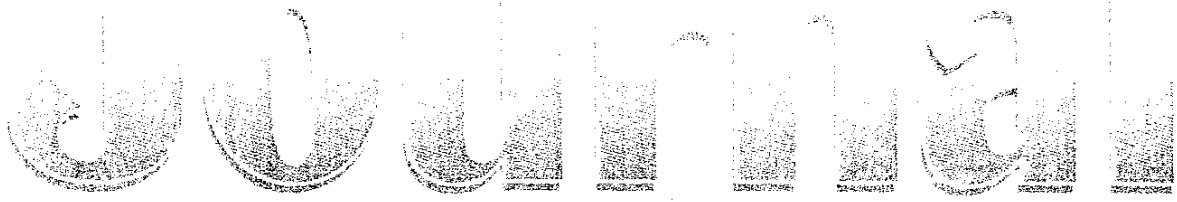


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TOWARDS AN IMPROVED READING CULTURE AMONG NIGERIAN STUDENTS

OKEBUKOLA FOLUSO (PH.D)

Abstract

It has been asserted that the Nigerian society has a reading problem. This assertion has been made with sufficient authority and frequency that they have been accepted as fact; a reading problem exists. This article traces the genesis of the problem to the schooling years when the ability to read and comprehend and the love of reading are developed. The article begins with a brief discussion about reading that underscores the importance of supporting and nurturing good reading habits among Nigerian students. Following a cursory exposition of the place of Reading in the Nigerian school curriculum and factors militating against the development of good reading habits, the remainder of the article illustrates ways of developing efficient reading culture among Nigerian students.

Introduction

For several years now different stakeholders in education have reacted to the poor reading culture of Nigerians. Government bemoans it, parents chant it, teachers lament it and students ignore it. Though the situation is berated by the different voices, yet all seem mired in blame trading. In some instances the outcry is directed at the teachers, at other times government receives the vitriolic attacks. One thing that can be said about this contentious debate is the discovery that Reading is adjudged important. As a stakeholder and practitioner in the field of education my interactions with literate parents reveal that they are worried about their children's poor attitude to reading. They cast aspersion on the schools for failing in their duty of making children literate. Yet investigations reveal that the basis for their concern is not connected with the utility value of reading for posterity but for success in examinations and subsequent career choice. I

suggest we begin by examining the importance of reading.

The Importance of Reading

Reading can be defined as the process of looking at and comprehending the meaning of written and printed words from the visual representation of symbols. It involves recognition and sometimes verbalization of symbols, which represent sounds in human speech. Reading takes place when the reader understands what has been encoded. Hence, comprehension is at the center of reading. Reading facilitates the teaching and learning processes. It helps in the mastery of relevant subjects taught and studied.

Reading is a vital means of acquisition of knowledge, skills and expression of thought especially in this modern world of Science and Technology which demands that one should be able to take an intelligent and informed interest in happenings within one's environment and the world at large. Every child needs to become fully competent in reading in order to succeed in school and to discharge responsibilities as a citizen of a democratic society. A citizen who reads has the capacity to actively participate in the continuity of learning. Reading is the foundation of much of the enjoyment the individual gets out of life and is closely related to vocational efficiency. Emetaram (1991) noted that reading provides a backup of information, which reduces ignorance thus empowering and promoting literacy and communication.

The literacy skills of reading and writing have served the human race over the years. Through them, humans have the tools to transmit knowledge to each succeeding generation. Before reading and writing became generally available, information could be learned only from those people and experiences present within a particular time frame. Through reading, time can be spanned between the reader and persons in whatever time, place or culture. Figuratively, reading allows one to listen to the wisdom and people of the ages.

God, the creator chooses to relate with us through reading. The holy books – the Bible and the Koran contain God's will and directives for whoever will read and profit thereby. The Bible lends credence to reading. Daniel said in Daniel 9:2 "I Daniel understood by books." Apostle

Paul under the anointing of the Holy Spirit admonished Timothy “study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needs not be afraid, rightly dividing the word of truth”. (II Timothy. 2:15). If God enjoins us to read, it means we can and we should read to get a deep understanding of ourselves, our environment and the world at large. Although listening to music, experiencing the changes in nature from sunrise to sunset, all contribute to understanding ourselves and the world around us, reading provides the information needed to expand our understanding of nature and human existence.

Reading in Nigeria

The history of reading dates back to the introduction of formal education in Nigeria, through the teaching of the English Language. English was introduced in Nigeria in the 16th century by British Pepper traders and later enhanced by British slave traders, missionaries, colonial administrators and post – independence governments.

The missionaries who started arriving in Nigeria in 1842 offered to teach English to the nationals to facilitate communication; the medium of English being the most convenient way for the missionaries to communicate. Apart from this, the nationals particularly demanded the English Language. It was valued as a way of identifying with the white man’s culture. In any case, English was the language of commerce, civilization and Christianity and knowledge of it was necessary to secure any useful employment in the coast of West Africa. However as the missionaries’ knowledge of the local languages developed, they tended to use it particularly for religious instruction in order to ensure that the Bible was truly comprehended. Efforts were made towards the teaching of the indigenous languages. However English Language came to be accepted as an indispensable second language in Nigeria.

Ordinances were enacted to put the apparatus for the teaching of reading in place in the schools. The 1882 education ordinance made it clear that the subjects of teaching shall be the reading and writing of the English Language. The 3RS – Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic dominated the timetable. Such was the high premium placed on reading in its early

days in Nigeria. However the knowledge explosion of recent years has led to a considerable expansion of school curricula to the effect that reading is now subsumed in language teaching, as we shall see in the next session.

Reading in the Nigerian School Curriculum

The goal of primary education as stated in the National Policy on Education (NPE 2004) is the inculcation of permanent literacy, numeracy and the ability to communicate effectively. It is also clear from the NPE that primary education is recognized as the key to the success and failure of the whole system when it says that 'the rest of the educational system is built upon it'. The medium of instruction at the primary school is "initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and at a later stage English". It goes to show then that Nigerian languages should serve as a medium of instruction at this level for the first few years. However in practice this is hardly the case as the majority of pre-primary and primary schools even in rural areas use the English medium mainly, while employing Nigerian languages for clarifications now and then.

It is also expected that through primary education children will become literate in either the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and English. With regard to English language the implication of the policy is that a Nigerian child should be proficient in English since it is recognized that English is the means by which the Nigerian child has access to the general pool of knowledge and the modern skills, which are essential to development.

At the secondary school level, English Language features as one of the core subjects. Others are: one Nigerian Language, mathematics, one of physics, chemistry and Biology, one of Literature in English, History and Geography and Agricultural science or a Vocational subject. Apart from these core courses, about 25 other elective courses contend for space on the timetable. This may explain why reading no longer stands as a subject on the timetable of contemporary Nigerian school Curriculum.

Factors Militating Against the Development of Good Reading Habits

That Nigerians' reading culture is poor is no longer news. The adult illiteracy level of Nigeria put at 49% by UNESCO provides easy target for blame. The ugly development has also been attributed, at least in part to the escalating level of poverty which prevents the common man from patronizing bookshops and compels the middle class to buy only prescribed text books for their children at the start of every school session. However the fact that even rich people are not known to be avid readers seems to implicate other factors that hinder the development of good reading habits. The spate of examination malpractice does not help matters. Aided and abetted by their parents, students buy questions and results from examination bodies. Others pay people to assist them in the examinations. These kill students' initiative and discourage them from reading. Moreover the growing culture of television viewer ship is having damaging effects on the Nigerian child. Many of them spend most of the time glued to TV sets, which send negative messages. The overall effect of this development is distaste for reading.

Among the Nigerian students are the unidentified dyslexics – children plagued with dyslexia – a reading disorder that persists despite good schooling and normal or even above average intelligence. It is a handicap that affects up to 20% of the student population according to experts. This group of children are stigmatized by parents and teachers who find it so hard to imagine what it is like not to be able to effortlessly absorb the printed word like other children. They therefore suspect the real problem is laziness or obstinacy or the conclusion that the child is not smart. They fail to realize that the problem is not of character but of biology.

Students are not alone in this debacle. The average literate Nigerian has been tagged "a non-reader". My skepticism of this assertion had been based on want of empirical evidence. This was however suppressed by the comment in the 'Media People' column of April 6th edition of Daily Sun that no journal in Nigeria is doing up to 100,000 copies and that all the publications in Nigeria are not up to a million copies. What an abysmally low figure in a country of over 140 million people 51% of which are

adjudged literate! What other evidence does one need to agree that Nigerians do not read.

In defense of the non-reading stance, some observers opine that the average literate Nigerian is too busy to read but I contend that it all bothers on priority. People will find time for what they believe in and what they enjoy doing. I believe that people do not read because they have not acquired the habit, interest and motivation to become active, engaged readers over time. This might have resulted to complacency. It is rather unfortunate that the tradition of poor reading culture is being passed down to the younger generation.

It is often said that those who do not read are not better than those who cannot read. Similarly people who do not read have no edge over those who cannot interpret the letters. People who can read but fail to read have the tendency of regressing to illiteracy. The worst hit by the non-reading syndrome are the public primary schools where majority of Nigerian children are found. Yet people look away from them. It is unfortunate that available research findings reveal that a great percentage of these young learners are neither learning to read nor reading to learn. The public primary schools have failed in their task to develop literacy skills in the pupils (Oyetunde and Umolu 1991, Okebukola 1999).

In many urban, semi – urban schools, large and growing numbers of children are reading upper elementary levels unable to read and understand class level appropriate material. The result of the FME / UNICEF / UNESCO MLA study (Folayajo *et al* 1997) revealed that less than a quarter of primary four pupils in Nigerian schools are able to read and comprehend written text. The 22,710 pupils tested nation – wide had a mean score of 32.4% in reading comprehension.

The magnitude of this problem causes not only innumerable personal tragedies but also significantly draws instruction down and jeopardizes the future of our public schools. What is most frustrating is that much of this reading failure could be prevented if teachers apply what is known about beginning reading instruction.

Remediation

Government

Government should recognize as a matter of reality the different kinds of bilinguals existing in Nigeria today. There are those bilinguals who though are Nigerian with their Nigerian Languages as L1 but who are proficient in English before schooling. This group uses English more functionally even in the home. This is the case with the children of the elite. Such children find it easy to follow a lesson conducted in English better than in their mother tongue, which they hardly speak. These are mostly found in private schools. The second group is made up of those who speak their mother tongue at home and having had the opportunity of two years pre-primary education enter primary one with some knowledge of English language. It should be noted that in the National Policy on Education (2004) introduction to literacy begins with pre-primary education. One of the aims is "teaching the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes – and to achieve this, Government will ensure that the medium of introduction will be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community." Obviously, any pre-primary school, which conforms to this policy, will find no pupil on its roll. We all know, parents send their children to these schools primarily to learn how to speak and write in English. The schools are left with no choice for "he who pays the piper dictates the tune."

The third group is made up of those who speak their mother tongue at home and having not had the opportunity of pre-primary education, come to school with little knowledge of English. For this group what is needed is a time of adjustment from the home language to school language. Obviously the same programme of literacy cannot work for these three groups. A model of instruction that caters for the needs of these emergent readers is needed.

- The curriculum of the lower primary classes needs overhauling. It should be made to accommodate the needs of the two kinds of bilinguals in our public primary schools. The curriculum should reflect the emergent level reading of the learners.

- The curriculum should be more specific on the type of reading in the modules, what to teach and how to teach it. It should provide a better guide for instruction.
- Reading should be accorded its rightful place in the school curriculum. It should be made a separate subject handled by a skilled teacher.
- Emergent literacy should be introduced into the curriculum of our teacher education programmes and should be made compulsory for all prospective teachers since the primary school teacher is a generalissimo in the classroom.
- Teachers should be trained in the methodologies of teaching beginning reading through seminars and training workshops.
- Since the National Policy on Education supports pre-primary education, government cannot afford to commit it to the whims and caprices of proprietors. Although through the family support programme, the past government established some nursery schools, more are needed to boost the effort of the existing ones. It is by so doing that the policy of ensuring that the medium of instruction at this level can be achieved.
- There is the need for a Reading clinic to cater for the needs of children and adults with reading disabilities who need reading specialists. This could be affiliated to the National Library of Nigeria.
- Government should see to the success of the UBE so that majority if not all Nigerian children will have access to formal education.

Teachers

Chall (1977) regarded the love of reading as the central and most important goal of reading instruction. There is the need to think through those things that motivate students to learn because for some of them learning to read seem almost effortless while others seem mired in confusion. It is realized that individuals approach with positive feelings, only those things that they do well or in which they are developing competence and learning to be effective.

Teachers need to design classrooms in which the focus is on the learner and on learners construction that lead to individual perspectives and insights that are shaped by dynamic classroom interactions; classrooms

where instructional processes are designed to help students become competent, strategic readers, classrooms where students come to realize the satisfaction and enjoyment associated with being a reader. These should start at the primary schools. We need to catch them young. Only then will all students have an opportunity to feel competent and successful, only then will they be encouraged to do what competent readers do – READ. Teachers need to know that young students are not expected to be responsible for reading themselves until after they have been taught HOW to read through the various teaching methods that have proved to be effective.

Evidence abound that teachers need help urgently in the understanding of what reading is, how children learn how to read and what they need when learning to read. Attendance and participation in the bi-annual conferences of the Reading Association of Nigeria accords them the opportunity to learn from others, express their frustrations, privations and deprivations and to keep abreast of findings in pedagogy.

Parents

Parents should be convinced of the need to foster good reading habits for only then will they be able to help their children. Example, they say, is better than precept. If parents can devote a quarter of the time they spend running after money and materialism to reading, we will soon soar above the backwardness associated with a deficient reading culture. People who “run after reading” have money run after them eventually for reading opens the door of opportunities.

It is well recognized that many children are failing in reading because they do not ‘practice’ reading nearly enough. It is a major and time – consuming task for a teacher to take fifty or so students down to the library (that is where it exists) and assist them in book selection and supervise individual reading. Parents should complement the efforts of the teachers by way of follow-up at home; checking children’s homework, helping and monitoring their reading and the time they spend watching TV as well as the programmes they watch. No parent need be told that the untrained child devours an accumulated wealth. Parents should know that

the best way to improve children's literacy level is to make them read by themselves. Once that is achieved, they will be able to read on their own and get on with every aspect of their education. Once the ability to read and comprehend and the love of reading are developed the children are empowered and so they are in charge.

Preaching the benefits of selected reading Francis Bacon said, "some books are to be chewed, others are to be tasted, while a few are to be digested. Children should be guided at home on those books, which will deliver the dividend of self – development. Reading, as the Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN) says, is a family affair.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, we have been able in the course of this paper to establish the fact that only fools make a mock at reading. The causes of reading failures, bad reading habits and deficient reading culture have also been advanced.

Since the child needs considerable ability in reading in order to succeed in school, since the adult in our society needs to do a great deal of reading both as a leisure activity and in order to keep abreast vocationally and since the success of our democratic way of life depends to a great extent upon the ability of the citizens to read, it is important that the government embarks on a nation-wide readership promotion campaign in furtherance of the commitment to produce an enlightened, educated and informed citizenry which could contribute meaningfully to national development and participate positively in nation building; the realization of which the inculcation of a sound dynamic, and effective reading culture is a sine-qua-non.

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