

## READING CULTURE AND READERSHIP PROMOTION AMONG YOUTHS IN PRESENT DAY NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

*By all accounts, reading is generally acknowledged as one of the most effective ways the knowledge base of any nation can be increased. Equally, it has been observed and rightly said that the cultivation of a reading culture among the youths from primary through secondary schools to tertiary institutions will boost their academic excellence and ultimately any nation's growth prospects. The youth after all are the leaders of tomorrow. The study hence discussed how good reading habits can be inculcated in children, and how libraries and schools can largely contribute to good reading habits in our youths. In conclusion, parents, government and youths themselves have been advised to play their individual roles in encouraging good reading culture among Nigerians as readers are leaders.*

**Keywords:** *Reading Culture, Readership Promotion, Youths, Tertiary institution*

### INTRODUCTION

Wikipedia defines reading as a process of retrieving and comprehending some form of stored information or ideas. These ideas are usually some sort of representation of language, such as symbols to be examined by sight or by touch (for example braille). Other types of reading may not be text-based, such as music notations or pictograms. By analogy, in computer science, reading is acquiring of data from some sort of computer storage. Although, reading is now a primary means for most people to receive information, this has been the case only for the last 150 years or so. With some exceptions, only a small percentage of the population in any country was literate before the industrial revolution. Gupta (2010) opined that reading is one of the finest habits that a person can have. Previously, when there were no televisions people used to spend their time reading books.

It was through reading of books that people used to know the world outside. They used to become members of libraries so that they could read more books, but this habit of reading books is continually degrading due to the vast impact of the internet. People spend a lot more time chatting than reading. But, still, those who love reading read in whatever form the information comes. Reading can be categorized into the rates of reading, types and methods of reading, skill development, and reading assessment. Rates of reading include reading for memorization (under 100 words per minute (wpm), reading for learning (100-200 wpm), reading for comprehension (200-400 wpm), skimming (400-700 wpm) and scanning (more than 700 wpm). Types and methods of reading can be identified with several types and methods of reading, with differing rates that can be attained for each, for different kinds of materials and purposes. Such as subvocalized reading, speed reading, proofs reading. Structured Preposition Evaluation (SPE) method and survey question read recite review (SQ3R) method.

***Skill-development:*** Several methods of teaching and learning to read have developed and become somewhat controversial. Phonics involves teaching and reading by associating character or groups of characters with sounds. It is sometimes argued to be in competition with whole language methods.

***Whole Language Methods:*** Involve acquiring words or phrases without attention to the characters or groups of characters that compose them. It is sometimes argued to be in competition with phonics methods.

***Reading assessment:*** Because reading draws on multiple types of knowledge, it can be tested in several different ways. For example, the average reading ability of children aged 10 years, 0 months will be 10:0. However, a more advanced eight year old might also be able to read at the 10 level.

### **INCULCATING THE READING HABIT IN NIGERIAN CHILDREN**

Reading habit should be inculcated in a child from his early age. This habit has only positive aspect and no harmfulness. According to Gupta (2010), the first advantage of reading habit is that it helps to improve a child's vocabulary. As a child starts reading he gets to know many words which are new to him or her. But he or she reads the words as part of the story, sometimes the child guesses the meaning of the word without the help of anyone. This power of deciphering the meaning of a word by its implementation is very useful in competitive examinations. By reading books, not only the stock of word increases also the child is exposed to various forms of writing which helps him in developing his writing skill.

Onwubiko (2010) supports Gupta by analyzing reading as obviously one of the basic things a child begins to do in the early stages of formal education, within the school building. Some children also learn to read from the parents even before they start schooling. It is through reading that children broaden their understanding of life. Reading opens up a whole new world from which to see themselves and others. It enables creativity to blossom in the child. It gives them the tools to explore their talents while learning about themselves and their societies. Francis Bacon (1561-1626), the English philosopher asserts that reading makes a full man, speaking a ready man, writing makes him exact.

Reading culture can best be explained as a learned practice of seeking knowledge, information or entertainment through the written word. Such practice can be acquired by reading books, journals, magazines, newspapers etc. Having a good reading culture has become imperative in the 21st century for everybody, especially our children's education, the future of the nation. To participate effectively in our children's education is a task that must be done. Great readers, as it is always asserted, have always made great writers, as history, autobiographies and biographies of great men have taught us. The great writers in Nigeria, such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, T. M. Aluko, Cyprian Ekwensi, Flora Nwapa, Elechi Amadi, Edwin Clark, Buchi Emecheta, Chinamanda Adichie, to mention but a few are examples of great readers and writers. Mefor (2010) opines that cultivating a reading culture is important to any individual and to the development of any nation. The declining interest in reading among the youth today is a cause for alarm and a challenge to

all. Chika Mefor stresses that a nation cannot sustain itself in the future without great readers and writers. The importance of reading in a nation's development cannot be overlooked. It is necessary to sustain a reading culture; otherwise literacy could revert to illiteracy.

### **LIBRARIES AND SCHOOLS AS MEANS OF CULTIVATING GOOD READING HABITS IN YOUTHS**

Mansor (2011) confirms that bookshops and libraries are a reflection of learned societies and we will be left behind if we are not focused on taking the young generation to an environment of knowledge. He averred on that there is no scintilla of doubt that the most appropriate place for the pursuit of higher learning is no other than a university. A university is an intellectual community wherein the primary objective is not only to teach our youth to be educated, but also to gear them to become independent and critical thinkers so that they can become responsible members of society and cosmopolitan citizens of the world. The paramount role of the school cannot be questioned, because it is the venue where the educators and teachers mould and train our youth to be the best that they can be, harnessing their fullest potentials and developing their inner character.

The educator's role is not simply confined to reading to them stories, asking them to give a report and delivering lectures via power point presentations. Part and parcel of being an effective teacher is to encourage the students to speak their minds and discuss and analyze critically among themselves a specific idea in conjunction with a particular lesson in a given session. It goes without saying that our students can only do so if they keep abreast with the latest developments in all fields of knowledge. Hence, besides encouraging our students to speak what is on their minds, the teacher must also cultivate in them the love of reading and the passion for books. Such an intellectual culture would incontestably lead them to the joys of writing.

In preparing youths to be future leaders of the country, they must be armed and fully equipped with the three incontestable weapons. Speaking boldly, reading voraciously and writing eloquently. It is therefore proper to say that those who can read definitively have an advantage over those who cannot. In other words, Readers are leaders. One of the researchers Solarin (2009) who carried out projects to promote reading culture among children in Nigeria opines that Nigerians' reading culture is at lower ebb than hitherto. Based on this noticeable impact, Literamed publication embarked on a campaign aimed at reviving the reading culture across the country.

The campaign was flagged off in Lagos State as the pilot arena to create awareness. He stresses that reading creates lots of fun and gives special enjoyment that nothing else can replace, adding that books help in developing children's vocabulary and ultimately their vocabulary skills. He said that research conducted by a group of experts shows that Nigerian youths preferred to watch cartoons at all times to reading books. Other organizations that supported promoting reading culture amongst children include QUEST and MAASC. (The minds across Africa schools club initiative). The latter was an action research project based at Makerere University in Uganda. Working with both teachers and pupils, reading in English was promoted through the distribution of a series of comic

books and charts which children were encouraged to read alone and in groups. The MAASC project was based on the following three hypotheses.

- (1) Providing an informal, interactive forum to children will lead them to improve their reading and writing skills.
- (2) Making available literature suitable to writing and speaking which will lead to children's enjoyment of the learning process.
- (3) Conditioned input focussed on desired values will lead to children's acquisition of life skills.

Oriade (2009) supports the above by suggesting that to revive reading culture, the Federal Minister of Education should begin a process to reclaim the minds of the youths. This process can begin by promoting a national reading campaign aimed primarily at primary school pupils in order to lay a proper foundation for their further and future learning and that of the nation. Such a campaign, amongst other things, should encourage the reading by these pupils, of at least one book a month. And to complement and ensure its success, a system of book tokens, to facilitate the easy access to affordable books should also be introduced. Whilst a reading culture will not, and is a huge gap between knowledge and know-how, it will at least cause more of the youths in Nigeria to think and question their government's actions and inactions and hold them to greater account, which in the long run will augur well for the entire nation.

### ***Efforts of the Nigerian Government and Reading Campaign***

Edukugbo (2010) applauds President Jonathan at the launching of his "Bring back the Book campaign at the modern EXPO Hall, Eko Hotel, Lagos on Monday, Dec. 27, 2010. The President, in his speech, said that he decided to publish a book because he wanted to promote a reading culture and accountability in governance. This president's campaign on reading culture, supported by Professor Wole Soyinka and other well meaning citizens, is a battle to restore our educational standard to its glorious past and to lift further to the heights where it would lead to resurgence of our march towards economic prosperity, environmental sustainability and social advancement.

According to President Goodluck Jonathan, the decision to embark on the campaign came after several consultations and a consensus that the country requires a nationwide campaign to bring back the book reading culture, so as to "catch them young. He pointed to the need to move towards creating a knowledge economy, which is starting with his campaign. The Nigerian President recalled government's efforts to bring about quality education through the recent Presidential summit on education held in Abuja which preceded the compilation of his book. The President said that at all times, "Nigerian youths should have a book in their hands". That is the way of civilization. "Many agree that the foundation for the development of all civilizations lies within a vibrant educational system and that at the core of these values is a sustainable reading culture." Among the dignitaries at the occasion was Odi Ofeimun (2010). In his own remarks, he said Nigeria has a President who is not over-bearing, not a philosopher-king, reaching out to the people, describing Nigerians as a new type of people who want to make a difference through book reading. He said that reading is an equalizer of all people. "Great nations are built by

great minds and great minds are nurtured by books". The renowned poet called for the revival of local government libraries which should be well stocked with good books. He recommended a version of the United States Library of Congress for Nigeria. "It's the first time a national leader will be identified with the reading culture even when cynics are saying it is not possible, a new approach to confront the situation". He decried the disheartening state of our reading culture saying "we have an educational system that gives poor education to poor people to make them poor so that they can remain miserable. Hence, there are poor WAEC results, poor libraries and lack of book stores.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no doubt that the reading culture among Nigerian children is tragically deficient in comparison to other developed nations. One can even say that the past generation of Nigerians -our fathers and grandfathers had a remarkable thirst for knowledge through education despite the scarce resources that they contended with. They had a better appreciation of the value of education as a status symbol. There are examples of parents who deprived themselves of everything to see to the education of their children, a situation that was also economically and financially viable or rewarding.

Sadly enough this is not the case among many Nigerian children in the 21st century. The importance of reading for its own sake has taken a bad hit and reading culture has steadily declined over the years. Where do we look for the source of this problem? Who is to blame? Is it the parents, the children, the educational system or the nation? What has happened to the Nigerian child and that love for reading so well exemplified by the past generation? Why is the Nigerian child no longer interested in reading except when he/she is sitting for an examination? Why is the lack of interest in knowledge for knowledge sake? Indeed this poses a problem for the future of this nation. How can a nation sustain itself in the future without great readers and writers with the imagination and creativity that characterized the Chaucers, the Shakespears, the Achebes, Soyinkas or even the younger voices such as Adichie? Some of the problems include the following:

***Lack of motivation among children:*** It is my belief that the Nigerian child is presently lacking in the motivation that creates a strong reading culture in the nation. There is a general apathy or loss of value for reading. The youth is distracted by the fall outs from technological innovations of today. These include the easy availability of entertainment media, games and gambling. Rather than read a good novel or biography they may prefer to play card games or indulge in some other pastime outside of reading.

***Lack of parental guidance and encouragement:*** Parents should encourage children by providing them good books to read at home. Those with access to modern technology such as the internet should monitor closely and restrict access time for the children. They should remember that all that glitters is not gold. Technology can be source of discouragement for our children's moral growth.

***Inadequate funding of educational institutions:*** The government can help by assisting schools and communities with functional libraries (which are repositories of knowledge) that children can loan books from and read at leisure.

**Poor economy and low standard of living:** A hungry man with N1000 in his pocket knows whether it is better to buy books or food for his child. Most parents live in reduced circumstances. They can ill-afford three square meals a day, how much more buy books for their children. Owing to hardship, most parents cannot provide good books for their children, especially in a situation where prices of goods and services continue to skyrocket with government not doing anything to ameliorate the situation. As a result most parents cannot send their wards to school so as to be able to read and write. Those parents that send their children to school send them to public schools where, in most cases, the teachers are always on strike because they are not well paid. They are not dedicated to their duties because of their meager salary. Most times they are engaged in private businesses, rather than teaching their students.

**Examination Code:** Nowadays, many children care only about passing their examinations without acquiring the basic knowledge that comes with education. Some of these students depend on "mercenaries" hired by their parents to write examinations for them. For this reason, these children no longer bother their heads to read their books. Considering the fact that education is a lifelong phenomenon, its distortion or misdirection under whatever guise or circumstance robs our children of great opportunities inherent in human potentialities. And the distortion or misdirection of education implies in reality, a negation of the process of developing the best of individuals for the collective well-being of society.

**Improvement of Public and Local Government Libraries:** A provision of libraries in every local government is another target for improving reading culture. Existing public libraries should aim at upgrading their collections. Their services should be made pleasant enough to attract children of all ages to read outside of their teachers' assigned texts. Indeed going to the library should be a pleasant experience for every child. Communities can be called upon to help in building up libraries for their children.

**Decreasing Cost of Publishing:** Government should consider a complete waiver of import duties and VAT on educational materials from abroad. Furthermore, supporting indigenous publishers has always been the best bet for any country's interest in its children education. This support can come in various ways, like reduced import taxes and tariffs on printing materials for local production in order to reduce cost of books.

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