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CONTENTS

Challenges Confronting Postgraduate Students in the Use of E-Resources: Experience of the University of Cape Coast, Ghana Barfi Kwaku Anhwere, Boohene Akonnoh Kwame & Afful-Arthur Paulina	1 - 14
Pedagogical Significance of Title-Taking among Yoruba Christians of South Western Nigeria Francis Omoyele Falako	15 - 30
Philosophical Inquest into Plato's Political Philosophy and Its Relevance to Nigerian Politics Adefarasin, V.O.	31 - 39
Funding Business Education Programme in Nigerian Universities Ishola, Nojeem Adeniyi	41 - 58
Summersault of Nigeria 6-3-3-4 Education Policy in Southwestern Nigeria: Challenges, Lessons and Way-Forward Oluwatoyin Isaiah Awolola, Okeyode Abraham Oketunbi & Olayemioyenike Oshin	59 - 76
Developing Children and Youth Reading Culture for National Development: The Role Of Library Services and Access to Education Akande Samson Oyeniyi	77 - 87
Integration of Historical Short Stories Into Physics Instruction and Students' Achievement in Mubi Metropolis, Nigeria Okoronka, U. A & Ballah, A. G.	89 - 102

DEVELOPING CHILDREN AND YOUTH READING CULTURE FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE ROLE OF LIBRARY SERVICES AND ACCESS TO EDUCATION

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Abstract

The decline in reading culture of Nigerian children and youth has become a subject of discussion in recent times. The conclusion reached at different debates and meetings organised to deliberate on the way out has emphasized the need to improve the reading culture of children and youth to enable them contribute to national development. This paper therefore examined the significant role the provision of library services could play in developing reading culture and highlighted some strategies that librarians and other stakeholders could adopt. The paper also X – rayed the poor state of education in Nigeria and the inability of a high percentage of Nigerian children to access quality education. The paper concludes by making recommendations that can enhance the acquisition of reading culture by Nigerian children and youth.

Key Words: *Reading culture, library services, education, national development*

Introduction

Development is one of the subjects which have received much attention in the literature in recent times. It is a word used to describe advancement of individuals, families, institutions, organizations, or nations. Development of a nation is associated with provision of basic needs of people. It has to do with an all round improvement in the social, economic, educational and other aspects of people's lives. No nation can be described as a developed one when the level of illiteracy, poverty and unemployment is high. National development engenders self-sustenance and independence in every sphere of national life.

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010) development refers to the gradual growth of something so

that it becomes more advanced and stronger. By this definition, development implies changes and increases from one state to another, and thus incorporates dynamism. Lawal and Oluwatoyin (2011) described national development as the overall development or a collective socio-economic, political as well as religious advancement of a country or nation. Development takes place when a nation has high skilled manpower achievable through systematic investment in education at all levels. In fact, to ensure national development, a strong foundation must be built at the primary and secondary levels of education because if the foundation is weak and faulty, tertiary education will be negatively affected. Harbinson (1964) cited in Nwogu (2013) lends credence to this fact by stating that:

the country which rapidly increases its national income through productive investment in development of skilled manpower may reach its goal of universal primary education more rapidly than if it were to neglect the early investment in secondary and higher education.

Literature is replete with facts that support the view of this paper that education is a veritable tool for national development. To this end, Nigerian youth must have access to quality education. The need to provide access to quality education for the Nigerian youth cannot be overemphasized in the light of the fact that today's society is knowledge driven. The present world moves on the wheel of knowledge – scientific, technological, agricultural, economic, and commercial. Thus nations are rated as developed when they are advanced in technology and scientific knowledge that promote national development. The schools and institutions impart knowledge and children must have access to education to be future leaders who can be independent citizens and active participants in the society for national development. It is on these premises that the nexus between education and national development needs to be critically examined.

Education and Development in Nigeria

Education and national development cannot be separated nor divorced. Education is so crucial to development that many scholars see education as a tool or instrument for national development. In a

lecture delivered by Senator Oluremi Tinubu at the Faculty of Education, University of Ibadan, on 22 January 2012, it was noted that: "we have reached a situation in which there is a consensus in the political and academic circles that the quality of education of the citizenry is one of the key instruments to achieving a dynamic overall national development." This paper is of the opinion that the citizenry referred to by Senator Tinubu included the Nigerian children and youth who are the focus of this present enquiry. The United Nations (UN) defines children as persons aged 14 and below while young adults are people aged between 15 and 24. By implication, adults are people aged 25 and above. These groups constitute the Nigerian society and they must all have access to education to ensure rapid achievement of national development.

It is a truism that almost half of the world's population are below age 25. In a very recent development, the National Population Commission (NPC) (2016) posited that children, adolescents and youth constitute not only a formidable demographic force, but also make up the next generation of parents, workers and leaders. The impetus for governments' investment in the children and youth lies in the fact that no country can achieve meaningful and sustainable development without interest in their development.

The concern for youth and children development and the need for government investment in their education is not a misplaced priority in view of the fact that Nigeria's population is predominantly youthful, with young people under 35 years accounting for about 50 percent of the country's over one hundred and forty (140) million people. The pertinent question to ask at this juncture is how this high percentage of future leaders will contribute their quota to the socio-economic advancement of Nigeria if they are not well educated. Kingdom and Maekae (2013) stressed that a nation develops in relation to its achievement in education and no nation rises above the level of its education. This implies that a high quality education will produce class of leaders and work-force that is highly skilled and can participate in the developmental processes that could enhance national development in a country like Nigeria.

The thrust of this paper is to look at access to education; the widely publicized decline in the reading culture of Nigerian children and youth and the role library could play to remedy the situation and promote reading culture.

Nigerian Children and Access to Education

The poor state of the Nigerian education system at all levels has been a recurrent topic in recent times. One thing that is emphasized by all discussants and commentators is the weak educational foundation at primary and secondary levels and inability of millions of Nigerian children and youth to have access to quality education. At a forum in Abuja, Nigeria, in 2010, many participants gathered to discuss the topic: "Nigeria: Child Education – A Case for an Improved System. The consensus was that the future of a nation's socio-economic and political wellbeing lies with the quality of its children's education because they are the future leaders.

Gbagi (2010) stressed the importance of quality child education and stated that if the problem of poor quality education is not tackled, the standard of education in Nigeria will continue to dwindle. This poses a serious problem because it forms the basis of how the children turn out in the future. He further added that government has been doing everything in its power to find solution to the problem of the decline in the quality of education in the country. Igbuzor (2006) joined the multitude of people who decry the state of education in Nigeria. According to him, "there is no doubt that the state of education in Nigeria is lamentably poor and there are a lot of challenges. We need to rise up to the challenges and change the course of events of Nigeria and put education in a right footing. That is the only sure way to sustainable development."

The importance and linkage of education to the development of any society is well known. It is in recognition of this importance that the international community and governments all over the world have made commitments for citizens to have access to education. However, according to Subrahmanian (2002), it has been documented that across the globe, there are inequalities in educational access and achievement as well as high levels of absolute educational deprivation of both children and adults. A more recent fact that revealed the declining educational standard and lack of access to education by Nigerian children and youth is encapsulated in the 2015 Global Monitoring Report (GMR). According to Natsa (2015), the 2015 Global Monitoring Report (GMR) revealed that Nigeria has the highest number of out-of-school children in the world and the figure is still increasing since 2000. More disturbing in this report is the revelation that Nigeria is one of

the countries in the world accounting for the majority of children deprived of access to education.

Early Reading and High Quality Education

Cultivating good reading culture in children and youth in primary and secondary schools could be an early intervention in reducing the high level of drop out in schools and the growing number of out-of-school children in Nigeria. Global Partnership for Education (GPE) 2016 expressed that an estimated 250 million children who attend primary schools in developing countries (Nigeria inclusive) are struggling to read even basic words. Furthermore, it was stated that children who fail to read in the early grades will fall further behind each school year, when the reading ability is progressively used as a tool for acquiring other types of knowledge. The end result of the experience is that poorly performing students will struggle to catch up and if they fail, they will simply stop schooling. The case of Nigeria is worrisome with public out-cry against the falling standard of education which starts from the primary schools. The foundation for reading must be laid during primary education. Non-readers will definitely become future illiterates and if they occupy position of leadership in the country's political system, much havoc will be wrecked. Therefore, as reading is the foundation of learning, ensuring that children are able to read in early grades will determine their future educational success (Global Partnership for Education, 2016).

Children and youth need to develop basic reading skills early in life for acquisition of knowledge. Knowledge documented in written texts is in different media like print and electronic formats which could be accessed only by reading. However, Nwosu and Unagha (2014) raised a concern about illiteracy among Nigerians, with its social and economic implications which has become a growing concern in recent times. More worrisome is the fact that the reading behaviours that are observed in our secondary schools and homes are not merely cases of illiteracy but illiteracy.

Harms (1995) cited in Nwosu and Unagha (2014) described the term "alliteracy" as the paradox of being able to read, but choosing not to. This is caused by poor reading skills, time pressure, workplace distractions and lack of concentration. Simply put, it is lack of the reading habit in capable readers.

Nigerian children and youth must develop basic reading skills to be able to acquire knowledge because according to Trelease (1991), the more you read, the more you grow and the more you grow, the more you know. But what do we observe about the reading habit of our children and young adults? What is the outcry of the school librarians, the public, parents, media, scholars, administrators and even the government which has invested so heavily in primary and secondary education of these categories of the Nigerian society? The consensus is that there is a decline in reading interest and the children and youth are no longer interested in reading. Aina, Ogungbemi, Adigun and Ogundipe (2011) described Nigerian children reading habit as poor. In their remark, the poor reading habits of young Nigerians affect their performance at school and during examination. They further stated that the habit of reading should begin at an early stage and should be imbibed throughout one's lifetime. This paper looks at the roles of libraries in the development of good reading habits by children and youth as formidable ways of enhancing quality of education and sustainable development in Nigeria.

Having established the need for access to quality education in schools for knowledge acquisition and future participation in leadership roles and the need to cultivate good reading habits to develop high order thinking and problem solving skills, it is now necessary to dwell on what the library could do to improve reading skills of Nigerians children and young adults.

Contribution of School Library Services to Cultivation of Good Reading Culture

Literature has described the reading culture of Nigerian children and youth as poor, dwindling, dying and unimpressive. The dwindling reading culture was reported in People's Daily of Wednesday, November 12, 2014. The paper averred that: "Today, reading culture is gradually dying down with its consequences showing clearly in the falling standard of education. Lack of readability among the youth and society leads to the failure of education individually and the country as a whole". This expression reveals that there is a serious and urgent need to buoy the reading habit of youths in schools for a better tomorrow for Nigerian children and increasing their chances of contributing to national development – socially, economically, educationally, politically and

democratically. What then could the school and public libraries do to promote and improve the reading habit of Nigerian children and young adults?

School and public libraries have been embarking on reading promotion programmes to inculcate good reading habit in school children and young adults. For example, as reported in Simisaye and Quadri (2010), organizing summer reading programmes as practiced by the Lagos State Library Board during the long vacation could be used as a strategy to inculcate and stimulate reading habit in children. At this programme, voluntary reading of books was encouraged and many activities like story hour and training on use of library skills were featured.

The Center for Educational Media Resource Studies, University of Ibadan (formerly Abadina Media Resource Center) also embarked on some strategies that can culminate in developing good reading culture in children. Some of these strategies are:

- i. Organizing "Saturday Story Hour" which is a "catch them young" programme aimed at promoting reading interest in children at an early stage through the art of story reading in which story books are read aloud to children by adults.
- ii. Organizing an annual Reading Culture Seminar where children are given the privilege of interacting with accomplished authors and scholars. At this programme, invited writers read part of their published books to the children and questions were entertained from the children. This inculcates reading culture in children and motivates them to be good readers.
- iii. World Book Day Celebration. This is a UNESCO International programme which the Centre marks annually to celebrate books and authors of books. The Centre celebrates this day by embarking on activities that can lead to cultivation of good reading habits by children. Visits are made to selected schools to talk to children about reading, engaging in reading promotion campaign through the mass media like radio, organizing a reading session for the children with a celebrated author of the year. At this programme, books are donated to the children to motivate and stir up their curiosity to read.

Public libraries also contribute immensely to the cultivation of good reading habits by children in schools, out-of-school children and young adults. They provide mobile library services to allow out of school children and young adults to have access to library services. This is made possible by conveying books in Vans to rural areas without access to functional libraries.

Several other strategies could be employed by librarians including collaboration with teachers and parents to motivate the pupils to read books. Teachers can be advised on the importance of giving assignments and projects that will enforce students to go to the library and read books. Librarians can educate parents and enlighten them on the need to provide home conducive to reading. This could be by providing reading facilities at home like – reading spaces, tables, chairs, assorted books, and also supervise and monitor their reading life. The parents can also mediate on the use of mobile devices by the children which has been widely reported as constituting distraction to children voluntary reading. Parents can encourage reading for pleasure at home in a bid to cultivate the love of reading in their children and young adults. This is established by Rajaratnam (2013) which stated that reading as a lifelong learning habit is sustained by the love of reading which must be nurtured beyond the school environment and formal schooling years. It is not difficult to know children and young adults who are equipped with reading skills but lack interest in reading for pleasure. They read to pass examinations and soon after the examination, they stop reading and resort to entertainment media like television, videos/games and movies at home. Therefore, to sustain children interest in reading after school, parents must be deeply involved by encouraging the reading habits in their children.

Rajaratman (2013) highlighted some strategies that could also be used by librarians, parents and teachers to develop love for reading in children and young adults. These include:

- i. Provision of space in the library for children and their care – givers, parents and members to sit and enjoy reading together (library as a learning space)
- ii. Developing collection that focuses on the early literacy theme, with appropriate and concept books for the target audience

- iii. Teaching reading skills and providing experimental learning experience that encourage children to develop an innate sense of curiosity and imagination
- iv. Creating a play – based learning corner for parents and educators to model after in their home or pre-school environment
- v. Organizing activities, workshops, programmes and storytelling sessions.

Promoting and sustaining Reading culture in Nigerian Schools

School libraries are established as information centres in schools. Their primary role is support for curriculum delivery by providing learning resources for teaching and learning processes. To this end, libraries must stock current and relevant materials which the pupils must read for academic excellence.

Generally speaking, there are uncountable activities and strategies that could be employed to promote and sustain reading culture in Nigerian schools. Thus the following recommendations are made:

- i. Providing a well equipped library with current and relevant reading materials with reading facilities and a skilled school librarian that will impart children and young adults with reading skills.
- ii. Providing opportunity for celebrities and successful people in the society to talk to students about reading and significant contributions it has made to their accomplishments in life.
- iii. Popularizing book and reading in public gatherings in the school by constantly talking to them like in Parent Teacher Association meetings, end of year activities, prize giving day and daily during assemblies.
- iv. Placement of posters on reading and books in strategic places in the school – Notice boards, Assembly Halls, Staff-rooms, Dining Halls etc.
- v. Promoting reading awareness through media campaign such as jingles on radio, write-cups in newspapers, initiating discussions and conversation on social media forums and blogs.
- vi. Organizing seminars and workshops where experts will converge to discuss current trends in reading and come up

with strategies that can inculcate reading interest in youth and children

- vii. Employing a school librarian who can teach how to read by introducing children to reading very early in their lives.

Conclusion

Education is an instrument for national development. It is a process that prepares an individual for lifelong learning and independent citizenry that can contribute to development of the nation. Education results in learning which cannot occur without reading. Therefore, the foundation of learning is reading and reading cannot take place without access to reading materials. Libraries have a central role of imparting reading skills and providing reading materials for children and young people to develop a good reading habit.

The Nigerian children and youth could be people who find reading pleasurable when a conducive reading environment is provided at home and at school. To this end, investment in education through government funding of schools, provision of reading materials in libraries with qualified professional librarians are imperative.

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