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Kenyan School Children Vying for World Reading Record

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Children's Garden Dagoretti reading out loud.

BY KARI MUTU



In June 2015, thousands of school children from across the country will attempt to smash the Guinness World Record for simultaneous reading by reading aloud from the same book at the same time.

In an effort to disprove the perception that Kenyans are poor readers, the pupils intend to beat the

current record which stands at 223,363 people in 909 venues in the United States.

“We got tired of hearing, ‘if you want to hide something from an African, put it in a book’,” says Anne Eboso of Storymoja Publishers.

Read Aloud is part of Storymoja’s broader Reading Revolution Campaign, a crusade to excite children about reading for pleasure through animated book readings and providing access to storybooks.

A few years ago, Eboso and her team did a survey in schools across the country.

“We stumbled across the shocking statistic that only two per cent of public primary schools have libraries. We believe it is a violation of children’s rights if they don’t have access to storybooks and libraries,” she says.

The Read Aloud is scheduled for 9.00am on June 15, 2015. It is a follow-up to a similar campaign held in January 2015, which beat the previous national record by achieving 160,910 children reading simultaneously in 422 schools across 12 counties.

Storymoja is now aiming for 250,000 students.

Eboso, who heads the Start a Library project, explains the history of the campaign.

“In 2013 we started doing the Read Aloud. We’ve done five of them and the dates we chose were the last Friday of every January and then the Day of the African Child.”

According to Charles Edward, a teacher at Five Star Academy in Kangemi, which participated in the June 2014 Read Aloud, the campaign has helped the pupils in terms of language.

“The challenge we have been facing is language. Since Storymoja has donated some books to us, our pupils can speak in proper English and can also write good compositions.”

The program also has in mind children living with disability. It has seen the translation of some books into Braille to enable participation of visually impaired pupils.

“When you are teaching the hearing impaired, we are normally supposed to have speech training.

It helps them to associate words they are signing with the way it is spoken and pronounced,” says Amos, a teacher at Kambui School for the Deaf, a participant in the June 2013 Read Aloud.

In June 2015, school children will be reading an excerpt from Attack of the Shidas by Muthoni Garland,

a book approved by the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD)

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Attack of the Shidas tells the story of three communities that draw water from a common borehole. When the water supply mysteriously starts to dwindle, each community blames the other. Only three children, from different communities and one of whom is partially blind, know about the aliens that are stealing the water. The children must convince the disbelieving adults and unite the community against the aliens before war breaks out.

The choice of the book was deliberate as it passes three key messages to the children.

“Children are the game-changers in society; disability is not inability; and the aspect of unity in bringing peace and cohesion,” explains Eboso.

Commissioned by the Kenya National Human Rights Commission, the book was written to determine, among other things, how children were affected by the 2008 post election violence. following a research done. The findings indicated that 12 per cent of Kenyan children believe they cannot play with a child from a different community.

“Fast forward this to 50 years from now, what will happen?” Eboso asks. “It will be something of a higher magnitude. We figured reading is the best way to unite the children and that’s why we chose this extract.”

In January, First Ladies from Nakuru, Homabay, Siaya, Kiambu and Kitui counties read with children from their counties. Music group Sauti Sol, together with actress Brenda Wairimu, joined pupils of Kilimani Primary School, Nairobi at the June 2014 Read Aloud.

Mombasa Governor, Ali Hassan Joho also took part reading aloud in unison with pupils of different schools the same year.

Eboso identifies the root causes of reading failure. “A poor attitude towards reading and a lot of children do not have access to culturally relevant books.” She is referring to the predominantly western books found in local bookshops and libraries.

Apart from Read Aloud, Storymoja also has other projects to promote reading and literacy in the country. The Start a Library projects sources non-academic children’s books written by African authors, which are then given to needy schools or to a school of the donor’s choice.

According to the business development manager, Mumbi Kariuki, there are different packs of books for the donors to choose from depending on their finances.

“Our education system is exam-oriented. Planting the seed of reading in a child who is five or six years old creates a longer term reading culture. Reading becomes an activity they continue in high school,” explains Kariuki, adding that to date, Start a Library has been initiated in 55 schools in seven counties including Nairobi, Migori, Homa Bay, Kilifi.

The project has also seen the collaboration between private schools and low-end schools.

In January 2014, pupils from Aga Khan Academy adopted the nearby North Highridge Primary, by fundraising to restock the school’s library.

“The children had a dress-down where they came to school dressed like a character from their favourite book to raise money to buy books,” says Kariuki.

However, a revamped library is not always a guarantee of improved reading by pupils. Communications Manager, James Momanyi, explains a pilot project to tackle this challenge.

“We have reading ambassadors and a system where we monitor the books and whether they are being used, if the teachers are giving out the books and if pupils are gaining something from these books,” he says. Volunteer reading ambassadors have been recruited to help establish reading clubs at select schools.