available in the homes and parents who are literate read stories with their children while promoting reading from a tender age, the perception a child in the developing world gets of the book is that of a book being a serious tool for study to be used mainly for academic success. Books are depicted as rare and expensive. In most of the homes books are only bought if it is very necessary and after everything else has been taken care of. Majority of the parents who are literate, either have no time to read with their children or simply lack the interest and culture of reading.

To achieve sustainable human development requires people who are literate and able to think critically and analytically. The developing world is now more than ever aware of the value of universal literacy as a link between culture and development and as an instrument to equip its citizens with skills and knowledge required for development. Reading is key to development.

Background

In most parts of Africa reading is perceived as an academic exercise and a means to pass exams. In Kenya for example, reading was for a long time closely linked to textbooks with reading being taught as a perfunctory skill to be employed only in school time pursuits. Many institutions still do not have functional libraries or sufficient budgets to acquire books. It is therefore necessary to create awareness on the importance of reading for leisure and not necessarily to pass exams and the need to develop reading as a skill that should be inculcated from a younger age and nurtured into a habit and culture. It is against this background that the mobile reading tent concept is being used in Kenya.

Tents as Mobile Libraries

The Reading Tent is an old concept but a new approach for promoting reading and enhancing literacy in both the rural and urban poor communities in most parts of the world. The reading tent approach focuses mainly on promoting reading for leisure and making books and other reading materials accessible to children in areas that lack adequate library services. The reading tent approach is an outreach tool that is being used to promote reading, stimulate a desire and love for reading, develop reading skills and a reading culture among children.

Reading tents serve as mobile libraries that are portable and travel from place to place encouraging voluntary reading and consequently the development of literacy. They serve as extension tools to places where there are inadequate or no library services.

The reading tent approach was introduced after the realization that:

- Reading is key to national development and individual improvement;
- Reading habits, skills and culture should be inculcated at an early age and nurtured to develop into a life long skill;
- Reading is the foundation to success and Excellency in learning and communication;
- Reading is one of the most rewarding pursuits in life and an art that is central to human development.

Objectives of Reading Tents

The main objectives of mobile reading tents is to:

- Develop and promote a reading culture;
- Create awareness on the importance and power of reading;
- Promote a love for leisure reading and inculcate reading habits;
- Develop reading skills and create life long reading habits;
- Make books accessible and available to young readers;
- Create awareness on the books available on the local market;
- Create awareness on the role of libraries in the community;

- Promote skill useful in the teaching of reading and in making reading enjoyable for young readers;
- Train teachers in the basic skills of establishing and running school libraries and encourage schools to set aside time for leisure reading;
- Produce and sustaining a literate society.

Why “Reading Tents”

“To ensure that reading thrives in Africa, concerted action would be required in three main areas namely; improvement of the social and reading infrastructure; promotion of reading across the school curriculum and development of reading extension services”. (Obanya, 2003).

Reading Tents are suitable for use in the reading extension services, they entail the use of tents to provide suitable reading environment out in the fields. This reading is done under tents pitched out in the open fields. Tents are used in this approach for the following reasons:

- Tents are versatile and hence easy to move from place to place;
- Through the use of tents many children can be reached regardless of where they live;
- In areas where there are no libraries, tents provide shelter from the rain, wind, the sun and dust for both the reader and the reading materials during reading sessions;
- Tents create an environment where reading is presented as enjoyable, fun and simple;
- Tents bring out an aspect of relaxation and create a non-formal learning atmosphere;
- The reading tents approach offers children an alternative approach to learning that is enjoyable;
- Tents depict simplicity, convenience and are easy to pitch and unpitch.

Reading Tents in Kenya

The Reading tent approach has been used in Kenya since the early 1990’s as an attempt to enhance reading skills and habits among children. The aim of this approach is to promote a love for reading and to develop a reading culture among children. Various organizations and institutions are using this approach to promote reading among them are, the Egerton University Reading Tent Project (EUTRP), Kenya National Library services (KNLS), Kenya Library Association (KLA), Maendeleo ya wanawake Organization (MYWO), Reading Association of Kenya (RAK) and Kenyatta University Basic Education Resource Center (KUBERC). Most of these organizations run the Children’s Reading Tent (CRT) activities under the umbrella of the National Book Development council of Kenya (NBDCK). The National Book Development Council of Kenya has been running Children’s Reading Tent activities since 1997 under the banner of the National Book Week Celebrations, which is an annual event of NBDCK. Over the

years, under the auspices of the East African Book Development association (EABDA), the organization of the children's reading tent activities has been decentralized to incorporate more interested book sector associations and institutions.

Reading tent events take either one or two days. Incases where the event is only one day, the main focus is on the children reading and participating in some of the activities listed below. If the event is to take two days, the first day is used to train teachers on setting up and running school libraries, teaching of reading and how to organize future children's reading events while on second day is the children's reading tent activities are carried out.

During the reading tent events, the organizers select at least five to seven of the activities listed below with reading being the main activity:

- Loud and silent reading
- Reading competition
- Creative writing
- Recitals
- Story telling
- Moulding and modeling using plastacine clay
- Song and dance
- Drama
- Puzzle and Word building
- Cutting shapes using paper
- Face painting
- Educational games.

In addition to the above activities the older children also participate in the following activities:

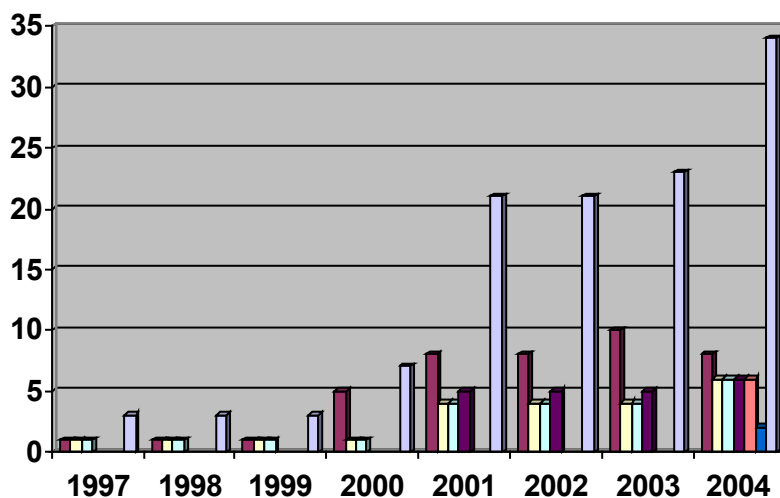
- Writing skills corner
- Comprehension corner
- Debate corner
- Science and nature corner
- I.T corner
- Book talks.

All the above activities play an important role in the development of reading skills in children. They are aimed in the long run to develop the aspect of creativity and critical and analytical thinking in children.

Reading tents in Kenya have been organised in various parts of the country with an aim of reaching to all the less advantaged. Due to financial constraints, there are still many areas that are unreached yet they have no access to library services.

Since 1997, the children's reading tents in Kenya have been run as follows:

NAME	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
EURTP	1	1	1	5	8	8	10	8
KNLS	1	1	1	1	4	4	4	6
KLA	1	1	1	1	4	4	4	6
MYWO	-	-	-	-	5	5	5	6
RAK	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6
KUBERC	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
Total	3	3	3	7	21	21	23	34



■ EURTP ■ KNLS ■ KLA ■ MYWO ■ RAK ■ KUBERC ■ Total

Egerton University reading tent Project

The Egerton University Reading Tent Project was started in 1997 as the university library outreach programme. The Rockefeller Foundation has supported the project since 1997 to date. The main objective of the project is to promote reading and the development of reading skills and habits among children in primary schools in Kenya, in order to develop life long reading habits.

The project uses a multifaceted approach to achieve its objectives. The main approaches include the following:

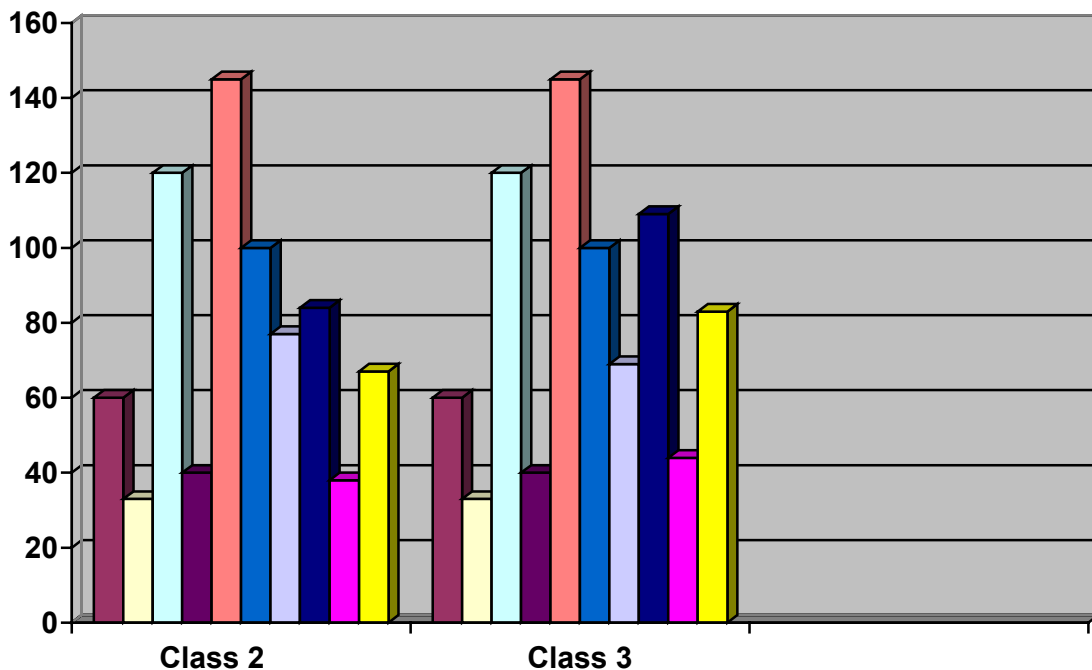
- Mobile reading tent activities in schools
- Introduction of a reading hour in schools
- Establishment of a children's library
- I.T lab to introduce computers as partners to reading
- Holiday Reading/IT camp during school holidays.

A total of one thousand five hundred and sixty five pupils from ten schools in Njoro

division, Nakuru district of Kenya, have been participating in all the activities of the project since 1999 when they were in classes two and three. These pupils are in classes six and seven. The schools and number of pupils on the project are shown in the table and chart below.

Schools and number of pupils participating in the EURTP since 1999.

School	Pupils		Total
	Class 2	Class 3	
Kilimo primary school	60	60	120
Kerma primary school	33	33	66
Egerton primary school	120	120	240
Ngongogeri primary school	40	40	80
Njoro D.E.B primary school	145	145	290
Njoro Township Primary School	100	100	200
Ogilgei primary school	77	69	149
Ndarugu primary school	84	109	193
Piave primary school	38	44	82
Tengecha primary school	67	83	150
Total			1567



■ Kilimo primary school	□ Kerma primary school
□ Egerton primary school	■ Ngongogeri primary school
■ Njoro D.E.B primary school	■ Njoro Township Primary School
□ Ogilgei primary school	■ Ndarugu primary school
■ Piave primary school	■ Tengecha primary school

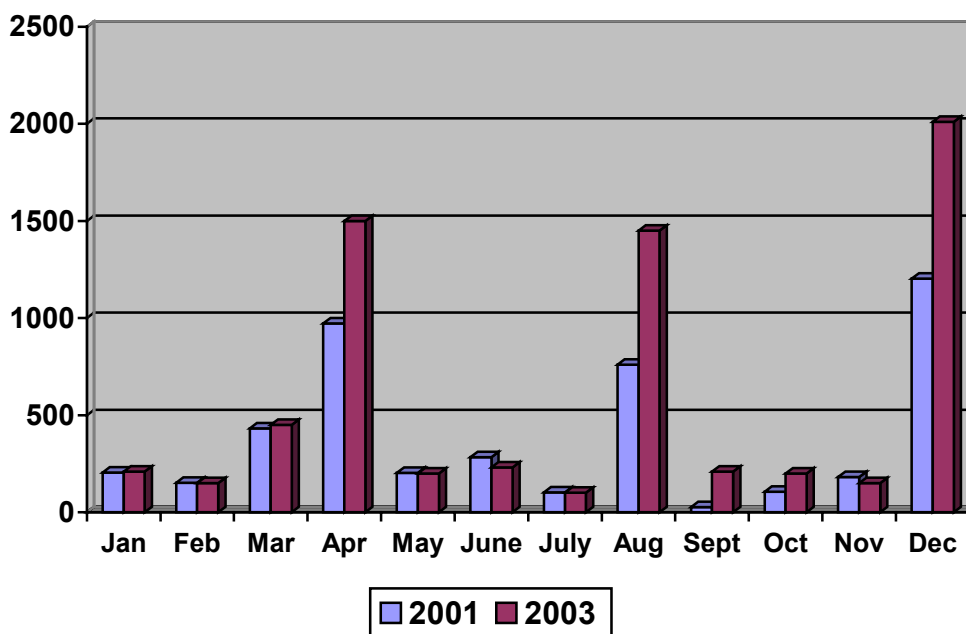
Project Library

Due to the awareness created through the reading tents on the importance of reading and the role of school libraries, more children are looking for opportunities to read. The Reading Tent Project at Egerton University has established a children's library at Egerton University. The main objectives of the library are to:

- Avail a conducive atmosphere and suitable environment for continuous reading in order to sustain the reading habit;
- Provide access to a wide variety of reading materials;
- Instill proper reading skills
- Train children in proper retrieval and information seeking skills
- Expose children to the computer as a partner to reading

At the project library the children are exposed to skills to enable them be good users of libraries and in aspects that will enable them to appreciate the long reading and learning road ahead of them. The project staff and teachers help the children to select books, read and solve word problems.

Library Visits in 2001 and 2003



From the above chart, it can be noted that there has been an increase in the use of the library between the year 2001 and 2003. the months of April, August and December are school holidays and number of visits go up as more children use the library and participate in the holiday Reading/IT Camp.

The project has since its inception been able to accomplish the following:

- Establish functional school libraries in at least ten schools in Njoro division, Nakuru district of Kenya;

- Introduce a weekly reading hour in the ten schools;
- Establish a children's library with an information technology (I.T) laboratory at Egerton University;
- Organize reading tent events in various schools in Njoro division;
- Introduce the computer as a partner to reading through I.T sessions in schools in Njoro division;
- Organizes workshops for teachers on the setting up and running school libraries and on the teaching of reading;
- Organizes holiday reading/IT camps for children during every school holiday, to sustain the reading habit;
- Published a handbook 'establishing and Managing School Libraries and Resource Centres.

Conclusion

Reading is the instrument for acquiring lifelong learning and reading skills. Sustainable human development can only be achieved if majority of people are literate and the reading tent approach, can be a powerful reading extension tool and an effective means of inculcating reading habits and sustaining creativity and critical thinking from younger ages.

The government of Kenya is putting structures in place to ensure that a sound reading culture is deep rooted in all primary schools in the country. Some of these structures include the introduction of free education at primary school level and the introduction of the textbook project which has an allowance for the purchase of readers towards the development of school libraries and the promotion of reading skills.

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