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The Rising Population of Aliterates in Nigerian Schools: Role of School Libraries

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Introduction

Nigeria can become a major force in Africa and indeed the world, if proper policies and structures are in place to entrench good reading culture. The rising population of reluctant readers in this age of information explosion is disturbing. Chinelo (2010) in The Nation Newspaper of May 27th noted that no society can develop more than the knowledge base of its citizens. He decried the dying culture of reading among children as leaders of tomorrow. This is the pathetic state of the Nigerian society. It is either Nigerians are not reading or if they do, do so reluctantly.

Nigeria as a society is composed of the partially-literate, aliterate, and literate avid readers. The partially literates can neither read nor write but have acquired informal education. The literate avid readers are highly motivated individuals who take delight in reading. They read with passion and for pleasure. They naturally love and enjoy reading. Aliterates however, can read but refuse to read and if they read, do so reluctantly. They are uncommitted and occasionally motivated to do so. They lack enthusiasm for reading and always have reasons why they would not read.

Aliteracy is here with us and we cannot run away from this fact. In most Nigerian schools, youths or students are hardly seen around reading except for reasons of test, examination or homework. They are not easily given to reading for the love of doing so. Instead most engage in group discussions or gossip, cracking of jokes, indoor games e.g. cards, cludo, chest etc during free periods. They also use break periods to play football and other outdoor games. Furthermore, students who have access to computers and internet facilities prefer to browse, chat, send email, sms, facebook, yahoo messanger, play computer games. While at home students most times play football, watch Television entertainment programmes such as drama, films, comedies, listening to music, watch dancing competitions and so on in the absence of house hold chores. Occasionally we see isolated cases of students engaged in reading as a recreation. Something must be wrong somewhere A few years back the situation was different. It used to be a thing of pride to be seen reading. Today even the few people who have the advantage of having books to read do not read. There are more than enough activities competing for the little

available time to students. In the past, there were more students who took on reading as a hobby than today.

A famous quote by Mark Twain states it best: “The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who can’t read them." The purpose of education is to give students every advantage at making a good life for themselves, and one way is to take advantage of the richness and benefits of reading (The Mark Twain Circle of New York, 1998).

Statement of Objectives

The study aims at achieving the following:

Identification of factors militating against reading habits of students

Highlight consequences of not reading on individuals and society

Examine ways of tackling aliteracy

Identify of role of school teachers in reading promotion

Examine role of school library in promoting reading in secondary schools

Literature Review

Developing deliberate love and passion for reading is imperative and involves self discipline. Sangkaeo (1999) noted that “the numbers of those who can read but do not read enough are increasing”. It has also been observed that the aliterates in the society have outnumbered the illiterates (Beers, 1996).

Factors Encouraging Aliteracy

Reading is a life decision individuals must make. Many teenage reluctant readers have never given reading a chance. Quite a number of factors have been identified as responsible for the dying reading culture; while some factors are physical, others are psychological. The psychological factors include:

Lack of enthusiasm, urge, drive, desire, and motivation to read. Kush and Watkins (1996) opined that the reading attitudes of students declined consistently all through their elementary years. Wolf (1998) observed in his research of a fourteen-week that fourth graders read four books while fifth and sixth graders each read three books. Most shocking, is the 48% of high school students who never read books all through the duration of study. Furthermore, a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) reported a decline in reading among the young people. The report titled “To read or not to read” focused on teens and young adults. According to Dana (2007) This study shows the startling declines, in how much and how well Americans read, that are adversely affecting this country's culture, economy and civic life as well as our children's educational achievement.

Lack of choice in what to read: Due to the operational systems of schools, students are not in position to determine what books or materials the school board or authorities recommends.

Negative attitude to reading: Mathew (1978) equally noted that attitude is usually considered as one’s mood or feelings towards a person, group, object, situation or value. There is a clear difference between the attitude of boys to reading and the attitude of girls to reading. While fewer girls may be categorized as aliterates, aliteracy is more prevalent among boys. This is because boys have been observed to engage less in recreational reading than girls. Boys were also identified as problem readers compared to girls, and as a group demonstrated a lower reading

achievement (Kush and Watkins, 996). Mitchell, Terry and Terry (1996) also discovered that females had significantly more positive attitude towards reading for individual development, utilitarian, and enjoyment purposes than males. This disturbing trend tended to correlate with evidence of higher high school dropout rate among male students. Beers (1996) identified three categories of alliterates: dormant, uncommitted and unmotivated. According to her Dormant readers have no negative attitude to reading, instead they voluntarily read during free periods, such as school break time. She further noted that uncommitted and unmotivated readers have negative attitude to reading. Reading is rather viewed as a task and not a pleasurable activity. The uncommitted may consider reading in the future but the unmotivated have no future plan to read. Diamond and Onwuegbuzie (2001) reported that females had higher scores in both reading attitudes and reading achievement.

Efferent reader vs Aesthetic reader: Researchers refer to active readers as having aesthetic to reading whereas reluctant or aliterate readers have efferent response to reading. Though used first by Rosenblatt, Louise; Murphy (1998) explains that an efferent reader seeks information and focuses on accumulating information to be carried away at the end of reading. Aesthetic stance reader on the other hand focuses attention on what is being created during actual reading. Cole (2003) points out from Anderson, Shirey, Wilson and Fielding research of 1987 that when a book or story interests a child, an emotional response occurs. When there is a positive emotional reaction, it can induce students to read and thus enhance their intrinsic motivation [to read]. It is logical therefore to expect an efferent response to textbook reading and other school reading. This is assigned reading, not of the student's choosing intended to impart information and knowledge to the students. However, when a student is reading for pleasure, hopefully something he has chosen himself, the expectation is that he would move from the efferent stance to aesthetic stance. One emotional experience with a book would lead the student to seek out this same type of experience again and again. The more a student experiences aesthetic response to reading, the more his love for reading grows.

Efferent response to reading is prevalent among students than aesthetic response. The problem lays in those "dreaded" assessment tests given each student. The school curriculum failed to move students from the point of learning to read to the point in which they love to read. Rosenblatt (1968) noted that students need to learn how to look at, to savor, the structure of image, idea, feeling, attitudes, during the process of evoking from the text. This emotional reaction induces students to read and contribute in developing their intrinsic motivation (Cole, 2002).

Interest or Preferences of Students: Research have shown that boys prefer to read books on subjects like computer, sports, books with male as main character in addition to nonfiction materials. Beers (1996) observed that aliterates far outnumber illiterates and encounter similar problems or difficulties. Harkrader and Moore (1997) and Hartlage-Striby (2001) in their study confirmed the differences in the reading preferences of boys and girls. Harkrader and Moore (1997) observed that while boys prefer reading books with male as main character, girls read books with either male or female character. In addition, Beers (1996) opines that teachers and librarians should structure reading events to suit children's current interests and should include questions on test and in group discussions that encourage aesthetic responses. However, some encouraging research has shown that maybe the problem of aliteracy is not quite as big as was once thought, especially among older elementary boys. Hartlage-Striby (2001), citing Wheeler found that while boys are not reading books, they are reading baseball cards, newspapers, comic books and magazines. The very boys teachers considered as aliterates because they are not reading do read *BMX Plus*, a magazine devoted to BMX biking, or *Complete Sport*, a football weekly, on a regular basis. It really should not matter what our students read for fun, as long as they find some kind of reading pleasurable. The more you read, the more you grow. The more you grow, the more you know, (Trelease, 1991)

Outdoor Activities

Sports activities such as football, table tennis, handball, basketball and other activities like school clubs, music band/ school choir, press club and so forth have been discovered to appeal more to young people much more than reading. Lang (1994) discovered this to be true while conducting a research on improving student interest in recreational reading. He states that reading has an abundance of competitors vying for the attention of … students. His research on the reading habits of fifth graders revealed that watching television and playing sports occupied a larger part of the students' free time than did reading. Furthermore, these students said that, when given the choice, they would choose "using a computer rather than read. Beers, (1996) also discovered the encroachment of outside activities on reading while studying the problem of aliteracy. Considering that there is limited time in a day, there are simply more "interesting" activities luring our students away from recreational reading.

ICT

The amount of technology available in our homes is another source of distraction, drawing students away from recreational reading. It is not unusual for students, even the less affluent, to return home every afternoon to play video games, surf and chat on the Internet, watch television, listen to music, or talk on the telephone. Trelease (1995) states that before the onslaught of computers, CDs, and the plethora of video game choices, , 59% of teens own their own television sets and 33% of those own a VCR. Reading requires more thinking and imagination than any of these high tech activities. With a nation of latch-key children, it is easy to see why reading is not taking top bidding as the after-school activity of choice. The probability of aliterates watching television, DVDs/ CD films, playing computer games and other activities apart from the ones listed here is very high. Ilogho (2002) states that "aliterates are more prone to watching TV, home videos, playing computer games, and engaging in a peer group discussion in preference to reading books, magazines news papers, etc. Purdy (1995) is of the opinion that privileged children living in a stimulating reading environment are more likely to be engaged in the art of reading.

The School Instructional System

In examining the causes of aliteracy, it is important to look at the way schools are educating the students. A very insightful quote from a student who participated in one of Sullivan (1991) study was included in Virgil (1994) research. The student said I loved reading when I was young; school made me hate it. One of the reasons students come to hate reading is the way teachers handle the subject of reading. The interest of students is usually not taken into consideration when selecting reading materials for school. Moss and Hendershot (2002) observe that students were motivated to read by a need to know approach. They wanted books that gave them information, e.g., non-fiction books. When students' interest for a topic is aroused, they will seek out all kinds of materials on that topic. Moss and Hendershot (2002), citing Worthy (1996), explain that "students' most positive in-school reading experiences were those in which they had choices about what they read. Incorporating more non-fiction books (not textbooks) into the curriculum could encourage more recreational reading for aliterate students. If students read what they find interesting, they will have positive experience with reading. It is thus reasonable to assume that a positive experience with a book, will provoke other positive experiences with other books.

Consequences of Aliteracy

"*I've traveled the world twice over, met the famous; saints and sinners, poets and*

artists, kings and queens, old stars and hopeful beginners, I've been where no-one's been before, learned secrets from writers and cooks, all with one library ticket, to the wonderful world of books" -Anonymous.

The above quotation reveals a vivid picture of some of the things readers stand to benefit when they engage in habitual reading.

In an occasion of International Book Fair in 1972, the then Director-General of UNESCO Rene Maheu said "The book is the most dependable and most convenient instruction of communications ever devised by man. With the book, the human mind for the first time was able to conquer time and space. It is equally important that the book – the unparalleled instrument for setting down man's wisdom and knowledge, promotes individual fulfillment and social progress, it gives everybody a chance to appreciate the best that the human mind could ever offer the world, and that it serves to create better understanding between people as a necessary step towards a true and lasting peace".

Aliterate individuals or society surely will suffer regrettable consequences that they may never recover from. The Old Testament book of Hosea says, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." We know that much knowledge is acquired through reading. Some of the consequences of aliteracy for individuals or society are numerous. Thus, refusal to read will create a gap that will result in:

1. Lack of in-depth knowledge of various subjects and issues of life;

2. Lack of perspective about things and inability to draw knowledge;

3. Lack of new vocabulary and terminology;

4. Lack of reading impairs one's intellectual abilities;

5. Lack of reading limits one's analytical abilities;

6. Lack of reading denies one the benefit of knowing places you may never get to;

7. Lack of reading deprives one of inspiration and opportunities;

8. Lack of reading limits one of mental imaginations and deliberate thinking;

9. Fewer opportunities for self development;

10. Lack of cerebral development which can result in mental stagnation;

11. Impaired self-confidence and boldness;

12. Lower-quality Interpersonal relationships;

13. Lower-quality decisions;

14. Inability to envision a bigger and brighter future

There is power in printed words to influence and produce change in certain undesirable aspects of human life including "Undesirable behaviours". Thus, an aliterate person is doing himself a disservice and may never be opportuned to find the needed solutions via reading.

Tackling Aliteracy and Reluctant Reading

A battle involves the deployment of weapons with which an enemy can be resisted and conquered. The battle against aliteracy will involve deploying some effective intervention to tackle the problems of aliteracy. Society and students in particular should heed the call to fight aliteracy in every ramification. Research offers some good weapons for the battle against aliteracy:

First, the choice of what students want to read for recreation should be left to them. According to Virgil (1994) the underlying issue is the disparity between what students are expected to read in the classroom, and what they would really love to read. If students were allowed more choices in what they read then they would read, and learn more. Of course, there are certain reading materials that teachers must require their students to read for the curriculum that the students would not necessarily choose to read. Teachers and librarians are not to dictate to students what they should be reading for pleasure. Recreational reading should not be treated as an assignment. Free choice is imperative for students to experience aesthetic responses to their reading.

Secondly, is the issue of giving time for Free Reading during the school hours. Over crowded school schedule has always been a problem and a challenge to reading in schools. By providing free time for students to relax and read what they have chosen to read and enjoy, teachers send the message that this type of reading is important enough to take time out of the very busy academic curriculum devoted to free reading. Trelease (1995) puts it bluntly: “If you have time for gym, art, music, recess, assemblies, and field trips to the zoo, then you better find the time for reading real books. If you can’t find the time in school, students won‘t find it outside either”.

A third suggestion for combating aliteracy is to ensure that recreational reading is purely recreational. That means it should be done for pleasure or for fun. Students should find this type of reading enjoyable. Nothing that is assigned a grade is going to be as enjoyable as it could be if it was done just for the sheer joy of the act.

Pennac (1994) puts it plainly in his book *Better Than Life*:

> We must ask for nothing in return, absolutely nothing. Erect no wall of prior knowledge around books. Ask not a single question. Do not assign the smallest scrap of homework. Do not add a single word to the pages that have been read. No value judgments, no vocabulary explanations, no textual analysis, no biographical notes. It is strictly forbidden to talk around the book.

Students should be encouraged to enjoy reading books, without asking for anything in return. They should be taught that reading is not just a school engagement. If schools want students to be lifetime learners, then they have to teach them how to enjoy reading and continue learning long after their school graduation. They have to teach them to love reading.

Anyone can develop himself/herself in any aspect as long as there is a desire to learn and the ability to read. Frederick Douglas did not have any formal schooling during his days as a slave. However, he was secretly taught to read by his master’s wife. Once he was able to read, a whole world of knowledge was opened to him. He was able to educate himself and became instrumental to others freedom. Douglas made it possible for others to find the courage to seek for freedom. Aliteracy problem is worsened by the jam-packed after-school activities. Ofcourse, a jam-packed school curriculum that does not allow time for free reading is itself an obstacle. It is imperative therefore that free reading becomes a part of the overall reading curriculum in every school, and at all class levels. If teachers do not make out time during the school day for this type of reading, how will students ever know how important it is?

Role of Teachers

Right from early years in school, students should be taught to be passionate about reading and even look forward to reading daily. They must come to appreciate why they must read. Reading skill is not enough, much more importantly the skills should be utilized maximally. Hitherto, schools have taught students to associate

reading with tests, assignments etc. They should now be made to see that reading is a tool for relaxation, enjoyment, pleasure, self development and advancement. They should understand that reading opens the way for a greater future. It is the tool for accessing the secrets and wisdom of life. It also opens access to the world of great minds one may never have the privilege of meeting.

Trelease (1989) asserted that “It is time to stop fooling ourselves. Teaching children how to read is not enough; we must also teach them to want to read. We have produced a generation of school time readers, the school objective should focus on raising lifetime readers.” If schools only teach students how to read, but fail to teach them to enjoy reading, there is a great chance that they will never read after school graduation. “The pathways of knowledge do not end in the classroom; they should start from it” (Pennac, 1994).

Role of School Libraries

The school library is strategically the center of all intellectual activities. It houses all print resources, audio materials, audio-visual resources etc in the school. The librarian’s first priority should be to lead the school, staff and students, in a reading revolution in which students are taught to want to read instead of just how to read.

A librarian can achieve this by the following: First the school librarian must know what subject users are interested in. Then find out what students like reading. The United Nations and UNESCO over the years gave high priority to reading promotion through education and cultural organizations. Towards this end, easy to read books or materials, newspapers, and other information sources have been published and are still being published. The school librarian being at the forefront in the school reading revolution can mobilize students to actively participate in promoting reading (International Federation of Library Assoc. and Institution, 1996) .

Involving Students in Reading Promotion

The school librarian must adopt workable strategies when organizing reading promotion programmes for students. The entire school should be carried along in the Reading promotion programme. That is students, teachers, parents, and other staff of the school must be properly enlightened and educated. Mackey, Margaret and Ingrid (1996) identified some strategies for encouraging reading among reluctant readers. These include: offering classroom reading time, allowing selection among a limited number of books, discussing selection technique with students, following an author’s series or genre, browsing, talking to friends, teachers or librarian, or making a choice based on an appealing title or cover. Reading the beginning of novels aloud in class can help “hook “reluctant readers.

Furthermore, encouraging students to read comic books, children magazine, series books, adventure stories, fiction-books, newspapers, biographies, and many others should be acquired to provide a long list from students can select what they want to read. Comics and illustrated colourful materials particularly appeal to children and adolescents. Also the ICT technology has a strong advantage of being used to promote reading among youths. The youths in our society tend to find ICT technology highly fascinating and exciting. Hardly can you find young persons in urban cities who cannot use or operate any of the new ICT technologies, be it internet, TV, telephones, GSM, emails, computers, computer games etc. Research however, has shown that young people are not reading because of the advent ICT. It is my belief that it can be used to promote reading. Today there are a wide range of electronic information resources and databases. A lot of literary works for children and teenagers can be found on the internet, including stories and novels in CD-ROM formats, talking books, audio-visuals etc. Young people can be encouraged to read electronic materials, especially those who have access to ICT equipments.

Another approach to promote reading is to introduce a “Readers Club”. This should consist of the school librarian, teachers and students. The club is responsible for organizing all reading campaign events for the entire school. The club will organize programmes on weekly bases taking into consideration all levels of students. The following are some of the activities that should be included in the Readers’ Club programmes:

- Organize reading competition and give prize awards to best readers
- Pay visit to renown authors and publishers
- Go on excursion to university libraries, national public libraries, publishing houses
- Organize reading seminars for students and teachers
- Each week, students with the guidance of class teachers should design bookmarks to promote a particular book, genre, or nonfiction area.
- Have students participate in Book Recommendation and selection process
- Introduce student journalism and have them write reviews of new library books and publish them in the school newspaper/magazine.
- Have students’ record book talks, on audiocassettes and check those audiocassettes out to other students.
- Give students time to talk with each other in an informal one-on-one or a small-group basis about books they have read for assignments or share aspects about the books they are reading.
- Have students select books for teachers to read aloud in the elementary schools.
- Have students select books for the library or for the classroom collection.
- Have students design poster advertisements about books and display them in hallways, etc. (Kuhlenschmidt, n.d.)

Conclusion

Those who detest reading may never discover secrets of life success and achievement. The continuous decline in reading among Nigerian youths is an important subject of concern to educators, parents, government and other stake holders. The reluctant reading behaviour displayed by both old and young adults reflects the state of intellectual decay and backwardness in society. The lack of desire, urge, interest, drive or motivation to read by educated literate persons describes “aliteracy”.

Several factors have been identified as haven being responsible for the ever increasing non-reading population, factors like sports activities, music, art, party events and diverse kinds of ICT technologies such as internet, emails, computer games, ipods, DVD films, satellite T.V programmes etc. These and many more compete favourably for the attention of majority of people especially young adults.

There is therefore a need to draw attention to young people’s reading needs and interest, challenges in order to make them want to read more and actually enjoy reading. Research Investigations show that intrinsic motivation, interest, attitudes, preferences and material types have in a way influenced students reading culture, particularly in this era of sophisticated ICT technology facilities.

Given the necessary support and backing school libraries and librarians have a major role in ensuring that students enjoy recreational reading. The library being at the forefront of promoting reading a revolution among students and school staff have the responsibility of putting in place programmes such as Reading Competition and Award Day etc via a School Readers Club. The aim is to encourage students to experience aesthetic response in reading each time they pick up a material to read. This will help them become self- motivated independent readers, who no longer need to be pushed or forced to read. For effective promotion of reading habits, skills and culture, reading must be made pleasurable and voluntary ( ).

Recommendations

Parents, teachers, librarians and school management should work as a team to encourage students' positive attitude to daily reading, whether in school or outside the school. The following are some recommendations for schools and school libraries:

- Free reading time should be introduced into the school Time- Table such that it is not associated with test, examination, homework etc.
- Students should be given the freedom to choose from a variety of available resources in the library leisure time.
- Parents should be encouraged by teachers and school librarian to build home collection to suit the interest and needs of their children or ward.
- Parents, teachers, school management and librarians should encourage reading by giving book gifts to students when appreciating them.
- Teachers and librarians should structure reading events to suit children's' current interests, and include group discussions that encourage aesthetic responses.
- Teachers should engage in book discussions with students regularly to promote analytical reasoning later on.

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