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Enhancing Literacy Development in Nigeria through Reading and
Writing Skills Development

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Abstract

Purpose: The Purpose of this paper is to draw the attention of the Government of Nigeria to the need to support the teaching of reading and writing skills in Nigerian schools for the much-needed national development.

Method and data used: The research was carried out using the library research method which furnished the relevant information on the relevance of reading and writing skills in the acquisition of literacy, which is fundamental to Nigeria's development.

Finding: The goal of education in Nigeria is development. A kind of development that is human-centred and focused on the aptitude and achievements of an individual. Development is realised when there is a highly literate populace. However, this set objective is hampered by the growing rate of illiteracy. A UNESCO survey in 2015 reveals that 65 million Nigerians out of the 170 million Nigerians are illiterates. They can neither read nor write. The latest report from Varrella (2021) indicates that 62% of Nigerians are literate, even though not quite a good rate. Hence, a development that ought to be sustainable is threatened. The lukewarm attitude of the government in seeing that literacy gains prominence in the curriculum through reading and writing skills is dashed. With the poor literacy rate, it is appalling and a thing of grave concern for a nation that is focused on development through education to have more than half of its citizens as illiterates. Illiteracy is a clog in the wheel of sustainable educational development; it has placed the Nigerian state high on the global poverty index and exposed it to so many diseases and epidemics. Hence, illiteracy is linked to poverty.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Furthermore, the paper found low literacy rate, inadequate funding of education and lack of professional literacy education teachers in the country and it concludes by strongly recommending the promotion of reading and writing skills through access to quality education, adequate funding of education and training of specialist teachers for the needed development of the nation, and sustain its future relevance in the comity of nations.

Keywords: *Sustainable Development, Education, Literacy Development, Writing, Reading*

Introduction

Literacy is central to the development of any nation; it is the bedrock upon which the ideas of development are driven to the level of reality. Hence a nation with a low literacy rate is prone to a high rate of underdevelopment and low engagement by the citizens in governance and many aspects of personal and national development (Ajibade, 2020). Without commitment and deliberate mechanism of enhancing literacy development and collective consideration of every citizen in ensuring that education and literacy levels go beyond the low-rate scale, a nation will struggle to attain development; sustainable development will just be a mere discourse rather than a productive discourse. The higher the literacy rate the better the citizen's engagement in governance and development. Illiteracy affects all areas of life; people with low literacy skills are far more likely to live in poverty, face health problems because they can't read prescription labels or instructions and grow isolated in a world increasingly dependent on computers and technology (Grahl, 2015). This shows that literacy is central to holistic development.

Harrison (2017) opines that literacy has to do with the ability to read and write, be informed and the ability to digest information received, and to communicate effectively. He also goes further to assert that literacy is the repository of all our knowledge and wisdom and the vehicle to transmit such to others. It is through literacy that all knowledge is transformed and transferred (Alokan, Ayodeji, & Babalola, 2012, in Harrison, 2017). Furthermore, Mike (2018) sums it thus:

Illiteracy is the inability to read or write. When people can read and write, they gain knowledge that can help them in life, and their literacy helps them understand the core consequence of a particular action. The kidnappings and bombings by Boko Haram are caused by illiteracy, at least in part. These men are fed with false information by their leaders and that is why they go as far as suicide-bombing, killing, and kidnapping. They are told that by dying in a suicide bombing or kidnapping, they will inherit the kingdom (p.4).

The goal of education in Nigeria is development. Hence to attain Nigeria's national goal in education, literacy is the central vehicle of attainment. Therefore, without literacy, Nigerians will not read and comprehend the outlined goals in the National Policy of Education (FRN, 2013), namely:

- a. a free and democratic society;
- b. a just and egalitarian society;
- c. a united, strong and self-reliant nation;
- d. a great and dynamic society; and
- e. a land full of bright opportunities for all citizens.

To this effect, literacy is the catalyst for the attainment of national development; it is a fundamental human right (UNESCO, 2006). It forms part of human development and socialization. It is one of the common indicators of development in any society. Therefore, the importance of literacy to a nation cannot be overemphasized. Nigeria's literacy level according to World Data Atlas is 62.02% (World Data Atlas, 2018), which is a thing of grave concern. In fact, it is the connection to the reason why some challenges in Nigeria are not dealt with forthrightly. High illiteracy rate negatively affects good governance; promotes ethnic and religious intolerance and serves as a recipe for brewing social disharmony. It also gives room for the misinterpretation of ideas. The mind of an illiterate person is most likely myopic and not objective in reasoning, shallow in reflecting and assumption of a life that is anti-social and inhuman like the Boko Haram sect and Fulani herdsmen who by virtue of their state of mind has given rise to banditry and insecurity in Nigeria and some nearby countries.

The key to literacy is reading and writing skills development, advancement of the skills that precede the aptitude to comprehend spoken words and decipher written words, and ends in the deep understanding of a piece of writing. To ensure literacy development succeeds, the need to enhance the teaching and learning of reading and writing skills should be taken as a national crusade. Through the budgetary provision and the relevant government agencies and school curriculum, the issues of mass literacy should be a proactive objective.

In September 2018, Bill Gates, of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation projected that by 2030 to 2035; the world's extremely poor people would be in Nigeria and Congo DR. This projection is alarming. How can we curb poverty without first fighting illiteracy? This then puts the Nigerian state in great danger and on a time bomb. Curbing illiteracy should be a serious investment beyond political rhetoric.

This paper employs library research method which provides relevant information on the relevance of reading and writing skills in the acquisition of literacy, which is fundamental to Nigeria's development.

Development and the Culture of Sustainability in Nigeria

Development entails a steady and gradual growth of something so that it becomes more advanced and stronger (Imam-Tamin, 2012). It is a need of every country in the world. A nation's measure of growth is visible through its developmental strides, hence, the categorization of nations as developed, developing, and underdeveloped. While some nations have to a very large extent contended with their developmental issues, some are still grappling with the realities. One basic factor for the sustained development in these developed countries is the ability to sustain their cultures of development.

Nigeria falls under the category of developing nations, blessed with every resource, manpower, skills, and economic endowment needed for the attainment of a developed nation, but the nation

is still struggling with development due to the lack of a committed culture of sustainability. Nigeria is grappling with development issues such as poverty, high mortality rate; insecurity, and a high number of out-of-school children; all due to the lack of an objective culture of sustainability. Inconsistent policies and drastic policy changes are some factors that affect our development and the realistic culture of development in Nigeria. Iman-Tamim (2012) sums it thus:

Nigeria, like other African countries, is endowed with human and natural resources as well as great cultural, ecological and economic diversity. Yet, it still struggles with developmental issues. The nature of development in African countries is such that has remained poor and lags behind other regions in the world (p. 6).

Furthermore, Sirleaf and Radelet (2008, in Imam-Tamin, 2012) opine that the past three decades were:

disastrous for Africans because most of Africa continued to be bogged by poverty whereas its counterpart in development rating, i.e. Asia, recorded the fastest growth rates and reductions in poverty in the history of the world. They pointed out that almost all the sub-Saharan African countries (which includes Nigeria) recorded average annual per capita growth of about zero, between 1970 and 2000. It should be noted that a number of mutually reinforcing factors account for this stunted development or its stagnation/underdevelopment at large. It is thus clear that the study of Nigeria's sustainable development is unfortunately plagued with problems that go beyond environmental and ecological abuse/mismanagement, and it is worthwhile having a look at some of the basic issues (p. 7).

From the preceding submission and with the plethora of gross challenges in Nigeria, development and the culture of sustainability are very poor; thus, the rate of Nigeria's growth is not commensurate with its years of nationhood.

Literacy Development in Nigeria

Illiteracy poses a serious threat to the overall development of any society and it is considered a serious socioeconomic problem that “accompanies poverty, low life expectancy, political oppression, and underdevelopment, it affects labour quality and flexibility, employment, training opportunities, income from work and wider participation in civic society” (Musingafi & Chiwanza, 2012 p.75). Thus, no nation which has relegated literacy development has had a sustained progress

of development and growth. In sum, Bakare (2015, p.1) states that “people who are illiterate are far more likely to live in poverty, facing a lifetime marred by poor health and social vulnerability.” The development of literacy should be non-negotiable because illiteracy is a tragedy. UNESCO (1993) laments that it is a serious problem that needs urgent attention, otherwise, it could adversely affect living conditions in developed countries.

Nigeria’s literacy rate can best be described as piteous; the shroud of illiteracy in Nigeria tends to make efforts by the government in combating the menace unfruitful. The commitment towards literacy development is not encouraging. Nigeria’s literacy rate from 1991 – 2020, based on the World Bank Data released by Microtrends, shows the literacy rate of Nigeria is 62.0%, showing a 10.94 % annual change from 2008 to 2020. *THISDAY* Newspaper (2019), in its editorial, citing the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-formal Education (NMEC), states that 35% of the nation’s adult population was illiterate. Hence, it is worrisome that more than a third of the national population flourishes in illiteracy. It goes further to assert that literacy is pivotal to national development and should be accorded great prominence because it is linked to the quality of life of people. In sum, literacy is a key link to opportunities and the world.

Literacy and Sustainable Development

In September 2015, the United Nations put forward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the aim of attaining the universal development of nations. Through the 17 points crafted, the United Nations brought the SDGs to attain the pitfalls of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, the attainment of these goals is hinged upon literacy. Kofi Annan notes that at the heart of sustainable development is literacy, which is the catalyst for social change and empowerment (Oghenekohwo & Frank-Oputu, 2017). Annan (2005) conclusively asserts that the three main pillars of sustainable development are economic development, social development, and environmental protection.

It has been noted that a high rate of illiteracy in Nigeria will lead to a very low level of development in the country because the growth and development of any nation depends largely on the quantity and quality of all segments of its population (*THISDAY*, 2012). It is not out of place to assert that progressive and sustainable developments are possible and viable when the literacy level of the nation is high. Furthermore, the United Nations (2005) posits that literacy is one of the major drivers in poverty reduction, enlargement of employment opportunities, advancement of gender equality, improvement of family health, protection of the environment, and promotion of core democratic values.

From the foregoing, literacy is vital to the realization of sustainable development; without it, sustainable development will just be a mere pronouncement.

Reading and Development

The concept of reading was built upon the relationship between the eye and the brain. Reading is basically the flow relationship between the printed materials and the reader which will end in comprehension. Thus, reading is a decoding activity – from written text to reader decoding and ultimately comprehending. Tarigan (2008) posits that reading is a process that is carried and used by readers who want to get the message delivered by the author through the medium of words or written language. Whether done aloud or silently, reading is an activity that the end result should be comprehension. In sum, it is at the level of comprehension that self-awareness is understood and rights and responsibilities are well decoded; hence the action that will bring about development. The ability to read and comprehend is the way out of ignorance and the gateway to knowledge. Also, Oka (1983, in Jaenal, 2010) considers reading to be a process of written symbols recognition, and this process includes the recognition of words carefully, in a wide range, and quickly.

From the above deductions, reading can simply be summed up to mean the conscious effort of the reader to recognize essential elements that project meaning as contained in the material being read and their links that add to accuracy and meticulousness in comprehension. It is beyond mere seeing words or pronouncing them or recognizing their meanings individually. Reading is more than reading aloud or pronunciation, it requires one to think, feel and imagine. It is an activity that involves the interpretation of ideas symbolized by written or printed language. Thus, without comprehension, reading will be a frivolous exercise. Reading is meaning-oriented. Reading is primarily about comprehension.

Furthermore, reading is the third key language skill. It is based on an understanding of what is read or comprehension of the written language. It is a communication between the reader and the author. Reading is an active process. Communication from writer to reader occurs only if the reader can take the meaning to the printed page. Without the reader, communication via the printed page is impossible. In conclusion, Reading is a receptive skill; it entails consuming what has been written or produced through visual contact with the printed material and decoding the message accurately.

Writing and Development

Writing is the most difficult of all the skills of language. It is an effort to express thinking, feeling, or ideas through the stages involved in writing. Thus, writing is a critical mental exercise that the writer engages in with the aim of communicating to the reader. Agreeing to this, Komariyah (2015), citing White and Arndt (1991 in Hammad, 2013) opines that writing is a thinking process that demands intellectual effort, and it involves generating ideas, planning, goal setting, monitoring, evaluating what is going to be written as well as what has been written, and using language for expressing exact meanings. Furthermore, Nunan (2003) in Komariyah (2015) states that writing is an intellectual activity of finding ideas and thinking about the way to express and arrange them into a statement and paragraph that is clear to be understood by the people. It

indicates that the writers are demanded to show their thoughts and organize them into a good composition.

In addition, writing presents the writer's concept in understanding an issue, which is shown to the public. It requires the integration of ideas systematically written. Writing is considered an active creation of text. It involves, on the one hand, lower-order transcription skills such as handwriting, punctuation, and spelling, and on the other hand, higher-order self-regulated thinking processes such as planning, sequencing, and expressing the content (Berninger et al., 2002 in Komariyah, 2015).

Reading and Writing Connections

All the language skills cannot be taught in isolation, they are linked one to another. Writing shares a relationship with reading just like the way speaking does with listening. While listening and reading are referred to as receptive skills, speaking and writing are regarded as productive skills. Hence, when one reads extensively, they become better writers; also, writing helps writers build their reading skills. Thus, reading and writing are the ready measures for literacy. When one cannot read or write, such an individual is regarded as illiterate. Over the years, research has shown that reading and writing are more interdependent than we thought. The relationship between reading and writing is a bit like that of the chicken and egg, which came first is not as important as the fact that without one the other cannot exist (K12 Reader, 2018). A child's literacy development is dependent on this interconnection between reading and writing (K12 Reader, 2018). Also, a major purpose for teaching writing is its strong impact on reading achievement as "reading and writing depend upon many of the same skills, strategies, and knowledge... In fact, about 70% of the variation in reading and writing abilities are shared" (Shanahan, 2017, p.1).

At the level of phonemic awareness, one gets to develop how to read and write new words. For children that are learning to read, their aptitude to tie sounds together which will lead to the construction of new words becomes easier, the learner is able to read and write the same words. Furthermore, writing instruction improves reading comprehension and the teaching of writing skills - such as grammar and spelling lessons - reinforces reading skills. Research suggests that reading and writing skills are best developed when taught and practiced in conjunction (Burgess, 2018).

The combination of reading and writing does not just change instruction - it can affect the curriculum itself (Shanahan, 2017). This implies that the connection of reading and writing makes it easier for the objective of the curriculum to be achieved or not. Hence, it can lead to the change or modification of the curriculum as well as the teaching method. Reading and writing make the evaluation of learning easier, hence, when the learner is not able to retell the story read or to rewrite, then comprehension is not attained.

Another level of connection is communication. Reading and writing abilities ensure communication is successful. Shanahan (2017) notes that reading and writing are communicative processes, with cross-modal benefits for students engaged in each of the skills. Likewise, writers by being readers can gain insights into the needs of other readers and become better writers (Shanahan, 2017).

The combination of reading and writing makes the accomplishment of particular goals in the teaching and learning process easier and increases decoding fluency. Shanahan, (2017) observes that the Common Core emphasizes two particular goals for such combination: using writing to improve learning from text and using the reading of multiple texts to improve the writing of syntheses or reports makes the learning active. Graham and Hebert (2010) have carried out a meta-analysis of more than 100 studies in which students wrote about text. They found that writing in various ways about what one had read improved comprehension and learning, and it did so better than reading alone, reading and rereading, or reading and discussing. From the submission, it points out that reading and writing connection makes learning a productive journey and engages the learner in the learning process. Also, Shanahan (2017) goes further to buttress that “students should not just be writing about text, they should be learning how to write about text effectively: how to write to text models, how to write summaries, how to write extended critiques and analyses, and how to write syntheses. Teach kids to write and use this instruction to improve reading achievement. Do it separately and you are leaving achievement points on the table.

From the preceding submissions, writing and reading cannot thrive in isolation. Through gauge reading achievement, writing must be there; also, in the gauge reading achievement, writing has a major stake. Furthermore, Murphy (2006, in Nkamnebe & Nkamnebe, 2018 p.4) states that:

... the single most important consideration in defining literacy is its functional significance. The ability merely to read and write at low levels of proficiency does not qualify a person effectively to meet the practical needs of daily life. Within increasing complexity of modern societies, the individual must be able to read simple instructions, write a legible letter, and engage intelligently in contractual relationships. This level of competence is referred to as functional literacy and the failure to achieve it is functional illiteracy.

How Writing and Reading Skills will Enhance Nigeria’s Sustainable Development

Ability to read avails citizens the opportunity to learn new things and improve themselves to be competitive globally. Reading is a way out of ignorance, when citizens can read and write they become informed citizens, open to learning and acquiring new skills. Reading makes learning enjoyable. It easily creates a sense of independence, the drive to participate improves oneself to compete globally. Also, the ability to read and write improves literacy which by that will increase citizens’ participation in governance and leadership.

Reading and writing create access to business opportunities and partnerships. The world is a global village, the interconnection between countries and people transcends distance. Thus, through the ability to read and write, one can easily build a network through business opportunities and partnerships. Without being literate, it will be difficult for one to attain or achieve such a level of a network. Reading and writing are central to connecting through business opportunities and a sustainable partnership.

Reading and writing links with research groups globally. The reading and writing skills make it easy for one to get linked with research groups globally. Without the ability to read, information gathering will be hampered. This link will present the researcher with the opportunity to have access to resources and material to help ease the research work.

Independent study and acquisition of knowledge and skills require reading and writing competence or skills. Reading and writing promote independent study and help improve one's knowledge base. The goal of every reading process is comprehension or understanding and it is such understanding of the knowledge acquired that situations or events or pandemics are handled with minimal risk or harm to such persons or communities (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic and the periodically issued safety protocols). The gateway to information or knowledge is reading, while writing is the expression of the knowledge gained.

Sustainable development is a need of every nation, and this is not possible without proactive proper literacy education, which is a pre-requisite for effective social participation, an instrument of empowerment, engagement, experience, and evidence at individual and community levels in response to sustainable development demands. Reading and writing skills will enhance Nigeria's Sustainable Development Goals through effective teaching of reading and writing from primary schools through to tertiary schools. Reading, which promotes decoding or comprehension, will empower the citizens with information that promotes the country's progress. Knowledge is power and at the centre of reading, lies the power to engage in environmental protection, employment opportunities, health awareness, and participation in governance through civic duties and rights. Writing, on the other hand, expresses the innate knowledge generated through reading, the interpretation of information, and contextualizing it through self-expression in writing. By writing it means information generated is solidified and well-articulated.

Education is the cornerstone of development, thus, without it; no meaningful development can be attained. The teaching of reading and writing should be made compulsory at all levels of education. Through it, learners will become so aware of the art of critical reasoning and thinking thereby enhancing sustainable development. Reading requires a person to think and process the information they have comprehended. Hence, the more one reads, the deeper his understanding and reasoning. Since sustainable development is a continuous state of development that will benefit the people, critical reasoning will help in building a system that will sustain the

opportunities, create feedback, engage in participatory governance, ask leaders questions that cause them to sit up, and will also trigger accountability and transparency from everyone holding public office. Writing and reading skills can also help citizens or people to strengthen their ability to make reasoned arguments on a variety of topics that are beneficial to the country.

Conclusion

Development and literacy cannot function in isolation. Human development cannot be attained to a satisfactory level without literacy. Through prioritizing reading and writing skill, the development of Nigeria can be addressed head on as much of the problems are development and socio-political issues. Literacy is a leadership attitude, the earlier we formed it as nation, the better and effective our drive for sustainable development would become easy; we shall become the force to be reckoned with in human and capital development. The Government in Nigeria needs to support literacy education through adequate funding and ensure the training of specialists in Literacy Education to drive literacy in schools and colleges for better education and national development.

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