

# Build on Books

## Rebuilding a reading culture in Sierra Leone

Lori Spragg

*We now have plenty of books in our community. These books have a great impact in my life and the life of many, especially children. During the past years, children were afraid of books, especially textbooks. But now almost every school you go, you will see pupils reading textbooks. The books are also reducing the quantity of writing [copying out] pupils do now. As for my younger brother, every day the teacher would give him one storybook to read at home. The textbooks are really widening our knowledge, the way we think, taking reference from books... We in Waterloo we highly appreciate the good work you are doing for us. May God bless you all.*

**Mohamed JBah (Waterloo, Sierra Leone)**

When speaking of education in Sierra Leone, one is often reminded that this country was once celebrated as the Athens of West Africa. The success of her classical scholars, proficient in Greek and Latin, attracted students from all over the region. Schools had well-stocked libraries, and children were encouraged to read for pleasure and education.

Sadly, war put an end to these halcyon days. During the rebel conflict (1991–2002), schools and libraries were looted or burned, and precious books were turned to ash. A decade on, and most schoolchildren are now in overcrowded classrooms that lack sufficient learning materials. Without books, teachers have resorted to producing improvised and often poor quality pamphlets, which they sell to pupils. Sometimes, the pamphlets even include both test questions and answers; students can pass exams, but still lack the knowledge and study skills necessary for the next stage of their education.

The commission of enquiry set up to examine the poor performance of pupils in the 2008 Basic Education Certificate Examination and West African Senior School Certificate Examination condemned the use of pamphlets, and said that 'Lack of adequate engagement with books and other learning material is a major reason for poor performance.' It found that 'libraries did not exist in many schools and that many pupils did not have access to reading materials at home'.

In contrast, in the UK, school books and library books are readily available and frequently updated. The UK is one of the world's top producers of new titles and new editions – even if the older versions are still perfectly useful – leading to an over-abundance of books. Every year, huge quantities of brand new, overstocked books languish in the warehouses of publishers, while millions of books end up as pulp.

Sierra Leone and the UK are two countries linked, not only by a shared history, but by language. As English is the language of

education in both countries, it means that we in the UK can try to redress the imbalance by collecting and shipping vast quantities of these books to Sierra Leone. As soon as the first Build on Books appeal went out in 2009, suitable books started to arrive at storage centres in their hundreds of thousands. In less than three years, more than a third of a million books have been collected, sorted and shipped to Sierra Leone.

Part of a UK-based charity – the Construction and Development Partnership – the Build on Books project is centred in Waterloo, Sierra Leone, and spearheaded by a handful of dedicated volunteer teachers and community leaders. The team has distributed books to more than 150 schools and two community libraries. Over 50,000 students now have plenty to stimulate their developing minds. Word is spreading and teachers come from far and wide to request books for their school. Schools receive a wide range of reading materials – textbooks, reference books, fiction, non-fiction, picture books – especially selected for the students they serve.

A home is found for every book sent. A large number of higher level books have been given to universities, teachers' colleges and even a police academy. A thriving community library, established in Waterloo, was given a sufficient variety of books to attract children and adult readers alike. Children who are not literate go there to listen to stories.

Teachers are encouraged to read regularly themselves, promote reading in the classroom, provide sufficient library time for students, and allow children to take books home to read. When these practices are in place, the pace of change is rapid.

Teachers are reporting that comprehension and enthusiasm for reading have greatly increased, and that students now perform better in debates and examinations. Young people are feeling more motivated to attend classes and stay in school. Many parents, who are themselves illiterate, appreciate their children being allowed to bring books home to read to them, and their siblings.

In the classroom, books offer opportunities for lively discussion, especially when books relate to pupils' own lives. Children at one primary school were enthralled by the story of *Jack and the Beanstalk*; they were incredulous that a bean, which struggles to grow in their impoverished environment, could reach to the sky in the fairytale.

It seems to me that bilateral partnerships, like the Build on Books model, between countries that have an excess of books and those that have too few, are the way forward. They reduce waste in one country and offer huge development potential in the other.

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