

Program Report

Public Library Programming for the Young Adult Reader: The Sierra Leone Experience

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Young adults form a significant proportion of library users all over the world. In Sierra Leone, however, this group of users is the most easily neglected in terms of collection development and the provision of library services. As this article explores public library services to young adult readers in

Sierra Leone, it notes the characteristics of young adults, provides an overview of public library services in Sierra Leone, and outlines the programs provided in meeting the needs of this user group to meet the goal of service for all without distinction.

Introduction

Sierra Leone is located on the West Coast of Africa, bounded on northwest and northeast by the Republic of Guinea; on the south and southeast by the Republic of Liberia and on the west by the Atlantic Ocean. The country is divided into four major administrative areas, namely The Eastern Province; The Northern Province; The Southern Province; and the Western Area. The country has an area of about 72,000 square kilometres and extends from latitude 7 degrees north to 10 degrees north and from longitude 10 degrees west and 14 degrees west. There are over twelve different ethnic groups; Krio is the *lingua franca* while English is the official language. The 2004 national census placed the country's population at 4,963,298.

Sierra Leone's human, development and social indicators are about the worst in the world; they include widespread illiteracy, low life expectancy and a high child mortality rate. The adult literacy rate is estimated at 30%. The decade-long civil war

(1991–2001) caused extensive damage to an already inadequate economic and social infrastructure, thus leading to a further deterioration in the living standards of a hard-pressed population. What is more the country continues to face an unsustainable large external debt estimated at over US\$1.5 billion which militates against a sustainable economic recovery. The Sierra Leone government's developmental programs are therefore prioritized and supporting libraries has not been a priority.

The young adult reader

The young adult is a person experiencing the period of development between childhood and adulthood. Often referred to as the adolescence stage, this is a period of transition and rapid change; one characterized by accelerated physical, physiological and cognitive development and by new and changing social demands and expectations (World Book Encyclopedia 2000). In Sierra Leone young

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adults form a little over 30% of the population, most of whom are enrolled in schools and colleges and are the most vulnerable group in society. In the country's decade-long civil war (1991–2001), young adults played a leading role in taking up arms. Similarly they are found engaged in many social activities and are greatly influenced by western lifestyles. Notwithstanding, most of these have a flair for library use and very often visit these institutions either for information finding, passing idle hours, reading or preparing for examinations.

Among the varied types of library users and potential clientele in Sierra Leone, as in most developing countries, young adults are the most easily and often neglected in terms of collection development and the provision of services in many library settings. The philosophy of public librarians in any community is to attempt, through books, to take each individual, whatever his reading level, and develop him to his full potential as a reader and widening interest and deepening his interest and understanding. This goal could not be reached easily by shelving books alone but accomplished through direct contact with young adults.

Young adults in Sierra Leone are found mostly in secondary schools and tertiary institutions and are among the steadfast and heaviest users of public library services, although such use tends to fall sharply as they leave college or school. This special group of readers continue to create problems to library staff, paramount of which are: they often present discipline problems to library staff; they sometimes ask difficult questions pertaining to their fields of study that require extensive reference and reader aid, which is sometimes demanding on library staff.

The unique way in which the Sierra Leonean society views young adults and the different ways in which information useful to these clientele is produced, disseminated and collected by the public library service are factors that complicate delivery of suitable library service to these clientele. Part of the difficulty in trying to serve this group of clientele is that those library staff that determine policy do not share a common understanding of the features and needs of such clientele. There is every reason for young adults to be served as in early life that a taste for books and the habit of using libraries and their resources can be most easily acquired.

Public library service in Sierra Leone

Public library service in Sierra Leone is the mandate of the Sierra Leone Library Board (SLLB), established in 1959 following the *Government white paper on educational development* in 1958. The functions of the SLLB are:

1. To support and reinforce programs of adult and fundamental education.
2. To provide effective services for children and young people, including requisite services for schools.
3. To provide much needed information and reference services.
4. To promote and stimulate reading for pleasure and recreation.
5. To provide, where needed, adequate services for special groups, that is women and girls, language groups... (SLLB annual report 1959/1962).

In practical terms the program outlined in the White Paper called for not only the establishment of a national/public library service nationwide but also the supply of books to primary school children and teachers, and advisory assistance to Secondary School and Teacher Training College libraries, which enrol most young adults in the country.

The SLLB presently has regional and branch libraries in most provincial towns like Bo, Kenema, Bonthé, Kailahun, Kabala and Kissy, Greater Freetown, that cater for people from all walks of life. In addition to the provision of book and non-book materials, the library allows organized visits by schools, organizes book displays and quiz competition for secondary school pupils, mounts exhibition, displays and allows its foyer and conference room to be used for public occasions. All these are moves to encourage young adults and other interested library clientele to use the library as membership is free.

Programs for young adults

The young adult librarian is an out-of-school educator that serves the cultural needs of the young adult users out and beyond formal classroom instruction. In Sierra Leone the public library is looked upon as the people's university, and one of its functions has been to provide facilities and materials for independent study. To assume its

rightful place in the country's educational system public library services, and especially the services devoted to young adult clientele, are meant to lure this group of users constantly to use the library for life. In the headquarter library in Freetown, public library service to young adults is integrated to the organization, and cooperation and consultative relationship exists with the other areas of service, namely Reference, Adult Lending and Cataloguing Departments; while in provincial public libraries this service is incorporated in the Adult Lending Department

Public library staff are also concerned with the relation of their services to school programs with especial reference to developing children and young adults' reading ability, use of libraries for life-long education, and preparing pupils for such public examinations as Basic Education Certificate Examinations (BECE), and West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examinations (WASSCE). Hence a Special Textbook Collection in the varied Reference Departments in these libraries was established geared towards the attainment of the aforementioned goals. Similarly young adults are served in the Adult Lending Department, which continues to give advisory services and serve their recreational needs as books meant for young adults are inter-filed with those of adult collection. Staff are instructed to treat young adults as *adults* rather than young people with special problems.

Remarkable in public library' programs to young adults is the organization of book talks. These are brief and inspiring and capable of transmitting the speaker's own pleasure in reading, noting the rate and span of young adults' interest and responses. Such talks are given by library staff, students and visitors from the vicinity who are engaged to assist public library staff on scheduled dates. The program is held either in the library to allow young adults to browse and select books for themselves or in school.

Book discussion groups and book clubs are organized in schools and colleges. Young panellists with above-average reading ability are involved in such discussions with young adult librarians serving as moderators. These activities are meant to serve as preliminary training grounds for young adult clientele.

Frequent book displays, booklists, exhibits and book days where young adults are exposed to a variety of publications especially those by re-

nowned local, regional and international authors are part of public library programs. Arrangements are made for interested young adults to borrow books and later return them to the library. Subject programs are pre-planned and hot topics such as HIV/AIDS, agriculture, poverty alleviation, corruption and conflict resolution in society are elaborated on with speakers drawn from staff that work in these areas, experienced teachers and lecturers, government officials local educators, theatre activists and those that relate to this age group. Such activities are complimented by films in case speakers fail to turn up.

Live music, drama and poetry form part of young adult programs in the public library. These are organized free of charge for young adults in the library, using renowned national musicians, actors and poets, with the theme centred on promoting reading and use of the library by young adults in society. Often young adult librarians alert young clientele interested in creative writing and poetry to be involved in writing plays and poems read in schools at devotions and copies kept in the school library for easy reach. Young adults are encouraged to review publications, especially prescribed school texts, guided by young adult librarian and teachers and copies of such reviews are availed in the public library and eventually sent to schools. This is meant to create delight and provide impressive recommendations to their peers. All these programs are publicized both in school and the public. Using such materials as bookmarks and fliers, programs are publicized ahead of time by announcement at morning/afternoon devotions in school. Some senior schools encourage pupils to write 'journals', which are recordings of everyday activities in school and, information about pending programs are included in these journals for the attention of staff and pupils. These programs are geared towards making the public library an exciting centre for cultural and educational development.

Conclusion

Designing programs for young adults requires an understanding of their needs and a vision of what needs to be done to serve them. The multi-dimensional problems facing the SLLB have not so much hindered public library service to young adult cli-

John Abdul Kargbo

entele. Since the country is in a post-war reconstruction period, public library staff perceive the programs offered to young adults as providing some kind of passageway to a traumatized group of clientele. The fact is that the school library serves the school, while the public library serves the community; and there is every reason in designing programs to meet the needs of young

adult clientele as the SLLB is bent on achieving its goal of 'service for all without distinction'.

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