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Poor Reading Habits Among Nigerians: The Role of Libraries

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Introduction

Comprehension is at the centre of reading. Collins and Cheek (1999) describe reading as a process that requires the use of complex thought processes to interpret printed symbols as meaningful units and comprehend them as a thought unit in order to understand a printed message. According to Rubin (2002), reading is a total integrative process that starts with the reader and includes the affective, perceptual, and cognitive domains.

Okebukola (2004) affirms that, through reading, humans have the tools to transmit knowledge to each succeeding generation; it allows one to listen to the wisdom and people of the ages. This is emphasized by many different religious traditions. The Apostle Paul admonished Timothy “study to show yourself approved unto God (11 timothy 2:15). Islam holds acquisition of knowledge (literacy, reading, etc.) in high esteem. The holy Qur’an reveals that the first communication (injunction) between Allah and Prophet Muhammad was knowledge-based, - *lqraa*, meaning “read” or “recite” (Qur’an 96: 1-5).

Douglas (2000) asserts that every child must become fully competent in reading to succeed in school and discharge responsibilities as a citizen of a democratic

society. Reading is the foundation of much enjoyment in life and is closely related to vocational efficiency. Students and employees in every field must read to keep abreast of what is happening in their fields. They must rely on written or digital words to convey information and data. The ability to read well is absolutely critical to success in life. According to Tracy (2008), reading is the only form of entertainment that is also an essential life skill. Reading is a skill that must be nurtured from a child's earliest years. Once children know how to read, they still need support to reach their full potential as readers. Most children with learning disabilities have problems with reading and related language skills. The decline in reading among children is an offshoot of technological advancements that have brought about overall changes in family, social, and economic conditions. Poor reading habits occur in children and young people because reading is not considered a relevant leisure activity as it does not form part of children's social interaction and reading is considered a solitary pursuit and is not attractive compared with interactive activity on the Internet. There is also an overriding desire amongst young people to spend more time with their friends than to remain at home reading. Adults and children alike may enjoy television and films as a way of enjoying their leisure instead of reading. There is unprecedented rise in the price of books, while DVDs are becoming more affordable.

Children with poor reading skills receive poor grades at school, get easily distracted and frustrated, have behavior problems, seem to dislike school, and often fail to develop to their full potential. According to Rubin (2002), children with poor reading habits have a higher chance of anti-social behavior. Delinquency; school violence, bullying, hacking computers, and even examination malpractices have a correlation with poor reading habits. This does not mean that those with poor reading habits display such behavior; however, poor reading habits are associated with such behavioral patterns while good reading habits help develop a steady and constructive mind.

Need for Effective Reading Culture

The acquisition of reading skills has a beneficial effect on all school subjects, including social studies, science, mathematics, and so on. Poor reading skill can make a child develop a poor attitude toward school and can create self-esteem problems later in life (Fosudo, 2010).

Oke (1996) gives reasons why people read, including self-improvement, pleasure and relaxation, and a feeling of pride and prestige. According to Antwi (1985), studies show a relationship between reading/early literacy and a child's emotional, mental health, and social behaviour. According to him, a study done in the US showed that reading was correlated with delinquency, independent of neighborhood, ethnicity, and family involvement, and was the same in both ethnic groups sampled and constant over the age range studied. The degree of seriousness of delinquent act was directly correlated to the degree of severity of reading problems. The study also showed that early in the primary grades, children who are struggling with literacy begin to experience failure and related negative effects in interpersonal skills. These effects can include task-avoidance and acting out, lowered levels of personal regard, and seeking of personal validation in venues that are anti-social.

In Nigeria, a study carried out by Henry (2004), reveals that 40 percent of adult Nigerians never read a non-fiction book from cover to cover after they finish school. The average Nigerian reads less than one book per year, and only one percent of successful men and women in Nigeria read one non-fiction book per month. The same study showed that 30 million Nigerians have graduated from high school with poor reading skills. Some Nigerians may not read because they are not working in the right field(s). If regular reading and studying is a required condition of your job or profession, this in effect means you read, even if it is under duress. The magnitude of this problem jeopardizes the future of our public

schools. What is most frustrating is that much of this reading problem can be prevented if government, libraries, and teachers apply what is known as reading instruction or techniques. The vast majority of the world's information today is not digitized; it is in print form, mostly in books. Reading per se among young adults is not exactly on the wane, but the delivery mechanism has changed.

Communications with words is thriving, but in a new format, reading online (Okebukola, 2004). For many years, especially in the West, there have been doubts whether the written medium of narration would survive the onslaught of technology. Will children and adults who spend most of their time in front of a television or computer continue to read books? Similar fears were expressed at the end of the 19th century with the emergence of films and cartoons. Books survived that era and maintained their position as a parallel "technology". Topo (2005) affirms that the need today is the thoughtful integration of book reading with high tech, i.e., the integration of multi-media activities such as photography, printing and drawing, sewing and crafts, 3-D and digital art, hip-hop, claymation, and online services in our libraries. This will reverse the decline in book reading among children and adults. Oke (1996) affirms also that a conscious effort should be made by all stakeholders in the educational system to promote the reading habit. According to him, equipping libraries is the first practical step in these efforts.

Poor Reading Culture

The way of life of a nation is influenced by the percentage of its citizen who are literate. Cuba, for example, is adjacent to the US and has the highest rate of literacy in the world. This is among the reasons why Cuba has a vibrant economy despite decades of diplomatic conflicts with the strongest nation in the world (Henry, 2004). Tracy (2008) asserts that being a former British colony, Nigeria's literacy culture ought to be as standardized as that of the Britain. About 99% of British citizens can read and write. The same cannot be said of Nigeria. Henry (2004), states that out of the 814 million illiterate people in the world, developing countries, especially in Africa, represent a huge percentage. However, Latin America, Asia, and others are making frantic efforts to drastically reduce the illiteracy rate, but owing to the following reasons, the same cannot be said of Africa.

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Poverty: In sub-Saharan Africa, the impact of poverty is deeply felt. Only a few people live above the poverty line. About 80% of Africans live under hazardous conditions. The per capita income of an average citizen in Nigeria, "the giant of Africa" with its abundant natural resources, is two dollars. This, in no little measure, affects the reading habits of Nigerians. Many are too poor to send their children to school. They lack money to buy books and pay school fees.

Corruption: Corruption has a profound effect in Nigeria. The government is trying to fight corruption, which has drastically affected Nigerians reading culture. Corruption is present everywhere in Nigeria, from government institutions to private organizations. In schools, for instance, many students prefer to indulge in immoral acts rather than face their studies diligently. Situations like trading sex for grades, sales of ungraded textbooks to students at high fees, using money to buy examination grades, and cheating in examinations abound in our institutions of higher learning. Those who engage in these infamous acts consider reading a waste of time.

Noise culture: A learning environment requires places for quiet study. Most schools

are in densely populated areas, where distractions prevent the smooth flow of learning. Moreover, the "illiteracy syndrome" has an adverse effect on the psyche of many Nigerian citizens. Most people perceive noise to be an integral part of their culture.

Undue importance attached to wealth: Many Nigerian people celebrate mediocrity at the expense of intellectuals. This is manifest in our rush for material things. Some people abandon their educational careers for the pursuit of money. Many have abandoned their education in search of "quick money," which they believe can be gotten in business or politics. Many people run away from the village schools to take up jobs in Lagos.

Lack of reading language: In many homes, the language of reading is introduced late; the first contact point of some children with this language is in school. As children grow older, reading and its associated activities become herculean.

Dearth of libraries: libraries play an important role in the promotion of reading habits. However, these libraries (school and public) are either non-existent or not playing their expected role. State and local government, and proprietors of schools (government and individuals) have not complied with library provisions in the National Policy on Education (NPE). Public libraries are not being established where they are needed. The few existing public libraries are neither adequately funded nor stocked with reading resources that can affect the lives of citizens.

Role of the Library in Reading Culture

The need to promote effective reading habits among the general populace of Nigeria has been receiving attention from organizations such as the National Library of Nigeria, the Reading Association of Nigeria and the Nigerian Book Development Council. Since 1981, the National Library of Nigeria has been sponsoring the readership promotion campaign in the country. This is done as part of the strategies to ginger up the reading culture in Nigeria. The objectives of the readership campaign includes:-

- (i) To encourage more reading Nigerians
- (ii) To promote the increase in production of reading materials in Nigeria, both in quality and variety and
- (iii) To identify the major obstacles that inhibit reading in the country and find ways of eliminating them.

The problem with the above objectives is that the readership promotion campaign has been restricted largely to Abuja, Lagos, and some few state capitals. The impact has not really been felt in other parts of the country because the National library has not been adequately funded to put the campaign in prints or electronic media.

The above observation notwithstanding, the library can play an important role in the promotion of reading habits among Nigerians. Libraries, especially school libraries, are fundamental to the design, implementation, and attainment of educational excellence. Libraries are an integral part of the educational development of school children and youth. Without the support of efficient libraries, schools cannot successfully achieve the goals of education, which are:

- The inculcation of national consciousness and national unity;
- The inculcation of the right type of values and attitudes of the individual and the Nigerian society;
- The training of the mind in the understanding of the world around, and
- The acquisition of appropriate skills and social abilities and competence as equipment for the individual to live and contribute to the development of the society. (NPE, 2004).

Libraries provide access to reading materials through which school children and youths can gain and improve their skills. Libraries help introduce the use of reading for information, pleasure, passing examinations, and personal growth through lifelong learning. Libraries provide materials that offer more extensive and varied information than classroom study alone. Voluntary reading helps develop reading skills and mastery of language, extends students knowledge, and assists them in their academic work. Students and youths who read are likely to have background knowledge, familiarity with new topics or subjects, and thus, find learning easier and interesting.

In Nigeria, literacy is recognized as a basic tool for personal and national development. The National Policy on Education (2004), places inculcation of permanent literacy and numeracy, and ability to communicate effectively as one of the objectives of school education. The library must provide resources to complement education. These resources can take children and youth far above technical literacy to developing reading culture which makes permanent literacy attainable.

The role of the libraries in promoting reading is especially crucial in developing scientific, reflective thinking and creativity. Librarians can help children and youths develop critical and independent thinking through their exposure to a wide variety of instructional resources and learning opportunities. Apart from the development of creative and critical thought, the role of the library in the promotion of reading culture can be seen in the readers' development of values, attitudes, and appreciation. These are difficult to teach in the classrooms.

In the process of encouraging or inculcating the reading habit in children and youth, stakeholders (parents, teachers, schools, librarians and other library staff) should avoid nagging, bribing, judging, criticizing reading choices, and setting unreasonable goals.

Promoting Reading Habits

Having considered some of the factors responsible for poor reading culture in Nigeria, it is pertinent to suggest strategies that can be adopted to turn the country to a reading nation and her citizens a reading people. Imbibing the culture of reading can assist in finding solutions to socio-economic and political problems.

Improved Funding: Fund is crucial to the development of education and libraries; it is a *sine qua none* of performance. Therefore, the Nigerian government has to improve its funding of the education sector, by increasing funds allocated to schools. This would affect provision of school library services. Funds should be earmarked for establishing, equipping and maintenance of libraries (public library inclusive). Sufficient fund should be provided to acquire adequate, current and relevant library materials – books, magazines, charts, transparencies; photographic slides, and computer instructional packages. Concerted effort should be made by the appropriate supervisory body to monitor effective utilization of funds allocated to the library.

Establishment of libraries: Efforts must be made by government at different levels to establish more libraries in their schools and for the private, club, communities, Religious bodies, organizations (NGOs and CBOs), Old Students Associations, professional bodies, and individuals should be encouraged to assist in the promotion of reading by establishing libraries or supporting already established school and public libraries. This can be done through stocking libraries with good reading materials that can impact on the lives of Nigerians. These libraries should also be provided with professionally qualified personnel to render services to the users.

Continued provision and access to books: provision of a varied collection of

enjoyable and information-rich books is a major contribution of the library towards reading promotion. Availability and accessibility of instructional and pleasurable books stimulate development of reading and attainment of permanent literacy. It has been found out that school libraries are the principal source of books for supplementary instructional resources and voluntary reading. It must, however, be pointed out that many schools do not have libraries at all. Where they exist, the stock in these libraries is grossly insufficient to play the expected role.

Associating reading with pleasure: Children and students can be motivated to read and thus form good reading habit through storytelling, reading together (shared reading), formation of reading/book clubs as well as provision of conducive reading environment devoid of unwarranted noise and distractions. Storytelling is a basic and enduring form of literacy expression in Nigerian cultures. Librarians should encourage the integration of storytelling and the oral literacy tradition with the school curriculum especially in primary school. Telling children interesting stories encourages their attention and focus, develops their listening skills, and helps stimulate voluntary reading.

Another way of introducing pleasure or fun to reading is by reading together. Reading together can take place in the classroom, library, or at home. Parents, school librarians, teachers, and children can read aloud to themselves at home, in the class or library, getting to an exciting point in the story book before stopping. The interest generated will inspire many students to continue the story on their own. In the course of shared reading, the passage read aloud can be discussed and a new book can be introduced to the students before its shared reading commences. The experience of reading and hearing increases speed; facilitates comprehension, good pronunciation; develops reading and critical thinking skills. In addition, shared reading puts confidence in some timid children and encourages them develop a voluntary reading habit.

Excursions to libraries and exhibitions: Children/students in schools where there are no libraries can be taken on excursions to libraries in other schools or in their locality. They can also be taken to book exhibitions/fairs. During such visits, children would be introduced to the library and its resources. They will also be educated on the importance of books and reading to their education and future lives.

Encouragement of library usage: Teachers should encourage maximum use of the library and its resources by giving pupils/students assignments/projects that would necessitate frequent visits to the library. Such assignments/projects must be practical. They may entail reading a novel and summarizing it, or using the library resources to solve an environmental problem.

Appropriate legislation: It has earlier been pointed out that the National Policy on Education NPE statements on the provision of libraries have not been implemented by the stakeholders. Non-implementation stems from the absence of appropriate legislation to back up these statements. It is, therefore, been suggested that appropriate legislation be enacted to enforce compliance with the policy statements. Such legislation should stipulate stiffer penalties such as closure of school(s), for non-compliance with the policy statements.

Resuscitation of mobile library services: Promotion of reading habits should not be confined to students in the classroom or the physical library alone. Rather, consideration and extension of library services should be given to children and youth who, for one reason or another, are out of the normal school or library environment. This can be done through mobile library service, a formidable service provided by the public library. In the 1970s, Nigerian populace in the rural areas – farmers, nomadic fishermen, and cattle rearers, used to enjoy this service. Regrettably, since the 1980s, this important library service has become moribund.

To attain the objective of the universal basic education as well as carry out the goals contained in the NPE, states and local governments in Nigeria must revive

the mobile library service. Once revived, the library would carry reading, vocational, and instructional materials to remote communities. The library would be able to serve the needs of school children, dropouts, adult illiterates, semi-literates, nomadic fishermen and cattle rearers, and other categories of people who wish to be associated with reading and education.

Conclusion

Education is a continuous process. It can be acquired formally through attendance at schools, workshops, seminars, or other forms of training. Traveling has been recognized as an important form of education. People can become educated by traveling to lands far away from them through leisure reading and thereby learn about other people, culture, and environment.

A reading nation is an informed nation. Nigeria can not be regarded as a reading nation because the younger generation of Nigerians does not consider reading a leisure activity. The poor reading habits of these younger Nigerians affect their performances at school and during examinations. Children/students with poor reading habits may engage in anti-social behaviours such as school violence, bullying, and examination malpractice.

To redress this anomaly, several organizations and institutions, including the library, have taken steps to encourage and promote the reading habit among Nigerians. Library been the nerve centre of any academic institution, is charged with the responsibility of acquiring and providing access to a variety of instructional and information-rich materials in different formats. The library continues to discharge this responsibility and employ other strategies that can promote reading culture. Other stakeholders - government at different level, communities, organizations, parents and individual proprietors have their roles to play. All hands joined together, would lift Nigeria from her present state to becoming a nation consisting of people with very high reading culture.

The habit of reading should begin at an early stage and should be imbibed throughout one's lifetime. The complementary role of the library in inculcating and promoting reading habit in Nigerians should be appreciated. According to Douglas (2008), "The library becomes increasingly important in the new teaching, for not only does it supply enactment materials in all areas; it also supply materials at all levels of difficulties. It stores books, pictures, pamphlets, maps, films filmstrips, recordings and all other printed media which makes it a gold mine for each teacher and each pupil."

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