Before School Reading Club—Seeta, Uganda

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I. INTRODUCTION

Although millions of books are donated to schools throughout Africa each year¹, and others have been purchased by school districts, these books do not always make it to the students. Book availability is not equivalent to book access. In this article, we will share observations of limited book access at a selection of primary schools in Uganda, South Africa, and various other schools in Africa. Following, we will outline a before school reading club that was developed at the Seeta Church of Uganda Primary School which helped students gain access to previously inaccessible books.

II. CHALLENGES WITH BOOK ACCESS IN A SELECTION OF AFRICAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

a. Seeta Church of Primary School – Seeta, Uganda

In 2006, while conducting a research project at the Seeta Church of Primary School, Dr. Jill Jenkins learned of two separate libraries located on school property that were being unutilized by both teachers and students (Jenkins, 2018). The first was a district Teacher Resource Center (TRC) building which contained thousands of books in English that were in impeccable condition and contained lovely illustrations and pictures (Jenkins, 2018). Teachers themselves chose not to check books out of the TRC because a) they did not have funds to pay for a taxi to visit the TRC during non-school hours, and b) if a book was lost or stolen while checked out, then the teacher themselves would be required to pay to have the book replaced.

¹ This number was concluded based on book donations listed on nonprofit websites, including Books for Africa: About Books for Africa. Retried from: https://www.booksforafrica.org/about-bfa.html
Due to these factors, the books were not utilized and instead sat on the shelves, covered in dust (Jenkins, 2018).

Another option that teachers had to utilize TRC books, was to bring students into the center to practice reading. The Headmaster of the school had given teachers permission to use the TRC in this manner, even though traditionally it was just for teacher use (Jenkins, 2018). The Headmaster explained to Dr. Jenkins that, “no teacher would use the center because of the pressure of District Exams,” (Jenkins, 2018). With the pressure for their students to perform well on these exams, teachers felt class time should be explicitly focused on studying for the exams, which left no time for reading (Jenkins, 2018).

The Seeta Church of Uganda Primary School also had a general school library. This library contained around 800 books in English under about 40 different titles (Jenkins, 2018). Teachers chose not to utilize this library for the same reasons that they chose not to utilize the TRC (Jenkins, 2018).

b. Ekuthuleni Primary School – KwaMashu, South Africa

In 2017, we worked, as representatives of Worldwide Access to Literacy, with the librarian of the Ekuthuleni Primary School to improve library book access to students. Prior to their project, children were not allowed to access the 1000 plus books on library shelves that were written in both English and Zulu (Jenkins, 2018). The only books that students were allowed to access were un-shelved books (Jenkins, 2018). If students visited the library after school, they were permitted to check out one these un-shelved books a week (Jenkins, 2018). Additionally, students spent one hour a week in the library where they read leveled readers in a group by reading ability (Jenkins, 2018). The two reasons, as both expressed by the librarian and
observed by Dr. Jenkins and Jenkins, were that a) students often do not return books to their proper place on shelves after using them, so therefore the books get mixed up on the shelves, b) during reading time, the students spend too much time browsing the shelves versus actually reading books (Jenkins, 2018).

c. Other Schools – Various Countries on the African Continent

While attending the 2015 Pan-African Literacy for All Conference in Cape Town, South Africa, spoke with two representatives of the National Book Development Council of Kenya. In conversation, they shared their experience of visiting an unnamed primary school in Kenya. During this visit the two asked the Headmaster where the Swahili books were located at. In response, “they said he pulled out a key and unlocked his desk to disclose the books,” (Jenkins, 2018).

Two years later, Dr. Jenkins led a workshop at the 2017 Pan-African Literacy for All Conference in Abuja, Nigeria; in this setting, educators shared their observations about book access in their various countries. Of this experience, Dr. Jenkins shared, “it was appalling to hear the reports of how books are not making it into the hands of the teachers and students as reported by about 25 educators from different African countries,” (Jenkins, 2018). Some of the overarching reasons for limited book access match those already expressed in this article (Jenkins, 2018).

III. BEFORE SCHOOL READING CLUB AT SEETA CHURCH OF UGANDA PRIMARY SCHOOL

In 2006, the head teacher at the Seeta Church of Uganda Primary School requested to Dr. Jenkins that she start a before school reading program for any students who arrived early to
school (Jenkins, n.d.). The original group met outside under the awnings. Each morning, Dr. Jenkins and group members would transfer books, desks, and chairs, outside for the club then transfer them back inside once the club concluded for the morning (Jenkins, 2006). The head teacher observed the dilemma and offered the TRC as a meeting location for the group (Jenkins, n.d.). The following is a description of the program in Dr. Jenkins’ words:

“The TRC was about 60 feet long and 20 feet wide with 10 benches and tables. There were two blackboards at the front and all the rest of the walls were covered with shelves holding books. The majority of the books were in English with a few in Luganda. There was a wide variety of books that looked like they had been donated. The purpose of these supplies was as a resource for teachers to support their teaching.

“Two of us started the program by inviting the children inside, encouraging them to get books to read and teaching the good readers how to read to the less able readers so they could follow along. We started out with about 20 students, but as we enriched the program with reading goals and awards, we would often go through 100 students before school started. The room held about 70 students. All backpacks were left inside the door with a volunteer student to watch those leaving to make sure no books left the room.

“We averaged about 12 student tutors to help readers and pass off students reading to earn ribbons. Every time a student read 10 books for a tutor, they received an ‘I Am a Reader’ ribbon that they attached to their uniforms and wore to school. This is how the program became so popular. Once other students saw the ribbons, they would come to school early so they could also earn ribbons to wear.” (Jenkins, n.d.).
The growth of the program from 20 to 100 students can be attributed primarily to rewards for achieving reading goals, especially the “I am a Reader” ribbons which students could wear to school and receive recognition from other students. Directions on how to make this ribbon are located in Appendix A.

Even though there was a 500% increase in student participation during the 2006 school year, the program itself was not sustainable. Dr. Jenkins oversaw the program and pushed for its success, but once she left, none of the school teachers were willing to come into school early to oversee the program (Jenkins, n.d.). An option for sustainability would have been to invite parents or other community members to volunteer to run the program (Jenkins, n.d.).

IV. CONCLUSION

One of the challenges facing schools throughout areas of Africa is helping students gain access to books that have been donated to or purchased by the school. Reasons for lack of access vary but include the worry that libraries will be disheveled and books will be worn, stolen, or lost. Dr. Jenkins’ project for the Before School Reading Club shows one example of how schools can innovate to help students gain access.

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\(^2\) If you would like to communicate via telephone, please email your phone number and a preferred time to talk.
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REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Appendix A – Directions for Creating the “I Am a Reader” Ribbon

Directions for creating the ribbons:

1. Buy a spool of ribbon 1/2 or 3/4 inch wide

2. Cut to the length needed (long enough to write "I am a Reader" on it)

3. Make a loop out of the ribbon and cross the ends over each other on the bottom

4. Connect the ends together with a pin

5. Make sure the writing is in the circle and can be seen well by others

6.