



**Children's Library Services in the least developed country and its collection: case study of Malawi**

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**Abstract:**

*The purpose of the paper is to provide an overview about the Malawi's Public Libraries as they pay a significant attention to the development of children's libraries. There is a gradual acknowledgement that has enabled librarians of least developed country like Malawi to be accepted as 'educators'.*

*Librarians as educators has played a greater role of introducing new ways of making the children's library a conducive environment for promoting high quality reading and learning opportunities. Currently, we have noted that librarians have a big task of meeting the changing needs of seeking information by children due to rapid development of electronic media. The growing production of radio sets, television sets, and computer games among others has created a problem for children in least developed country to look at his or her traditional sources of information like story telling, drum or tom-tom beating as inferior and dull.*

*The Librarian has to make sure that the collection has relevancy to the needs of children in their early learning process which may focus at the children's early exposure to pictorial books, toys that depict things found in their surroundings.*

*The paper then will focus on socio-economic factors and cultural diversity that has made the Children's Librarian in Malawi to cope up with the changes in the information delivery to children based on the studies that were done by some Malawi Public Libraries information gurus.*

*Traditional beliefs of some parts of the country Malawi including digital photo illustrations will also be incorporated in order to show some of the lessons learnt in order to come up with relevant collections for young ones.*

**Keyword(s): Children Library, Children Librarianship –Malawi, Public Library- Malawi.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Public libraries as generally defined in the library profession that they are a type of a library that is open to the general public and do not have a well-defined clientele that is being served. However, a public library does establish a section on children in order to act as a place where parents, children and librarians can talk to each other, can as well be free for children to choose, explore and have fun by accessing books, toys, new technologies and listen as well as learn the librarian's good stories.

## **MALAWI PUBLIC LIBRARIES**

Malawi is a least developed country found in Southern part of Africa and it is a member of the regional grouping known as Southern Africa Development Community (SADC). It is bounded in the North by Tanzania, East and South by Mozambique and North-West by Zambia. It is also a member of the African Union (AU), the Commonwealth and United Nations. Currently; there are 13.1 million people in Malawi. Male population is at 6.4 million (49%) and Females at 6.7 million (51%). (<http://www.nso.malawi.net>)

Malawi gained its Independence from the British in 1964, Republic status in 1966 and embraced a fully multiparty system of governance in 1994.

The formation of the National Library Service in Malawi after gaining a Republic status from the colonial rule became the only public library service that was funded by the Malawi Government. It was established under the 1967 Act of Parliament which became effective in 1968 when the first Director and Library Board were appointed. The main function of National Library Service is to provide a free public library service to the people of Malawi irrespective of their race, colour or creed. (Ngaunje, 1985)

Despite Malawi attaining its independence and republic, other public libraries are run by the British Council and the American Embassy-Public Affairs Section. These public libraries originated from the colonial era administration when the British colonial administration through the British Council established a first library in Blantyre in 1951 and went on open others in Zomba in 1962 and in Lilongwe in 1963. As for the American Embassy opened a library in Blantyre in 1970.

Since the National Library Service of Malawi was established in 1967, numerous public libraries have been set up in various districts in order to serve the public in accessing educational, developmental and recreational information. Currently, Malawi has twenty eight districts which the National Library Service has managed to establish public libraries. However, most of the well organized and stocked libraries are found in the urban areas of the said districts.

## **Collection Development**

Johnson (2004) states that 'performance measurement should occur as an integral part of working with the library's public. The Librarian or Information specialist seeks not only to learn the users needs, wants, demands and interests, but also the extent to which collection resources are meeting these preferences'

Children's library which specializes in providing books usually written especially for children and is attached to pre-primary and primary schools. Its primary objective is to supplement the teaching of school children. A children's library provides its services to children who are eager to read and also to backward children who read with difficulty and who require visual aids and kinds of incentives to study. Normally, children's libraries contain more of audio-visual and graphic materials that may include photographs, pictures, diagrams, realia (real objects), etc. The other materials that are available in children's libraries are books, magazines, etc. (Luban, 1998). The main purposes of children's libraries, according to Luban (1998) argued that they are similar to those of school libraries and include the following:

- Encourage reading habits of children.
- Develop the feeling of learning from books without a teacher among children.
- Break down the gap school calendars create that prevents children from learning when they are on holidays.

### **Children's Library Section.**

The Malawi National Library Service as a public library has created in its all libraries in Malawi a section on children's library. This development has been done inline with the fulfillment of UNESCO/IFLA Public Library Manifesto adopted in 1994 which proclaims UNESCO's belief that the Public Library is a living force for education, culture and information, and as an essential agent for fostering of peace and spiritual welfare through minds of men and women. It is a guide or a policy that a national or public library has to base its establishment.

A Librarian at Malawi National Library Service Public Libraries network do act as educators because of their role they play of collecting books designed to encourage reading culture among young learners to develop language skills and comprehension. This practice has also been enhanced by the introduction of story telling sessions at the children's library by the Children's Librarian. These sessions has enabled the librarian to impart knowledge to the young ones as a supplement to the books, toys and games.

These story telling sessions really give the children a rare opportunity to listen to those interesting tales that strengthens there listening skills. Some of the stories are from the older people that were used by them in their school days. Folk tales who consists of legends, music, oral history, proverbs, jokes, popular beliefs and fairy tales of traditions of particular cultures, group or set of practices enrich children's understanding of the world around them.

On March, 2011 a local newspaper "The Weekend Times-March 11-13,2011 p.13"quoted the Malawi National Library Service Branch Librarian for Blantyre City Public Library that she "felt writing alone was not enough to encourage modern children of Malawi to appreciate their own cultures and traditions including knowing those juicy tales that strengthen their listening skills" end of quote.

The remarks made by the Branch Librarian clearly shows that young persons needs diverse approach on the format of the information materials that may be used to make children cultivate their interest to read and learn.

It was also timely for the branch to have the **Mother and Child Project** that has added better dimension on diversion made to make the children access information through their parents and the Librarian.

As Achitabwino (2005) highlighted the different approaches that were done by other developing countries like in Kenya they tried to use a Mobile Reading Tent. Such reading provisions provided learning arena for all children, whether in school or out of school, economically disadvantaged or economically affluent. Children's were also able to be creative, tell stories, take part in debates, play with innovative toys and develop their potentials. The same thing was also done in Kampala, Uganda here an NGO called Pearls of Africa established a Children's Resource Library for the physically challenged children to access information in various formats conducive to their challenge. Oyarzun, G. et al (2009) also stresses the importance of children library designing that attracts or promotes the use of the library by both children and parents. The Santiago Public Library in Chile everything is carefully thought: the areas for babies are implemented with spaces for pushchairs, some collections are for parent's interest, designated rooms for changing nappies and toilets.

### **Mother and Child Project**

As mentioned earlier in this paper, National Library Service of Malawi embarked on a special literally project which is being sponsored by NORAD. Its main objective is to target under- five children through their mothers.

The National Library Service has this project as a complementing activity to what they had already introduced in all their public libraries of having a story telling sessions. Currently, the project is been piloted in Lilongwe the headquarters of Malawi National Library Service and in Blantyre the commercial city respectively.

Basically, what happens is that mothers are taught various literary works for them to impart the knowledge to their children at home. The whole idea is to construct a powerful literary foundation to young learners for them to become knowledgeable citizens. As for Lilongwe, children from the surrounding ghettos' are encouraged to go the library with children where the Children's Librarian attend to them. Apart from recitals, traditional dances, painting and games are included as a way of making the children not to sleep.

However, Librarians do bemoans the booming of technology as the main stumbling block to the considerable enjoyment of literary works among children in least developed country like Malawi. Children are highly fascinated with electronic gadgets like electronic toy computers among others.

Apart from a guardian who seems to have run out of interest to tell their children those fascinating and exciting tales, the National Library Service has resuscitated the interest in the parents of young ones to relay or impart knowledge to their children.

## **Mzuzu University Children's Library**

Mzuzu University Children's Library is found in the northern part of Malawi and was established with funding from Beit Trust as well as Mzuzu University. It was officially opened by Mr. T.M. Johnson of Beit Trust on 14<sup>th</sup> April 2004. The library opens from Monday to Friday. The Mission statement of Mzuzu University Children's Library is to "Promote information literacy, develop reading culture, and create appropriate reading and learning environment for all its patrons through the provision of information resources and activities in all formats that respond to 21<sup>st</sup> century information needs".

Mzuzu University Children's Library provides such library services as reading service, reference service, storytelling and writing, entertainment and dancing, and sports. Dhamabaworn (2004), concurs by saying that every children's library needs to provide a playground and this area should be used for various kinds of creative activities such as story-telling, arts, drawing, painting, music shows and concerts.

The users of Mzuzu University Children's Library are mostly children from Mzuzu City and the surrounding areas who are school going.

Other users are brought from schools under the guidance of their English teacher. Some users are children from orphanages around Mzuzu City who uses the facility under the supervision of their Matron or Patron.

### **Marketing Children's Library Services**

Children are conducted on an orientation on the first day they set their foot into the library. The Librarian does show the children the type of library materials that are stocked for them like pictorial books, television set and computer games among others. The Librarian and their teachers or matrons also do carry out story telling sessions as one way of inculcating cultural values in them as some have grown up in towns or cities without knowing what the rural Malawian set up is all about. Yesner and Murry (1993), stated that children's libraries that aim at providing educational resources and services to both school children and teachers stand much chance of improving academic performance in children compared to those children's libraries which only provide educational resources to children. This is because by providing educational resources and services to both school children and teachers, both school children and teachers tend to have access to the resources and services and they work together for achievement of one goal which is the improved academic performance in children. Markless and Streatfield (2006), clearly explains that pupils and teachers need to work hand in hand for improved academic performance.

Currently, Mzuzu University Children's Library has a positive impact in improving academic performance in children. This was discovered by Mzuzu University Children's Librarian by making a comparison between previous academic performance and current academic performance of the users who have been members for more than one year. Some of these children were illiterate but now they are literate making them to have much chance of sustainable improved academic performance.

According to the study carried by Malunda (2010) he found that , Mzuzu University Children's Library improves academic performance in children. However a lot need to be done because in spite of improving academic performance in children Mzuzu University children's Library has some services which are being provided with the aim of improving academic performance in children but they are not. Such library services or activities include entertainment and dancing, role playing, and open days. These services/activities can lead to improved academic performance in children if they are well planned and promoted so that the users are aware of these services and make full use of them.

Mzuzu University Children Library needs to provide more text books recommendable by Malawi primary school curriculum. Alexander, Entwistle and Olsen (2007) concurs with this point that for achievement of better academic performance by children's libraries, children libraries need to provide their services in line with the curriculum for school their client attend.It further recommended that it was important to

- Make sure that all services/activities intended to improve academic performance in children are achieving the intention.

Operate extramural services to reach out those who do not manage to access the services at the library since this is the only children's library in the northern region of Malawi.

Provide more text books that are recommendable by Malawi primary school curriculum

## **Conclusion**

This paper has shown that children's Librarian can provide the nucleus of the prospective library users at a later age and occupation. The opportunity to learn and access information at Malawi National Library services Public Librarian and the Mzuzu University Children's Lifelong skills and knowledge that allow them to participate in national development. Note worthy, also is the fact that the activities and programmes lined up for children at these Librarian like the Mother and Child Project and the Story telling sessions are in line with the rapid changes children and librarians face in the modern world of technology and collection development.

Despite that, children's librarianship seems to be neglected because of its vulnerability. It is important that Africa in particular Malawi should strive to make these vulnerable and under privileged children in our society that are taken care and their rights are observed.

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