

Accessing the world through promotion of a reading culture in Zimbabwe Rural Schools: the case for Mavhurazi Primary School

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Theme: Information, Innovation and Impact of School Libraries

Successful promotion of a reading culture in rural schools requires the participation of the rural community who need more education on the importance of a library and how it is a central asset that can empower them to be productive citizens of their country. In rural Zimbabwe, there are few libraries existing in schools, creating a situation which has impacted negatively on the literacy and reading levels of the poor marginalized rural children. This paper therefore explores the collaboration and partnership of a rural community, parents, schools, local traditional leaders and international trust organizations in promoting a reading culture in schools by encouraging the community to develop an interest in books as resources that can transform their livelihoods. The author on his first visit met with important stakeholders such as School Heads, School Development Committee who are the parents' representatives, the District Education Inspector, local Chief and several Headmen, Village Councillor, local businesspeople and health workers. Five Schools which the author identified through Mavhurazi School Head's assistance were targeted in order to elicit response on a culture of reading. The paper will offer recommendations on the best way forward regarding use of the books by rural learners of Mudzi district, and then concludes by examining best methods to adopt to promote reading and bring about better performance in schools by learners. The promotion of rural adult literacy is another issue to be examined by this paper as well as the need to support the Primary and Secondary School Ministry's concerted efforts to bring on board the concept of adult literacy to the poor rural folks of Mudzi district in rural Zimbabwe.

Keywords: Rural Schools, Rural Mudzi, Books, Rural Learners, Rural School Library, Mavhurazi Primary School

Introduction

Creating a reading culture in rural schools is very essential in order to encourage school children to become engaged and motivated readers. It takes time and requires commitment to develop a reading culture. Creating a reading culture requires on the part of rural school heads and their teachers to know why a reading culture is important, to understand its impact on student achievement, and to fully support the library and its resources, services and programmes. It is not an understatement that reading culture among rural Zimbabwean children is tragically deficient when compared to the urban settings. In this era of high level technological development, it is disheartening to note that reading culture is missing as the younger ones are now engrossed much more in the daily village chores such as cattle herding, firewood fetching, or hours searching for water to drink. The challenges militating against effective promotion of reading culture in the rural child include the followings: The internet trend, lack of academic competitions and schools, non-integration of story-telling in school curriculum and high costs of children's literature among others.

Reading is a worldwide phenomenon that has the capacity to promote development as well as instill discipline in the individual. For one to play a significant role in contemporary society, the ability to read and write is a must. The survival of any society therefore is a function of the extent to which that society is involved in reading and literacy

Background and Information Trigger

Mudzi District is found in Mashonaland East in rural Zimbabwe. To date no child in Mudzi District has qualified for the Government science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) programme due to the dilapidated state of schools in the area, which is able evidence of the lack of adequate reading material in all subjects taught at primary school level. Established in 1967, Mavhurazi Primary School is one of the schools which celebrated its 50th anniversary last year. With an enrolment of more than 500 students it is sad to note that this is one of the most disadvantaged schools in the District.

This paper was triggered by this author's first visit to this school in mid-March when, having been granted permission by the District Schools Inspector, organized a meeting to appraise the various stakeholders (including village headmen, councillors, school heads and teachers from other schools, local health workers, and local businesspeople) on the value and importance of setting up libraries in their schools. Furthermore, the importance of a school library committee as the backbone of a properly run school library and to act as the advisory body of the school library was advocated, providing information on the best way to run and manage the facility.

The overwhelming positive and passionate response whereby village headmen, councillors, local health workers and local rural businesspeople, school heads and teachers braved the chilly weather as early as four o'clock morning triggered this author to engage them and collaborate with Aussie Books for Zimbabwe to help stimulate and reinforce a reading culture within the school and school surrounding community.

Research Motivation

Two months earlier what started as an e-mail conversation from Aussie Books for Zimbabwe founder seeking this author's services to go on a school library advocacy drive ignited an interest in carrying out a short case study of the state of schools and reading within the Mavhurazi rural area cluster in Mudzi District. Through the assistance of the Mavhurazi Primary School Head, the author was able to get a sample of five (5) schools. This research investigated the extent to which reading culture is being developed.

Problem Structure

The promotion of a reading culture in Zimbabwean Schools was taken up in the mid 1990s when the Zimbabwe Book Development Council went on a nationwide campaign to strengthen and promote readership with programmes such as the National Reading Campaign, the National Reading Week project which aimed to nurture the love of reading in people and encourages them

to become readers for life and to broaden their experience of books . However, over the years with the folding up of this donor funded programme and, reading culture is not being practiced because of the non-availability of reading material for all grades, and the lack of seriousness with regards to instilling a reading culture on the part of school heads and their rural primary school teachers. This study, therefore, seeks to confirm the lack of a reading culture and attempts that are being made to address this lack in rural schools. The study further seeks to reveal the magnitude of efforts that are being made in five selected rural schools in the Mudzi district of Zimbabwe.

Methodology

The researcher conducted qualitative research in the form of a survey through the use of questionnaires, interviews and document analysis as data collecting instruments. Information necessary to achieve the objectives of this research was gathered from a sample population of fifty-four respondents. The research method used to support the approach to this study is a case study focusing on Mudzi District of Zimbabwe consisting of five schools in the Mavhurazi cluster namely, Mavhurazi, Katsande, Nyakuchena, Kambanje and Makaha Schools. The research technique approaches used are questionnaires, which sampled five (5) school heads out of a population of twenty (20) for quantitative and qualitative data collection. The research also relied on literature reviewed from other scholarly sources regarding the promotion of a reading culture and its impact on learner performance in Zimbabwe and other African countries in southern Africa as well as the world over.

Literature Review

1. The Importance of Reading

Reading according to Yilben and Kitgkka (2008) is a basic life skill as well as the corner stone of a child's success in school and throughout life. Reading, therefore, is an aspect of learning and as such should not be overlooked. The act of reading plays an important role in creating independent learners. Reading is thus indispensable in sustaining the development of any society.

It follows that the importance of reading in a nation's development as pointed out by Mefor (2010) cannot be overlooked. Reading is an essential tool for lifelong learning; consequently it is important for everyone to develop the rudiments of reading and the culture of reading so as to flourish in life (Igbokwe, Obidike & Ezeji, 2012).

In spite of the acknowledged importance of reading as a culture, it has become obvious that rural Zimbabwean children no longer read. They only read when they have examinations to write; outside that, reading has no meaning for them. Students hardly make use of the school libraries, in most cases, if they exist at all. Where a school library is available it is not stocked with relevant information sources.

Essentially a school library is expected to assist in promoting reading culture among rural Zimbabwean children. The school library and school administrators can use various strategies to promote reading culture. As pointed out by Gbadamosi (2007), reading requires books; good reading habits promotes effective use of library book resources and effective use of library book resources has the inherent advantage of promoting good reading habits.

Since Zimbabwe according to Bhowa and Kutiwa (2010) cannot be regarded as a reading nation because reading is considered a leisure activity and an expensive sojourn, it becomes imperative for communities (local and diasporas) to explore ways to bring in materials to focus on setting up reading spaces that will encourage such activities as book talks and story hours.

There is a need for school libraries to devise an effective means of promoting reading culture since school libraries are custodians of school information resources. Librarians must make the effort to take the book back to the people through book talks, story hours and displays. Book talks (reading-oriented) are organized so that children can talk about the interesting books they have read by describing characters and drawing similarities. Story telling (folklore-oriented) on the other hand

is not new to rural Zimbabwean children and school libraries can explore this avenue to stimulate reading among the rural child. Book talks, story hours and displays can be used to inspire independent reading among students. displays as well can be a powerful means of advertising the books available in school libraries display helps to showcase books available in school libraries.

The issue at stake is that that libraries are faced with challenges since the trend of seeing reading as a noble act is non-existent in our contemporary society; coupled with daily rural survival skills, reading is no longer seen as part of our culture. No wonder, Chisita (2007) sharply pointed out that the culture of reading and reading habit formation has been bedeviled by the complex interwoven effects of human attitude, electronic media and telecommunication development.

2. Reading Culture

Reading as noted by Anyaemene and Adebola (2011) is a crucial learning activity. Reading to them boosts academic achievement, facilitates knowledge for self-reliance, and equips individuals to function meaningfully and effectively in the scheme of things concerning positive contributions to national development. This implies that the extent to which a nation develops is a function of the reading culture of the citizens of such a nation. It means that reading is a determining factor for national development.

A reading culture as rightly pointed out by Anyansina (2011) is imperative in this age for children who are the future leaders of the nation. He contends that only extensive reading can make acquisition of knowledge possible because it is through reading that children broaden their understanding of life.

In reality, reading culture is an attitude that is developed over a period of time. Reading culture, therefore, is not hereditary; hence it does not run through the genes from parents to children. Reading culture generally no longer exists in Zimbabwe by and large, whether urban or rural. The norm is that in an urban setting and to an extent the rural populace, the child prefers buying WWF/ DVDs to buying books and when they are tired of watching, they go to cyber cafes to browse the

internet on mountain climbing. Reading culture in Zimbabwe, therefore, is very low in comparison to other African states and developed countries.

Findings and Discussion

Five (5) school heads responded to the questionnaire on strategies that can be used in their schools with respect to promoting a reading culture. In terms of gender ratio analysis, 3% school participants were male and 2% were female.

3. Challenges to a Reading Culture

However, there are various (too many to mention) reasons for the poor reading culture among rural Zimbabwean children; the harsh economic environment is a major constraint militating against reading culture. Similarly, other multi-varied factors include: change in Zimbabwean value system, economic hardship that is prevalent in many homes, astronomical prices of books and other information materials as well as the cost of publishing books which is very high.

It is clear from the above assertions that there is a need for rural communities and their schools and librarians to devise an effective means of promoting reading culture since school libraries are custodians of school information resources. Kumar, Ansari and Shukla, (2010) affirm that one of the major goals of the school library is to inspire a love for reading in order to promote a reading culture among users. In view of this, a community must make the effort to take the book back to the rural child and this can only be achieved if appropriate strategies are devised and applied.

Strategies and Methods to Improve the Reading Culture

The following strategies amongst others may improve the reading culture.

- Creation of a library period in the school time table (corner libraries)
- Formulation and implementation of a viable National Information Policy (NIP).
- Establishment of school/community libraries.

However, it is sad to note that the number of strategies used by teachers in rural Zimbabwe to teach reading skills is not encouraging with the implication being that learners are not aware of the skills to apply while reading. At primary school level most popular strategies are questioning, retelling and summarizing, connecting text to life experiences and visualization.

Coupled with this is inadequate attention to the requirement of the potential readership which suggests a need for picture story books and books in the local language and a disregard for the important role of the illustration and designer in the production of books for children.

Bhowa (2007) identifies unavailability of school libraries and more importantly, lack of funding, where it exists it all. Similarly, the state of facilities such as libraries, books, journals and furniture that are helpful for developing good reading skills and culture are grossly inadequate. Again, Chisita (2011) pointed out that there is no clear cut policy on funding school libraries and so these libraries are generally ill-equipped, lacking proper organization, qualified staff and relevant information resources such as books and other educational materials.

In view of all the identified problems, it is imperative that school teachers and teacher librarians should devise means of promoting reading culture among students which may include story hour, books talks and displays. Children and students in schools where there are no libraries can be taken on excursions to libraries in other schools or in their locality; they can also be taken to book exhibitions or fairs as such visits can be used to introduce the children to the library.

A school of thought suggests that school libraries encourage children in the use of books and help to develop a reading culture which improves the academic performance of children and also helps them develop knowledge outside the classroom environment.

The case of Mavhurazi School



A Cluster Meeting of Schools in Mavhurazi

The case study however does not include programmes that promote reading culture or a regular means of inculcating reading culture into the students. No strategies such as story hour, book talks and displays for promoting reading culture are in place.

In order to come up with a viable method to bring about interest in instilling a reading culture in the five identified Schools in the Mavhurazi cluster a meeting was held with relevant stakeholders to appraise them on the value and importance of setting up school libraries in

schools and highlighting the School Library Committee as the backbone of a properly run school library and how the culture of reading would be encouraged in schools to help make the school library more effective in meeting the teaching and learning process, promoting the use of books, and ultimately the use of the library.

Book Mobilisation and Presentation at Mavhurazi School



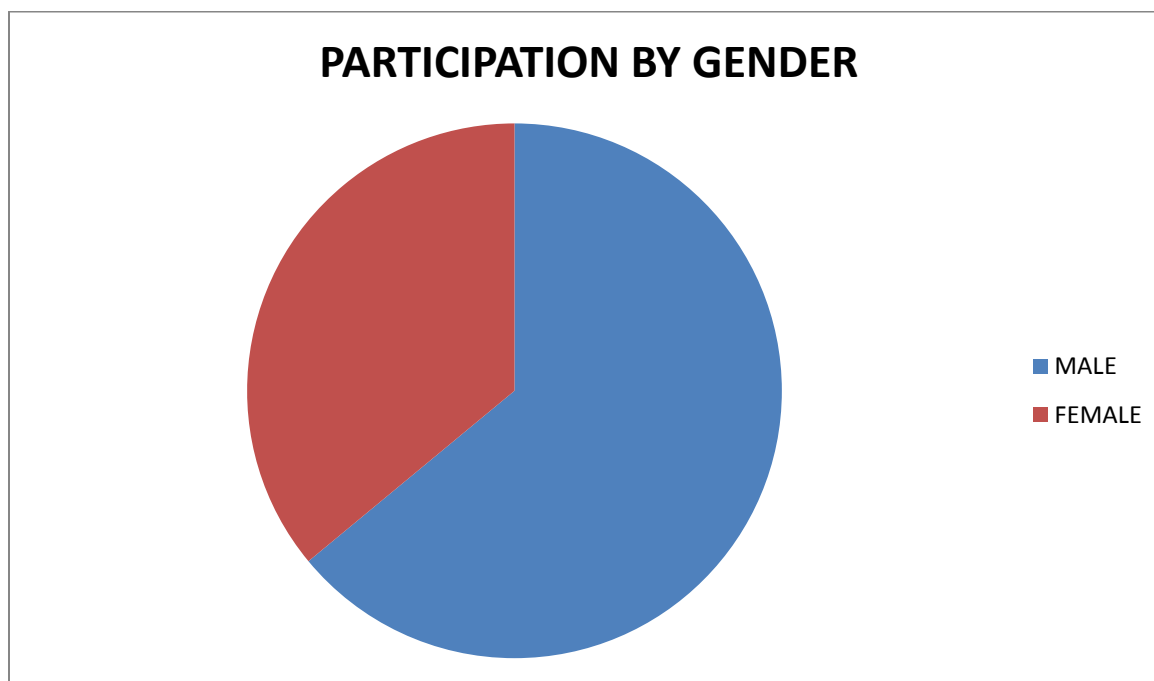
The author gives a speech during the Book Presentation at Mavhurazi School

It would be foolhardy to encourage the culture of reading in remote rural schools without ensuring the supply of the much needed books. It then took one month of intense preparation to organize the clearance of books from Australia and organize a Book Presentation Ceremony

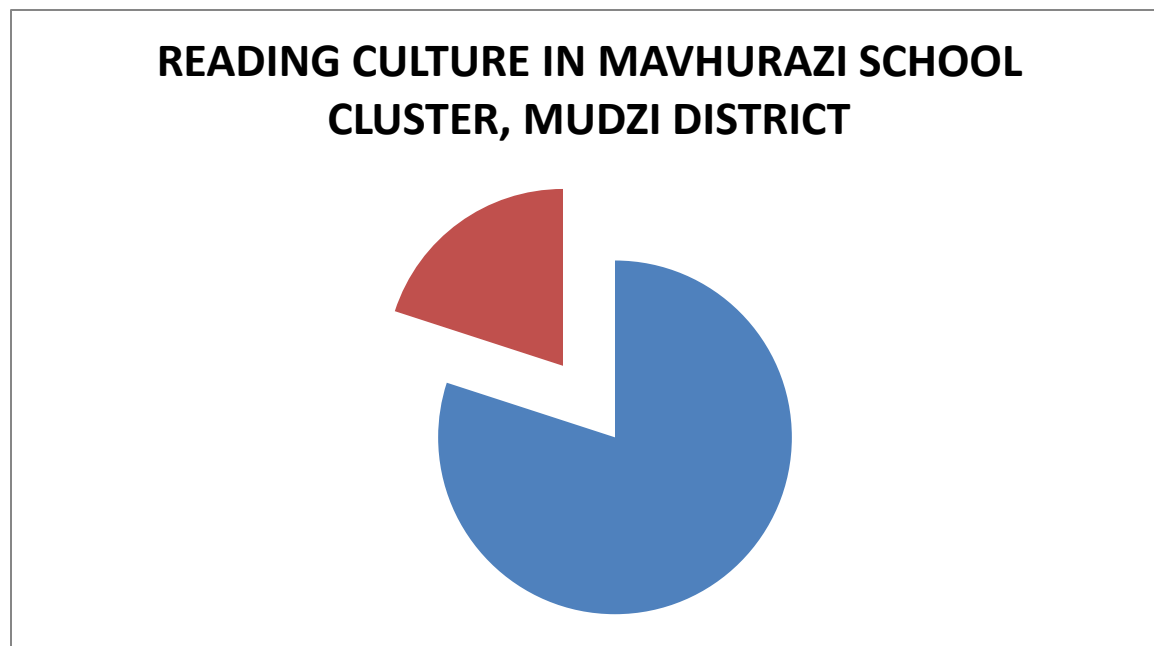
where each school received a small starter pack of a thousand books for children to read. The first consignment was presented on 14 April Good Friday at Mavhurazi Primary. Six dedicated volunteers donated their time, expertise, money and ideas and went to Mavhurazi School to witness the book presentation ceremony with the hope of empowering and transforming the lives of Mavhurazi rural area children.

Major Research Findings

SCHOOL HEADS PARTICIPATION BY GENDER



MALE	60%
FEMALE	40%



The chart above shows that **90%** in blue of the schools in Mavhurazi School Cluster have no reading culture. Only **10%** in red of the selected schools has a better reading culture as there are a few reading materials. Upon asking the school heads why this is the case, the following were found to be the reasons why most schools are not cultivating a culture of reading:

- Teacher work load
- Inadequate and irrelevant reading material
- No library building to encourage school children to go and read
- No reading period for storytelling
- Lack of reading material

Conclusion

It can be concluded that strategies such as story hour, book talks and displays if put in practice can yield rapid results but the teacher librarians lack professional experience and trainings. There is an urgent need to bring the book back to the people; it will take those with the book to bring it

back and librarians are custodians of the book irrespective of the form and as such are in a better position to ensure that the rural Zimbabwean child imbibes the reading culture.

Recommendations

In view of the identified challenges, the following recommendations are hereby put forward:

1. Integration of story hour, book talks and displays into the school curriculum:

Efforts should be made to ensure that story hour, book talks and displays are integrated into the school curriculum as this will help to instill reading culture into the Zimbabwean child.

2. Provision of relevant and current books:

You can't just tell somebody to read when there is nothing to read. There is a need for provision of relevant information materials in school libraries, more especially ICT oriented library services.

3. Recruitment of qualified teacher librarians:

It is a common adage that you cannot give what you don't have, therefore school proprietors/heads should ensure that priority is given to employing qualified teacher librarians. If the library is seen as an integral component of the educational system then the teacher librarian should also be recognized. A biology teacher no matter the level of intelligence cannot do the job of a medical doctor; therefore, let us not allow those running the school system to devalue our profession.

4. Re-orientation for the parents:

The parents of the children in our contemporary society should be given proper orientation on the importance of reading in the life of their children. The application of technology to our educational system should not in any way over-ride the place of reading culture. The internet trend, home video syndrome and phone addiction cannot be effectively addressed without the co-operation of the parents of the school children.

5. Initiate and host events in the library: The librarian can initiate events to promote reading and encourage the school community to host events in the school library, such as reading aloud to groups so that children of all reading abilities share the experience of the story, award ceremonies, literary lunches and special events like community celebrations. Reading challenges and incentives with targets and rewards can be used to encourage and excite readers of all levels

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