International Reading Association
A membership organization of literacy professionals
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4th Pan-African Reading For All Conference

"Literacy for Sustainable Development"

Reading for All: A Pan African Voice for Literacy

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CONFERENCE SUMMARY

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1. General Information

The main theme of the **Reading for All Conferences is** "Reading for All." To address issues of illiteracy, poverty, diseases such as HIV & AIDS, the subtheme of the 4th Pan-African **Reading for All** Conference was "Literacy for Sustainable Development." Each of the four conference days **addressed one of the subthemes,** contributing to the main theme and subtheme.

The conference has been an international Pan-African sharing experience of a paradigm shift in education that recognizes African people's rights of expression and information. It has taken cognizance of reading skills that are developed through materials in African indigenous languages relevant to people's daily lives, from their immediate environment and starting early in the life of a learner. This is sure to bear fruits of reading beyond school: for a favorable activity, individual development, leisure, making informed choices, and calculated decision-making ─ all through information, which is power.

Some facts shared in this conference about reading…

- Reading is done by those who know how to read and write.
- People who read can be free because reading banishes ignorance and superstition.
- Nations that really lead are those where the literacy level is high.

- A citizen who reads has the capacity to actively participate in the continuity of learning.

- Reading is a foundation of much of the enjoyment the individual gets out of life.

- Reading is closely related to vocational efficiency.

- Reading is related to the success of a democratic way of life.

- Through reading, time and distance can be spanned between the reader and persons in other times, places, and cultures.

- Reading allows one to listen to the wisdom and people of the ages and to learn from them.

- Success and recognition in school life depend upon the development of skills and concepts of reading, listening, oral expression, and written expression.

Some facts about literacy...

- Literacy may be defined as the ability to functionally apply language and mathematical skills in everyday life.

- The goal of literacy is functional competency.

Some facts about the mother tongue...

- Learning starts from the known and works toward the unknown.

- Beginning instruction in the mother tongue provides an enabling learning environment for beginners.

- It is beneficial to use the mother tongue as the language of instruction for the first 3–4 years of school, as made evident in presentations by different countries.

Priority areas of focus shared in the presentations for educators (particularly writers and/or curriculum developers)...

Literacy programs provide lifelong learning opportunities to all, focusing on the learner and the learning process,and inspiring learning environments that enable families and individuals to develop their critical thinking and creativity and to realize their full potential. Presenters urged conference attendees to

- Validate and apply home-based, traditional approaches to child-care in parental guidance and teacher training, reinforcing the principle that learning starts at birth.

- Promote the use of the mother tongue in early childhood education, early years of primary education, and adult education.

- Link personal development to the learners' cultural heritage and strengthen their self-confidence.

- Improve the development, production and distribution of learning materials that are affordable and suitable to local conditions.

2. Day One Theme: *Literacy: Children and Youth*

Before children start going to school, their groups are relatively stable, consisting of the members of their own family and a few neighborhood playmates. The conference emphasized that early childhood development requires optimal physical development through good nutrition to stimulate mental development.

How children feel about themselves and others determines to a large extent how well they learn school subjects. Everyone who learns something has some feeling about it. Background experiences such as the following have a great effect on the learner's comprehension:

- Wide or minimal exposure to reading materials.

- Rural/urban settlements (e.g., reading about relevant lifestyle).

- Boy/girl basic needs (e.g., reading about growing up, hygeine).

- Rich/poor families (Parent/guardian supported, OVC new environment with child-headed families, reference to father/mother, aunt/uncle, grandmother/grandfather, and sister/brother should be considered in writing reading materials).

Writing of books in indigenous languages that are user-friendly is proof that educators are meeting the needs of the African child. One presenter who specializes in developing mother-tongue resources for schools and libraries said during the conference that "Mother tongue stories ignite reading passion!"

"Little Hands Books," or small books with large pictures and minimal text, are fun for toddlers and popular with children, who are comfortable with the small size. Children's own stories published in fun books with less moral, gender and ethnicity consideration are relevant mental development materials. The stories enrich learning and make it enjoyable; they also have relevance through children's immediate environmental experiences.

A review of curricula and validation of African indigenous knowledge systems, values and skills

The development of appropriate books incorporates value systems founded on indigenous languages and knowledge systems, as well as new knowledge,

information, and technology. This links formal, nonformal, and informal learning opportunities and creates a "culture of lifelong learning" for all, with the aim of promoting social integration.

3. Day Two Theme: *Literacy and National Development*

Some key points of the presentations...

- "Parents should be empowered to lead by example through reading and writing."
- "Teacher capacity building requires specialized training to effectively address literacy programs in diverse learning situations."
- "The Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE), a UNESCO program intended to ensure that the six EFA goals are achieved, should be developed to expedite individual country effectiveness."

The adoption of appropriate and cost-effective technologies

New, appropriate, and cost-effective technologies should be adopted, to complement the integration of indigenous educational methodologies. Dependence on imported materials and technology, which requires an ever-increasing supply of scarce hard currency, is not viable and should be reduced as rapidly as possible. The use of oral tradition, more effective in appropriate contexts, should be explored and systematized for teacher training and other education and training applications.

Reduction of adult illiteracy

As demonstrated in a study conducted in Kitengesa rural library in Uganda, adult illiteracy rates can be reduced by consolidating and continuing education as part of lifelong learning. Sharing library books with parents and siblings at home has had a fruitful multiplier effect in this community.

4. Day Three Theme: *Literacy as a Vehicle for Eradicating the HIV & AIDS Scourge*

According to the conference, current reading materials should help children and readers to face reality, to understand their own strengths and weaknesses, to build on their innate strengths, and to accept situations that cannot be changed. Developing HIV & AIDS education reading programs and response mechanisms are leaving behind a record of the impact of this disease and how it is overcome for generations to come.

A review and harmonization of existing policies and legislation

Special attention should be devoted to the rights of disadvantaged groups, including girls and women, ethnic minorities, the disabled, those affected by the HIV & AIDS

pandemic, and those in especially difficult circumstances in other ways. Formal, nonformal, and informal learning opportunities should be linked in order to create a "culture of lifelong learning" that promotes social integration through the diverse population of Africa.

Putting HIV & AIDS education programs and response mechanisms into place

Conference presenters shared that HIV & AIDS is no longer a public health problem. It constitutes a rapidly growing obstacle to development on all levels. Teacher training and recruitment must be accelerated to balance personnel losses. Systems must be developed for keeping the increasing number of orphans in school, and solutions found for their long-term care and development. Life skills and HIV & AIDS education should be strengthened or introduced in all education programs. Working partnerships should be forged with the media, religious organizations, civil society, and communities, to build consensus on implementing HIV & AIDS curriculum and to develop effective and viable strategies to fight the HIV & AIDS pandemic.

5. Day Four Theme: *Literacy Educational Development*

Some statements picked from the different conference presentations under this theme include the following:

- "Blessed is the person who reads!"
- "Share the available resources – especially classrooms and libraries – between primary and secondary schools."
- "To stimulate publisher support there should be to start small and to gain momentum over time through popularizing books for bigger profit."
- "The well-adjusted person is the one who is content to see others excel in some things while he/she excels in others."
- "Here also, regional variations exist: in general, where enrolment and literacy are high, gender equality prevails; where enrolment and adult literacy are low, the survival rate of girls is generally lower than that of boys."
- "To meet these challenges, it is important to learn from the examples of good practice and successful policies that have proven to be effective in the African context."

The new vision of African Renaissance

Envisioned is a resurgence of a vibrant Africa, rich in its cultural diversity, history, languages, and arts, standing united to end its marginalization in world progress and development. Envisioned is a peaceful Africa, having beaten its swords into ploughshares, and respecting the human rights of all, irrespective of color, gender, ethnicity, religion, or abilities. An enlightened Africa, victorious in its struggle for the

liberation of the mind is achieved through the African literature and the ideas evident in the 4th Pan-African Reading for All Conference presentations.

Conference presentations show that a prosperous Africa is where the knowledge and the skills of its people are its foremost resource. The values that unite Africa and the knowledge of its own environment, combined with modern management, social and physical sciences, and technology, are being applied to solving the chronic problems of poverty, disease, famine, conflict, misrule, and corruption through the writing initiatives that consider African heritage.

Evident in the presentations is that education through literacy means preparing people to take control of their own destiny, liberating them from dependency and endowing them with initiative, creativity, critical thinking, enterprise, democratic values, pride and appreciation of diversity.

It is the collective responsibility of government, civil society, and development partners at all levels that is creating dynamic learning organizations with a clear mission for social, economic, and cultural development. Toward the realization of this vision, Africa is working cooperatively in the area of literacy, cementing African unity and engaging in a continental development.

Improvement in learning achievement

The conference presentations have shown that teachers are being empowered through preservice and in-ervice training programs on literacy, reading, and writing. The training emphasizes child-centered approaches, human rights and gender-based teaching. Presentations have shown mechanisms in place for carrying out national assessments of learning achievement. Children are expected to master the minimum competencies in language, mathematics and science; reading initiatives should be designed to help them to become fully functional members of a rapidly developing society.

6. Conclusion

Guided and supported by joint commitment, courage, hope, and creativity, education in the new African millennium will never be the same again. Education will be the strategic medium for attaining African Renaissance in the globalized economy, culture, and communication in the twenty-first century.

- ***Recognizing*** that African indigenous knowledge systems, languages, and values should be the foundation for the development of African education systems;

- ***Recognizing*** the necessity for curriculum transformation to give children, youth, and adults the type of quality education that promote appreciation of the diversity, richness, and dynamism of different cultures;

- ***And dedicated to*** the goal of liberating readers from psychological, economic, and technological dependency.

The Conference has raised participants' consciousness of the need to implement planned changes as well as to respond to crisis and to manage adjustment. For this, participants need to establish a mechanism for professional partnership with regard to the Reading for All goals and strategies at various levels. To meet these challenges, it is important to learn from the many examples of good practice and successful initiatives that have proven to be effective in the African context, as shared in the different sessions of this conference:

- Curriculum reform toward locally relevant subjects and integrating HIV & AIDS issues and life skills education;

- Affordable reading and teaching materials and textbooks that are largely African oriented and meet the needs of all readers, including those with disabilities;

- Use of mother tongue as the language of instruction in the first 3–4 school years;

- Use of schools as community learning centers to improve literacy to the out-of-school population;

- Evaluation of literacy programs based on an action–research–action paradigm; and implementation of management/statistical information systems to assist in planning, evaluation, and other components of those programs.