



Article

Football: An Innovative Way to Attract Teenagers to the Library

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Abstract

Attracting teenagers to libraries has always been a challenge. To do this, the Children's Centre Library of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka combined a book club with a football club and made active library membership a prerequisite for joining.

The Children's Centre was founded in 1978 by the University Women's Association of the University of Nigeria in Nsukka. Its purpose was to provide a broad range of educational and recreational resources to children and teenagers from 3 to 18 years of age living within the University community and its environs.

A library was the first component of the Children's Centre Project. Its initial focus was to encourage voluntary reading. Presently the collection exceeds 10,000 books, magazines, maps, audiovisuals materials, and clipping files. It also houses a research collection of African children's literature and reference materials for scholarly use.

The Children's Centre Library has four goals:

1. Encourage reading and the enjoyment of books.
2. Help users develop information and learning skills.
3. Provide literature and learning materials reflecting Nigerian culture and environment.
4. Provide resources for meeting the varied needs of children and youth.

The Library is open to children of University staff and to residents of the town of Nsukka (who pay a small registration fee). University students and researchers may use the library for reference purposes. Since 1988, it has also served as a teaching laboratory for the Department of Library and Information Science. In recent years, the Library has established links with several schools in Nsukka and its environs in an attempt to encourage reading, information literacy, and library awareness. The Library also provides service to inmates of Nsukka prison (Children's Centre Library, 1996).

Despite its mission to serve teenagers as well as children, many people at the University and within the community perceived the facility as a children's library. As a result, the Library has found it difficult to retain teenagers as members. Once in secondary school, most teenagers drop their memberships.¹ Attracting teens to libraries is a challenge many libraries face. Shay (2011) has pointed out how challenging it can be to develop successful programming for teenagers.

Most users of the Children's Centre Library are children of employees of the University. Most of these children were born in the community and grew up using the Children's Centre Library. On becoming teenagers and entering secondary school, many formerly regular users now see themselves as having outgrown the Library; therefore the materials for teenagers are underutilized. By 2010, usage by teens dwindled to such a degree that it became a burning issue for the Children's Centre Committee, which manages the Library (see Table 1).

¹ Members must pay a 200 Naira (N200.00) registration fee and a 100 Naira (N100.00) renewal fee annually.

Table1. Children’s Centre Library Membership, by Age, 2005-2010

	3-5 Years Old	6-8 Years Old	9-11 Years Old	12-15 Years Old	16-18 Years Old	Total
2005	74	85	64	20	15	258
2006	86	126	109	37	9	367
2007	51	92	68	20	7	238
2008	72	102	84	15	7	280
2009	67	91	50	12	4	224
2010	77	105	82	9	4	277

The Committee was most concerned about the underutilization of teen resources and began to look for ways to make the Library more attractive to this age group. The Committee started by introducing a book club. The following announcement was sent to teachers and staff at secondary schools in the region:

INTRODUCING CHILDREN’S CENTRE YOUTH CLUB

The Children’s Centre Committee thought it right to float a reading club for youth, targeting first the children of the University community. It is hoped that the reading club will help to promote reading among our youth and help them to imbibe a reading culture. The reading club will last throughout the forthcoming long vacation holiday and any other time deemed fit by the participants. Registration fee is N200.00. Participants are required to procure the novel for discussion themselves. The reading club will be meeting fortnightly at the Children’s Centre on a day and time chosen by the participants after the first contact.

The school administration and staff are invited to be members. Registration starts on Monday July 5, to Friday July 16, 2010. First contact will be on Monday July 26. The novel to be discussed is “Shattered inheritance” by Chinyere Eze-Mbuilo. The novel is available at all major bookshops at Nsukka.

The Children’s Centre Committee will be very grateful if you can help bring this information to the notice of your students.

Yours Faithfully,
Ngozi Osadebe
Secretary, Children’s Centre Committee

Publicity to students consisted of the following flyer:

YOUTH READING CLUB

You are invited to be part of the Children's Centre Youth Reading Club. The reading club will help you to develop your vocabulary, master the world around you and imbibe reading culture. "Read a book a day" as the saying goes, and "reading makes a leader" said the sages of old. Let us read to become leaders and better citizens. Registration is ongoing at:

Venue: Children's Centre Library. UNN

Registration fee: N200.00 only

Current book for discussion: "Shattered Inheritance" by Chinyere Eze-Mbuilo

Day of discussion: Monday, July 26, 2010

Time: 4.30pm

Please be punctual.

Ngozi Osadebe

Secretary, Children's Centre Committee

On the first day of the book club, attendance was disappointing. Even with publicity, only one parent and nine children attended. Further announcements were made promising the children small gifts. It didn't work. By the third meeting, only two children were in attendance. The members of the Committee considered asking the schools to make attendance compulsory, but determined that although this would increase attendance, it might not increase genuine interest in the Library's programs and services. The members of the Committee also thought about moving the book club to the schools, but decided that this would defeat the purpose of the book club—attracting teenagers to the Library.

So the Committee let the book club die a natural death and began exploring other options to increase teen usage. One committee member suggested that youths, especially males, love football (soccer). Perhaps, the committee could link a book club with a football club? Other members found this idea appealing and starting working to implement it.

Announcements and flyers promoting the reading/football club were sent to schools and churches. The text was similar to the advertising for the original book club, except that now a new novel was chosen and the title of the program was changed:

YOUTH READING/FOOTBALL CLUB

You are invited to be part of the Children's Centre Youth Reading/Football Club. The reading/football club will help you to develop your vocabulary, master the world around you and imbibe reading culture. "Read a book a day" as the saying goes, and "reading makes a leader" said the sages of old. Let us read to become leaders and better citizens. Registration is ongoing at:

Venue: Children's Centre Library. UNN

Registration fee: N200.00 only

Current book for discussion: The Great Ponds by Elechi Amadi

Day of discussion: Monday September 6, 2010

Time: 4.30pm

Please be punctual.

Ngozi Osadebe
Secretary, Children's Centre Committee

Twelve teenagers attended the first meeting. They were formed into two teams of six players each and played a football match in the morning from 9 am to 11am. Then at noon, participants met in the Library for the book club. Unfortunately, since only two teens read the book, discussion was postponed until the next meeting.

At the next meeting, attendees elected their own officials of the club. This is consistent with IFLA guidelines for library services for young adults, which recommends that users should be involved in decision making, planning and implementation of programs (Muller & Chew, 2008). The Committee asked the elected officials to draft rules and regulations for the club and present them to members for consideration at the next meeting.

Thirty-one teens attended the next meeting—the 12 original participants, plus 19 new participants. Football was played in the morning again, followed by the book club in the afternoon. "The Great Ponds" by Elechi Amadi was discussed. This initial book was chosen by me. However, subsequent books were selected by the reading/football club members. The discussion was structured in this way:

- Identification of characters in the novel.
- Presentation of the story line.
- Analysis of the characters in the novel.
- Lessons learned from the novel.
- New words from the novel.

After the book discussion, the teenage officials presented the rules and regulations they had drafted for review, amendment and adoption. The following was agreed on:

1. The club should meet on the second Saturday of every month.
2. A book should be selected, read by every member, and discussed during monthly meetings.
3. Each month one member will select a book of his choice and act as moderator during the discussion. A member who fails to read a book twice consecutively is penalized by having to be a benchwarmer during the next football competition with another club--no matter how skillful he is.
4. The club will be known as the CUBS reading/football club.²
5. The club will be involved in two football competitions against other organizations every year (one in May to mark the Nigerian Children's Day Celebration and the other in October to mark the Independence Anniversary of Nigeria).
6. Membership in the reading/football club is limited to boys. (Limiting participation to boys was the decision of the members, who all were boys.)

Since its inception, members have read 11 books (nine novels and two plays), and played three matches against other football teams.³ The club has 52 members, which is much higher than the 10 to 20 recommended for such clubs (Cavalier, 2009). Yet at every meeting, more new members turn up for registration. Today, the Children's Centre Committee is exploring the idea of splitting the reading/football club into two age groups (11 to 14 and 15 to 18) to accommodate more members. Teenage girls are also clamoring for the formation of a club of their own. Thanks to the formation of the reading/football club, the Children's Centre Library can now boast of at least 60 active young adult members of the Library.

Acquiring books is not a financial burden on the Library, though it is a logistical challenge as the coordinator and club members have to find copies of the books. So as not to conflict with the members' academic work, books of no more than 200 pages are selected. The club is informal, not like a student-teacher relationship. Members sit wherever they like and discussions are spontaneous and flow easily. The librarian helps highlight salient points from time to time, and no contribution or opinion is considered right or wrong. Members analyze selected books from their own perspective. The teenager leading the discussion moderates the discussion as necessary; for example, when too many people are talking at the same time or when the discussions become unnecessarily long.

The reading/football club has been a success, but success has come with some problems too, including a lack of funds, a lack of personnel, a lack of time, and the availability of reading materials. The Children's Centre is a non-profit organization run purely on donations from good-spirited individuals and the small sum obtained from library registrations and renewals. Funding for programs is a constant challenge.

²The name CUBS was chosen to represent baby lions. At the University of Nigeria, students are known as lions and lionesses.

³ They played twice against the Shining Stars of Umeano Quarters and once against the University of Nigeria, Nsukka Secondary School football team.

Children's Centre activities are run by volunteers who are mostly young mothers and students on industrial attachment. In Nigeria, undergraduate and graduate students participate in industrial attachment to work in industries or organizations in their fields of study. For example, the duration of the industrial attachment for Library and Information Science students is 6 months and takes place in the third year of study. As a result, most Children's Centre activities lack continuity because staffing is disrupted when students leave for holidays or industrial attachment, or when young mothers go on maternity leave.

Time is another pressing problem of the reading/football club. In Nigeria, most schools let out at 4:00 pm daily, leaving little or no time for the children to engage in extra-curricular activities.

Experience has shown us that novels selected for discussion from the Library's collection are often not available locally for the members to purchase. The club has either had to photocopy novels or ask the members to read the novels in haste, so that they can be passed on to other readers.

Based on the aforementioned challenges of the club, the author recommends that librarians who wish to run a similar program consider revenue, volunteer staff, and book availability in their planning. Libraries, especially those that are not funded by the government, should find ways of generating revenues to run their activities. This might be in the form of charging fees for services in order to enable the library to hire and retain permanent staff and procure more materials. For libraries that depend on volunteer staff, it is advisable to specify the duration of volunteer service beforehand to enable adequate planning for staffing. Books should be selected early in the year so that the coordinator of the reading club can acquire them from the publishers in advance.

Attracting teenagers to libraries has always been a challenge. But as the Children's Centre has shown, librarians can be successful if they create programs that make the library experience enjoyable and memorable. Benefits of the reading/football club went beyond the sole promotion of reading by creating a sense of belonging among the children. Members began seeing themselves as a formidable force within the Children's Centre organization and accepted responsibilities to further the interests of the Centre (e.g., by volunteering to help with other activities). The Club has even provided members with the opportunity to have direct contact with the wife of the Vice-Chancellor of the University, who is the patron of the Children's Centre. The children have come to view club membership as an honor. The reading/football club has evolved to the extent that it is not just about participation, but about pride and engagement too.

References

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Appendix Photographs



The CUBS after a football match with the University of Nigeria, Nsukka Secondary School team.



University of Nigeria, Nsukka Primary School Band, cheerleaders for all of our matches.



Trophy presentation.

The woman wearing the patterned shirt is Professor Jill Dike, Chair of the Children's Centre Committee. Ms. Terri Emezi, Vice-Chair, is wearing the white shirt.



The author, Ngozi Osadebe, in a book discussion with club members.

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