

# **RETHINKING CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS IN AFRICA**

**Language and Children's Literature: a case study of Uganda**

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**At**

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## **1.0 BACKGROUND**

### **1.1 Contemporary literature defined**

Contemporary literature is literature with its setting generally after World War II. That means it is the literature that transcends from the twentieth to the twenty-first century.

### **1.2 Children's literature defined**

A 20<sup>th</sup> Century renowned personality in the names of Clifton Fadiman<sup>1</sup> defined Children's literature as a body of written works produced in order to entertain or instruct young people.

Wikipedia (*The Free Encyclopedia*) asserts that Children's literature or juvenile literature includes stories, books, magazines, and poems that are enjoyed by children.

### **1.3 African literature defined**

For centuries, African literature was primarily orally transmitted and it had a certain flavor which seems to have diminished in the wake of contemporary literature.

Contemporary literature for children and young adults of Africa is comprised of picture books, easy to read stories/story books, magazines, proverbs, simple poetry and other printed materials. Uganda's literature for children is not any different.

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<sup>1</sup>Clifton was an American multi-talented author, critic and intellectual who lived in Brooklyn, New York from 1904 to 1999.

## 2.0 International and Regional Legal Frameworks on Child definition

- (i) The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) defines the Child as “a human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier”.
- (ii) The African Charter and Welfare of the Child (1990) defines the child as “every human being below the age of 18 years”.

Uganda is a signatory to the above-mentioned two conventions.

## 2.0 Overview of schooled children and young adults in Uganda

An analytical report produced by the Department of Social Work and Social Administration (MUK) and the African Institute for Child Studies in November 2015 on the Ugandan population census data, revealed that over 17 million (more than half of Uganda’s population of 34.9 million) are under the age of 18 years (UBOS, 2014a). Table 1 below shows that 10.7 million children and young adults are enrolled in the pre-primary, primary, secondary and post-primary institution in Uganda.

**Table 1: Enrolment of children and young adults in schools/institutions<sup>2</sup>**

Sub-sector	Males	Females	Total
ECD	279,159	284,874	564,033
Primary	4,294,473	4,361,451	8,655,924
Secondary	765,406	691,871	1,457,277
Post-Primary	37,107	26,178	63,285
<b>Totals</b>	<b>5,376,145</b>	<b>5,364,374</b>	<b>10,740,519</b>

Source: MoES (EMIS data) 2014

<sup>2</sup> The data picked on each of the above sub-sectors includes learners from private schools/institutions.

#### **4.0 Provision and special interventions for Children literature in Uganda**

- Literature for Children in Uganda can be accessed through the formal system (at school) or outside the school (at home, community library, print media, social media and many other sources).
- Literature at school is determined by the curriculum of the particular level (as will be explained in the subsequent slides) and the accompanying reading/materials provisions from government.
- Stocking of reading books is also done in some cases by parents, private stakeholders (e.g. OB/OGs, NGOs, EDP etc) and schools which have the capacity to buy their own books.
- The Ministry of Education and Sports is currently providing reading materials in 27 local languages and English to all government-aided primary schools.
- Special interventions from UNICEF, GPE/EGR (through World Bank; 27 districts) , USAID /LARA (28 districts)/; SHRP (30 districts) and various NGOs have helped the Ministry to improve the reading levels in the lower primary and enabled children in the intervention districts to access reading books at the ratio of 1:1.

#### **4.1 Children Literature and policy issues for Primary Schools in Uganda**

- Reading materials in primary schools are based on thematic curriculum, which stresses usage of Local Language (LL) as the medium of instruction in the lower primary (P1-P3), or English in case of a multilingual or urban situation.
- In situations where LL is used as the medium of instruction, English is taught as a subject and vice versa.
- Children in those classes also enjoy a literacy hour (meant to enhance their reading and writing skills) on a daily basis.
- The story books in both English and Local Language provided are written according to the themes which the learners are familiar with, e.g., Our School and Neighborhood, Our Home and Community, Our environment, etc....
- From P4-P7 the Medium of Instruction is English, while Local Language is taught as a subject.
- Children of the Upper Primary (P4-P7) are able to access other reading materials in English and Local Language, Kiswahili, SST, Integrated Science, Mathematics and Creative Arts and Physical Education (CAPE1-3). However, the latter are academic books, not fun literature books.

However, there is need for government to provide a budget line for story and fun books at this level.

## **4.2 Children literature for Lower Secondary Education in Uganda**

- At Ordinary level Literature in English is offered as an optional subject. Students may select literature (African literature in the form of novels) among the optional subjects offered by the school when they go to Senior 3.
- At S4 students sit for literature as an academic subject.
- English Language (which is a compulsory subject) is also a form of literature because it covers some aspects of literature, e.g. story reading/comprehension, the narrative /composition writing and poetry.

## **4.3 Young adult literature for Upper Secondary Schools in Uganda**

- At Advanced Level, literature is offered as an Arts subject which can be combined with 2 other Arts based subjects recommended /offered by a given school.
- There are 3 genres of literature offered at “A” level namely: Prose and Poetry, Drama/Plays and Novels.
- Other “A” level students (other than those studying literature) may access literary works for personal enrichment and fun from the school library.

#### **4.4 Young adult literature for Post-primary Institutions in Uganda**

- Post- primary institutions in Uganda are the certificate awarding institutions, i.e., Community Polytechnics, Health/Nursing Institutions, PTCs, Specialized Institutions, Technical Institutes, Technical Schools and Vocational Schools/Institutions and Business Schools. All the afore-mentioned institutions enroll students who have completed S4 and some, if not majority, are approaching 18 years of age.
- Despite the fact that English is taught as a subject (case of PTCs), there is no other reading material for students (except newspapers and magazines for a few colleges which endeavor to buy and avail copies in the library).
- There is need to have literature materials which learners can easily access for leisure and fun, which in the case of Uganda is still a big challenge.
- At this level there is also need for availing the age-appropriate literature because this is a critical stage for transition from childhood to adulthood.

#### **5.0 Potentials of Children today with regards to literature**

Ugandan children have numerical strength. Out of a total population of 34.9million, over 60% of the 17 million Ugandan children are under the age of 18 years are in school. In terms of readership/literature this is quite enormous. Children all over the world, Uganda inclusive, are very creative. If stimulated or guided they can do wonderful things. For instance:

- ✓ They can imagine and narrate their own stories.
- ✓ They can draw pictures, read and write their own stories.
- ✓ They can be productive and developmental thanks to the knowledge acquired from what has been read.

Today's children people, although they may read children's books, they may increasingly read adult books and have other options as a result of increased computer literacy and ICT in general. Today many children and young adults can access all forms of literature on the social media and:

- With mobile phones, children of today are able to receive and send short text messages to their correspondents.
- With internet they can send/receive mail. Besides, they can also access all sorts of information and literature on the website.
- They are also able to read story /fun books and play video games on the net.

However, the latter may have its own challenges if not checked because it can be abused.

## **6.0 Challenges of Ugandan children vis a vis literature**

- A lot of children are not able to read and write by the end of P7 and, to make it worse; the completion rate at this level is about 6%.
- Additionally, some children hitherto are not going to school despite the effort by government to make primary and secondary education free through the commonly known UPE and USE programs.

- The Ugandan education system is examination oriented due to high competition and rush for good schools at the end of every level; hence focus is only on examinable subjects. (Reading a Story Book for fun may be interesting but a Story Book is not examinable; hence most school administrators, teachers and parents tend to regard reading story books as a waste of valuable time).
- There has been a crisis for simple story books in English and Local Language following the suspension of the scheme to provide Supplementary Reading Materials (SRMs) to primary schools in 2009.
- In some schools/institutions reading materials are not available at all, while in others the literature is obsolete and uninteresting to learners.
- Children are hardly involved in producing their own literature. In many instances, children read what they have not written. Stories are always about other people and other places NOT children themselves and their places.

## **7.0 Recommendations**

- MoES should re-instate the Reading Scheme in primary schools and emphasize the need for children to read story books alongside examinable subjects.
- More Book Bazaars and Book tents should be conducted not only to sensitize the Children but the Ugandan public at large to reading story books. Reading is a culture which children need to pick from their parents and the wider public.

- Secondary and tertiary institutions should provide age appropriate supplementary reading materials to learners.
- Parents and other stakeholders (e.g., IBBY, UPA, UBA, UCWIA, RAU, NABOTU and many others) should come in to support government effort by providing free reading books or the necessary funding in schools and tertiary institutions.
- Ugandan Children should be given the opportunity to write their own stories, display them in class, read them for their friends or even publish them for wider coverage /readership.

## **8.0 Conclusion**

- ✚ Contemporary literature for Children and young adults in Africa and Uganda in particular has greatly evolved and the momentum is still on.
- ✚ If the materials for children and young adults are to be appropriate, relevant and interesting, providers and all stakeholders in the industry must address the dynamics of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.
- ✚ Above all, Children and young adults must be involved more and more in producing their own literature.

**LADIES AND GENTLEMEN I THANK YOU FOR LISTENING TO ME!**

**OUR CHILDREN, OUR FUTURE!**

**OUR FUTURE, OUR CHILDREN!**

**I HAVE SAID ALL THIS**

**FOR GOD AND MY COUNTRY!**