

EVOLVING READING CULTURE AND READERSHIP PROMOTION AMONG THE NIGERIAN YOUTHS

ELIJAH OJOWU ODE

Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, Benue State University, Makurdi, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

One vital aspect of education, which is awfully lacking in Nigerian education system in spite of the curious nature of our society, is the reading culture. Reading is an indispensable part of an educational program without it the latter will be crippled and the nation will be deprived of intellectuals, artists, musicians and other talented persons; and the state of depression and monotony will prevail. There will be no zeal in life, which would be the very contrast of the theory of life. Against this background the paper examines the need to evolve a sustainable reading culture and discusses the role of various agencies in the development of reading culture and readership promotion. In addition, clarification is given to the concept of reading and recommendations are made to enhance a durable reading culture and readership promotion.

Concept of Reading

Reading process is so complex that a single acceptable definition is not readily available. There are almost as many definitions as there are experts in reading. We shall not go into arguments over these definitions but stick to one as a working definition. One of such classic and commonly used by Foertsch (1998) as the ability to pronounce words, the ability to identify words and get their meaning; and the ability to bring meaning to a text in order to get meaning from it. This definition looks logical and attractive because it encapsulates the ability to perceive and comprehend letters, words, sentences, paragraphs and whole stories in a written text. However, these definitions reflect long-standing views of reading, current literacy research by Arlington and Cunningham (1996) supports a more comprehensive definition of reading. This new definition includes all of the above definitions and places learning skills in the context of authentic reading and writing activities. It recognizes the importance of skill instruction as one piece of the reading process.

KEYWORDS: Nigerian Education System, Reading

INTRODUCTION

A necessary aspect of every man's education is the ability to read and comprehend. Amaka (2001) noted that reading in itself is a basic tool for learning enjoyment, development; and an avenue through which literate people can have access to vast and varied knowledge and experiences that are embedded and preserved in books and other forms. Thus, it is anticipated that awareness to read will be at a higher rate because of the high percentage of educated people. Regrettably, the literates on the contrary read only to pass approved examinations and for the attainment of certificates, thereby producing a society without a reading culture. Quoting Eziren (1977), Maka (2001) regretfully observed that it was disturbing in our country that most people go to the library only to study for examinations and after then, the library is forsaken. If this ugly drift is not tartan, it will not only cripple our education system, but will also divest us of the intellectuals and the state of nonentity and ignorance will triumph. Therefore, the thrust of this paper is to examine the

importance of evolving reading culture and the role of relevant agencies in the development of reading culture and in the promotion of reading.

The need for a Sustainable Reading Culture and Readership Promotion

Reading, according to Chase (2003) is very germane in that it helps to develop the habit of pursuing many useful hobbies and other allied interests by spreading before an individual a panorama of cosmic knowledge through the reading of interesting books and periodicals. He further contended that by encouraging reading varied tastes are developed and nurtured to the full heights. Agreeing to the above fact, Brown (2008) contends that reading is an indispensable part of an educational programme and that without it, the latter will be crippled and the nation will be deprived of intellectuals, artists, musicians and other talented persons and state of depression and boredom will prevail. There will be no passion in life, which would be the very contrast of the theory of life. Accordingly, Carlyle (2007) declared that reading is a ladder out of poverty and mental deprivation. He further contended that reading is probably one of the anti-poverty, anti-deprivation, anti-crime, anti-vandalism policies one can think of.

Developing reading culture will not only create mastery of varied knowledge preserved in books but also help one to become more independent in carrying out research. The spirit of independent research work is enhanced when the youths are exposed to the treasure embedded in books through reading thereby equipping them with tools for learning beyond graduation from formal study. According to Grayling (1996), to reading is to fly: it is to soar to a point of vantage which gives a view over wide terrains of history, ideas, shared experiences and the fruits of many inquiries. Thus, reading helps to widen the educational horizon of an individual as it exposes him/her to other areas of study, which are far remote from his areas of disciplines.

Studies by Brown (2008) and Ode (2004) have revealed that there exists a strong need for developing reading habit if one would be academically successful. A sustainable reading culture has the effect of delivering teaching from the domination of the textbook; and how this helps in attracting scholars of the highest quality must not be overlooked. The present emphasis on certificate and passing of examination in Nigeria, which is the bane of our reading, is precarious to our education system to thrive. According to Amaka (2001), reading is an acquired art and requires skills, which needs to be developed else, is stunted under certain socio-cultural environments. Therefore, it is important to develop reading habit, which is awfully lacking in spite of our curious societies.

Reading is a life-long companion without whom people are apt to grope in darkness and stumble upon the rock of ignorance. Complete freedom should be given to the students in reading by teaching and making them to appreciate the relevance of reading. Supporting this fact, Ode (2004) contends that an individual in this sense is endowed with unparalleled power and no longer become a servant of a single dogma but masters over an empire of knowledge.

Furthermore, Chase (2003) believes that reading grants an individual intellectual freedom because the knowledge they acquire through reading exposes them to have free access to all information that they may require. As scholars in arts and science work to advance knowledge in their various fields, they require the freedom to seek truth (through reading) when and where they will, not fitting their findings into pattern dedicated to superstitions or assumptions but base their findings and conclusions on evidence.

Importantly, reading provides access for individual or group development, foster and promotes self-development of an individual or group at whatever level of education, thereby bridging the gap between the individual and recorded knowledge. Affirming to this fact, Ode (2004) asserted that the quality of knowledge derived by an individual through reading has the potentials to free him, to enable him shape the world to his choice, and to conquer his ills and deprivations.

Considering the relevance of reading in academic and overall development of the youths, relevant agencies in education system should make frantic effort to ensure that a sustainable reading culture is preserved amongst the youths. Thus, the roles of some of the agencies like the library, school, authors, book industry, the government and mass media are discussed below

The Role of the Library

The library is the most cost-effective and logical means of providing reading materials for the greatest number of readership and should live up to its responsibility of providing guidance and encouragement in reading through talks in library and schools. The youths even after leaving school should have the opportunities for continued reading and access to further reading materials and the place of the library in this regard is very crucial. According to Carlyle (2007), all that mankind has done, thought, gained or been: it is all lying in the magic preservation in the pages of books, which the library is the procurator. Librarians should display attractive and varied books, which will captivate the interest of the youths and develop reading habit among them.

Library should provide pre-recorded radio and television programmes on reading and on the importance of the use of the library and play them for the youths to watch and listen to them. What they watch and listen to last longer in their memories than what they merely listen to. Chase (2003) asserts that libraries should also store and make accessible these essential informative materials in the library for the student to access themselves. This will help tremendously to cultivate their interest in reading and if allowed to continue, will create a better base for a sustainable habitual reading.

Audiovisual materials are essential tools for the motivation and stimulation of the interest of the youths in reading and their uses in library services should be encouraged to enhance development of reading habit. Audiovisual materials are particularly designed to motivate and stimulate interest as they appeal to more than one sense. They stimulate interest in learning. Studies in Educational Psychology by Carlyle (2007) show that audio-visual materials stimulate interest in reading because they provide learners with something, which makes them active. They motivate the interest of learners by offering them variety, which is a spice of life; monotony kills interest.

The library should include in its services organized reading and story hours and the provision of soft literature books, which are meant for entertainment and pleasure to attract the interest of the students towards reading. According to Ode (2004), public library is particularly charged with the responsibility of organizing reading and story hours for children and should live up to its conventional responsibilities as it will go a long way in creating interest among the patrons and enhance development of reading habit.

Libraries should mount serious readership campaigns to synthesize the public towards reading and create awareness of the availability of useful reading materials in the library in order to captivate the interest of the youths towards reading. Most youths have no interest in reading because sufficient awareness has not been created. The National Library of Nigeria has in many occasions organized readership promotion campaigns and annual national reading

competition. It has also sponsored national seminar on reading, all geared towards development of reading habit among the public. Public, Academic and Special libraries should borrow a leaf from this gesture and vigorously mount readership promotion campaigns and reading competitions in their respective places in order to develop and encourage reading habit among the public.

The library can further introduce mobile library otherwise known as 'library on wheels'. Library on wheels is a device to reach out to communities where there are no libraries services with books in van, hence the name 'Library on Wheels'. Various and varied books are selected and put in a van, which moves round from one community to another on appointed days with the books. The books are then displayed and given to people to read for a given period of time (1-3 hours) and are collected back at the end of the period. This approach affords young school leavers living in rural areas without the library the opportunity of having access to reading materials.

The Role of the Book Industry

Publishers and booksellers who are the producers and distributors of reading materials have a crucial role to play in ensuring an enduring reading culture among the public by producing and increasing number of reading resources. According to Amaka (2001), the inability of the publishers to publish sufficient relevant reading resources has to large extent contributed to lack of reading among our teeming youths. The attendant scarcity in turn makes the prices of the books to soar and consequently unaffordable by an average Nigerian who may wish to buy and read.

In addition, Kadiri (1987) noted that publishers in Nigeria are profit-oriented and do not accept manuscripts from budding number of authors which are unable to pay the exorbitant cost of publication they charge, thereby constituting a serious setback to the efforts to promote reading habit. Again, looking at the nature of publishing and bookselling in Nigeria, you will notice that it is not geared towards publishing books that will enhance reading habits among the youths. It is noteworthy to mention however, that the situation has now changed with the coming of Longmans and Macmillan publishers who have diversified publishing into books that will be relevant for promoting reading habit. Kudos should also be given to Onibonoje publishers, who has also popularized and formed book clubs to promote reading among the youths. Other publishers should borrow a leaf from the examples above to ensure that they encourage and publish resources that will be useful in the development and promotion of reading habit.

The Role of the Authors

Nigerian authors should not be exempted from the noble course to instil reading habit in our future generations because if there are no books, there can be no readers. The authors have not been living up to their expectations of writing books that will be insightful for reading. They owe the nation and the youths in particular, duty to write books that will be used in influencing the reading skills of the youths, but not much have been seen in this direction. Writing on the paucity of authors, Kadiri (1987) and cited in Amaka (2001) said that some of our intellectuals are lazy; others are frightened to write because they can hardly write impeccable English. Apart from that, those who can write are too busy and sometimes they are unable to meet the financial requirements involved in publishing. Those facts with their attendant problems have been some of the obstacles in the effort to promote reading habit among the youths. It is the opinion of this paper that if we are to leave an enduring legacy of reading culture to the future generations, the Nigerian authors should wake up from their intellectual slumber and see the paucity of literary materials in the country as a big challenge before them. We sympathize with the fact that writing in Nigeria is financially involving, but this must not be an excuse for not writing. Many

individuals who are concerned with development and promotion of reading culture among the public will be willing to render financial assistance to ease the problem if they show willingness and interest to write.

The Role of the Parents

Parents have a noble role to play towards inculcating reading habit in our youths, because most of the habits that children form at the early childhood are copied from their parents. Confirming, Buchwald (2001) contended that children are made readers on the laps of their parents. Habits are contagious and it is easier to copy than to cultivate, hence, the parents should cultivate the reading habit for the children to emulate. It is said that children have never been very good at listening to their parents, but they have never failed to imitate them. It is lamentable to say that most parents, even the literate families, do not read except during the periods of examinations and their children have ignorantly emulated those same habits from them. Thus, it is not funny to hear a parent, even an educated parent, scolding his child for reading outside examination schedule.

Furthermore, parents should create an enabling reading environment in the home to encourage reading. There should be a reading room with books or a library in the home secluded from noise. There can be no reading without books. When the reading materials with an enabling environment are provided in the home, the children and even the parents, themselves will derive pleasure and interest in reading.

Parents should also form the habit of visiting the library along with their children and wards in order to create awareness and encourage them in using the library where independent reading habit can be cultivated. During such visits, the parents should be able to devote time to tell the children the purpose and importance of the library, and conduct them round the library for the children to see for themselves. This will go a long way to arrest their interest in visiting the library on their own and subsequently cultivate reading as a habit.

In addition, parents should form the habit of giving book present to their children for them to appreciate the value of books. Chase (2001) advocated that there is no substitute for books in the life of a child. In Nigeria, this noble habit is awfully lacking among almost all the parents. Parents would afford to buy any toy (toy motorcars, bicycles, balls, video films and toy guns etc) no matter how expensive for their children, but not books. Therefore, the only books the children may boast of having are the ones the school authorities recommended, which their parents were compelled to buy. Even the parents hardly buy books for themselves except newspapers that they buy occasionally. By this singular attitude, parents have ignorantly sacrificed the interest of their children in reading for pleasure, which is inconsequential for their intellectual development. In addition, parents have the responsibility to awaken the interest of their children in cultivating reading habit by organizing story or reading hours at home during which they will teach children skills in reading.

The Role of the School

The school system, according to Helene (2004) is the best and the most effective means of imparting knowledge and influencing the youths especially in information gathering and the use of books as a source of information through reading. One would agree that a greater percentage of children who go to school – primary and secondary in Nigeria came from ‘homes without books’. That is, many of the children come from rural areas and their parents never went to school. When these children get into primary, secondary and tertiary institutions, the school is expected to encourage them in using the library where independent reading can be developed and encouraged. Compulsory library hours should be infused and

encouraged during which all the students are expected to be in the library reading books selected by their teachers.

In addition, the school authorities should create class-reading hours and organize the students to read in groups with group leaders where they can read to each other. During this period, the teacher should be an active listener, guiding and making corrections only when and where necessary to do so. A visit to some primary and secondary schools in Benue State, however, revealed that the practice has been abandoned and should be invigorated. In addition, pupils and students should be examined in reading during examination to make them appreciate the relevance of cultivating reading habit.

The Role of the Government

The governments at the federal, state and local levels have responsibilities of promoting and encouraging an enduring reading culture. The edict of 1998, section 5, subsection 53 on cultural policy for Nigeria, states unequivocally, 'the state shall promote reading culture.' Amaka (2001) regretted that several years after the formulation of the edict, the implementation of this noble policy had suffered serious setbacks in the hands of the military dictatorship and our avowed politicians. Government should be committed to ensuring that the implementation of the edict is enforced.

Government should avoid the usual ad-hoc approach in designing and introducing educational programmes, no matter how beautiful they may appear to be, without ensuring the availability of books. Without books, Amaka (2001) insisted that there could be no reading and consequently, no readers. Therefore, the government as a matter of urgency should wield into the astronomical cost of books in the country with the view to making books available at affordable price. Government should also ensure the participation of various non-governmental organizations in the promotion of reading habit among the youths in the country.

Government should also enforce the establishment of libraries in each of the Local Government Areas in the country. It is disheartening to observe the conspicuous absence of library services in most of the local government headquarters where greater percentages of our youth school leavers live. Most of the anti-social vices perpetuated by the youths today are due to lack of libraries. Availability of libraries with adequate reading materials would not only be a bold step towards promoting a sustainable reading habit but an antidote against the present crime wave in our society.

The Role of the Mass Media

The mass media has a crucial role to play in the advancement of an enduring reading culture through the production of their interesting programmes. The radio, television and newspaper houses should embark on production of programme, which promotes the relevance of reading. The adverts, jingles and broadcasts should gear towards promoting the importance of creating reading habits in our youths. Mass media should instigate activities, which will promote reading through literary programme such as book reviews, announcements of new publications and publishing poetry and short fiction. Pre-recorded radio and television programmes on reading and the value of the use of the library can be played during this period for the students to watch and listen. They should live up to their traditional duty of entertaining, educating and dissemination of information to the public.

Recommendations

Considering the weight of reading in the intellectual, social and economic development of an individual and the society, it is crucial to develop a sustainable reading culture among the populace. Towards this end, all hands should be on deck to ensure that this noble objective is realized.

Government, parents, school authorities, libraries, mass Medias, non-governmental organizations and even individual should as a matter of inevitability, contribute their quota sufficiently toward putting a structure for an enduring reading culture in our society. This is crucial, if our concerted efforts towards putting a structure in place for a durable reading culture will have any positive impact.

The library, which is the most cost effective and logical means of providing reading materials for the greatest number of people, must be established in every Local Government Headquarters in the country in order to provide reading materials for our teeming youths.

Nigerian authors should wake up from their intellectual slumber and see the paucity of literary materials in the country as a big challenge before them.

Finally, the publishers in Nigeria should be more responsive to the paucity of reading resources in Nigeria and publish sufficient books that will be relevant for inculcating reading culture.

CONCLUSIONS

The benefits of reading in academic and over all development of individual are very crucial that a nation that neglect the development of reading culture, does so at her own peril. Therefore, all stakeholders in educational matters should consider the development of reading culture among the populace as a challenge before them and ensure it success. It is the opinion of the paper that the recommendations advanced above will provide the panacea for the problems experienced in the efforts to promote reading culture among our teeming populace. They should therefore, be taken seriously by the parties involved in the fight to inculcate reading habit as a veritable legacy for our future generations.

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