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The Imperatives of Organising Read- A- Book Competition Among Secondary School Students in Nigeria

By

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Abstract

Reading is a foundation for success, not only in school, but also in life in general. This paper discusses the imperatives of organizing read-a-book competition among secondary schools in Nigeria. It examines the dwindling culture of reading and what is responsible for it. The paper analyses what is to be read, why it is to be read, the importance of reading and what we must do to inculcate the reading culture among students and adults in Nigeria. The paper concludes that in order not to face the risk of ignorance, decadence and oblivion students must cultivate the habit of reading which Francis Bacon says 'maketh a full man' and this of course according to Kevin O'Brien Chang 'maketh the full nation'

Keywords

Books, Reading, Readers, Students, Nigerian Library Association.

Introduction

- "Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man and writing an exact man. And, therefore, if a man writes little, he need have a present wit; and if he reads little, he need have much cunning to seem to know which he doth not." **Francis Bacon.**
- "Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body. It is wholesome and bracing for the mind to have its faculties kept on the stretch".
Sir Richard Steele -

The two quotations above by Francis Bacon (1561 - 1626) an Irish-born British figurative painter known for his bold, graphic and emotionally raw imagery and Richard Steele (1672-1729) British Dramatist, Essayist, Editor presents elixir vitae which indicate the place of reading in the general development of man and his society. A reflection on the above quotations on reading sets the stage in our journey to understand what it is all about. What does it mean to read? To read according to the American Heritage College Dictionary (1997) means:

- to have the ability to examine and grasp the meaning of (written or printed material in a given language or notation);
- to study the movements of (as lips) with mental formulation of the communication expressed; and
- to utter or render aloud (written or printed materials).

To read therefore is to fly, for books allow the mind to soar through time and space and to survey at will a virtually limitless expanse of peoples and ideas. Who is a reader? A reader is one who publicly recites literary works. Thus, he is a person who reads a book, magazine, newspaper, etc. It could also be a machine that is used for reading text or information that is stored on film, tape, among others. Reading is one of the components of literacy. The other components are writing, speaking and computing. Generally, literacy is considered to be the ability to read, write, speak, and compute at a certain level. Functional literacy involves skills needed to cope at an adult level in everyday situations, such as reading a newspaper or a textbook. "Reading", in Richard Steele's reflections "is necessary to the man as is the air, the water and the food. It is a spiritual exercise that makes you to know the people and the life". He further adds:

Reading is essential because it makes a person ready to converse...these people have a broad knowledge...and more information with which to make evaluation and decisions. Reading is the best way of developing our imagination and moral qualities. It makes us to understand better the world around us and to see it in a new light. Many times the reading of a book has made the future of a man. Those that love reading have everything within their reach.

Reading is the corner stone of learning. It involves the meaningful interpretation of words, phrases and sentences making for various forms of thinking (e.g. critical, analytical, creative, imaginative, evaluative, and judgmental) and how to solve problems. The reading culture in Nigeria has greatly declined, as the effects of this

is quite visible all around. According to Anokuru,(2013), this lack of interest for reading books, which now seems our bane, is more apparent among the demographic group (15 to 35 years), that comprise more than 65 per cent of the country's population – The youths. With this situation, along with the realisation that the level of development in a country is directly proportional to the literacy level, the popular expression, "*the best way to hide anything from a Nigerian is to place it in a book*", keeps popping up in my mind. The situation indeed calls for concerted efforts aimed at stimulating renewed interest for reading books among Nigerians. It therefore goes without saying it that if Nigerian students do not spend a good portion of their time every week reading, they are either doing the wrong thing or they are doing nothing. So what do we read?

Reading What?

The book of course, Ononogbo (2011) euphemistically states! It originated as an insurance against the loss of oral traditions grown too voluminous for continuous retention by memory. At that time its contents included "mainly collections of magic formulas, prayers and ritual, epics and sagas, dynastic records, laws, accumulated medical experience and observations of the physical universe". As it was then and as at now, these qualities endeared the book to man as a precious commodity. Those who could read it were associated with the knowledge of the gods, for indeed, there are all the knowledge resided. The usefulness of textbooks in the transmission of knowledge in any educational setting is widely accepted. Akinpelu (1994) described books as,

the shrines where the saint is believed to be, and having built an ark to save learning from the deluge, deserve in propriety any new instrument or engine whereby learning should be advanced.

But, how do we recognise the book? It is "a written (or printed) message of considerable length, meant for public circulation and recorded on materials that are light yet durable enough to afford comparatively easy portability and permanence (New Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1991). Its purpose is to "announce, expound, preserve and transmit knowledge and information between people, depending on the twin faculties of portability and permanence". This purpose is illustrated when we consider *the* two holy books, namely, the Bible and the Koran. Both books are portable and the message they bear is printed on a more or less permanent medium called paper. Some say, it is also virtual, digitised electronically. In whatever form, it

must be read). They transmit knowledge and information among people about a Supreme Being. The knowledge and information the book transmits are being announced, expounded and propagated. Similarly, whatever knowledge and information we have about chemistry, geography, history, mathematics, physics, culture, etc, are announced, expounded, and propagated through the medium of books (Ononogbo, 2002). And, how can we develop, be informed, be knowledgeable, understand, and appreciate our world if we do not read? Some argue, "Go to the Internet, watch the TV, follow the movies, this is the order of the day". Waldman,(2014) writing on *Reading Insecurity* states:

"Someone will eventually wail plaintively: "I just can't reeeeeaaad anymore." The person will explain that the Internet has shot her attention span. She will tell you about how, when she was small, she could lose herself in a novel for hours, and now, all she can do is watch the tweets swim by like glittery fish in the river of time-she-will-never-get-back."

Granted, but, society has not closed the books on book yet. Again, how can we KNOW when we are not INFORMED? Who will inform us if we fail to read? Why, a little bit of everything, of course.

Why Read Books?

According to Jenkins (n.d.) we read at four levels as follows: (i) We associate printed words and sound. (ii) We read for literal meanings. (iii) We interpret what we read. (iv) We undergo the shock of recognition when we encounter a new idea or undergo a new experience. For the purpose of this paper these types of reading are relevant to this study. Wilson (2010), while writing on *Reading and Writing* states whimsically:

Read. Read constantly. Read the kind of stuff you wish you could write. Read until your brain creaks. Tolkein said that his ideas sprang up from the lead mold of his mind. These are the trees where the leaves come from.

This is because they make you a man, not in the anatomical sense. But, in the sense that you are enriched intellectually, you become aware of your environment (the world around you); you understand mankind and his creative arts. Above all, if you do not read, you are no better than another who cannot read. But to borrow Babawale (Sunday Guardian, November 20, 2011, pp 38 - 39) during the 2011 Lagos Book and Art Festival (LABAF), we read for the following reasons:

- To acquire knowledge and information especially at a time v. hen knowledge rules the world...
- To be entertained through reflections on man's ingenuity and follies;
- To understand society better and live as better human beings who have learnt from the mistakes of others;
- To promote and propagate our culture and defend our identity...
- To encourage youths to adopt positive attitude/orientation that will enhance society's development;
- To educate the populace and encourage the creation of a critical mass of enlightened citizens.

Our society rests on "an interaction between and among the elements of commerce and industry, public authorities and private individuals as well as their functions and separate activities. These interactions generate information as a common product. This common product is often encoded in books, theses and dissertations, reports, workshops, etc. These are gathered and organized in libraries and information centres to serve, in turn, the needs of society to sustain development.

The Importance of Reading

"Reading is power; Read a book today; Reading makes a man; Teach a child to read – and you have made a king..."

The above assertion by the Reading Association of Nigeria and the International Reading Association indicates the place of reading in the general development of man and his society. Reading, like all other acquired, developed skills, flourishes with practice. People who read regularly and heavily become skilled at reading (Don & Usman, 1987). The importance of reading cannot be over-emphasized in the educational development of students in Nigeria. Sani Yakubun-Hauwa Nasarawa state Commissioner for Education, Science and Technology, while receiving officials of the state chapter of the Association of Nigerian Authors, ANA, in Lafia states as follows:

"Reading is a process of building positive attitudes among people, hence the need for the culture to be inculcated in children at early age as they mature to adulthood. The measures are taken to improve the level of literacy and boost reading habit among students in the state,"

Government he further states has put machinery on ground to ensure reading is adopted not just to write examinations, but as a lifelong hobby and for research purposes. Reading is a vital life skill and a gateway to learning. It is the first chapter in education and also one of the components of literacy. Generally, literacy is considered to be the ability to read, write, speak, and compute at a certain level. Functional literacy involves skills needed to cope at an adult level in everyday situations, such as reading a newspaper or a textbook. According to The American Heritage College Dictionary (1997), ability is defined as the quality of being able to do something; the physical, mental, financial, or legal power to perform. Ability can also be defined as the competence in any occupation or field of action from the possession of capacity, skill, means or other qualifications. No other skills taught in school and learned by school children is more important than reading. As a result reading is a foundation for success, not only in school, but also in life in general. If children do not learn to read efficiently, the path is blocked to every subject they encounter in their school years. Children's self esteem is lowered which is very harmful for development and the growth of their individuality. It really should not matter whether children read for fun or for knowledge purpose, as long as they find some kind of reading pleasurable. Poor reading skills in children affect study skills and such result in downward learning spiral. An individual's ability to process print includes basic reading skills and specialised reading skills are necessary for complex and challenging text like scientific text. As Trelease (1991) remarks "*the more you read, the more you grow. The more you grow, the more you know.*" In the process, people read for many reasons. Such reasons include: acquisition of information and knowledge, self-reflection, practical application, as well as pleasure, enjoyment, and relaxation. The importance of reading contributes to many dimensions in the development of an educated individual. The following is a list of ten reasons why reading is important as posted on the website.<http://www.best-books-for-kids.com/benefits-of-reading.html>.

1. Kids who read often and widely get better at it.
2. Reading exercises our brains. Reading is a much more complex task for the human brain than, say, watching TV is. Reading strengthens brain connections and actually builds new connections.
3. Reading improves concentration.
4. Reading teaches children about the world around them.
5. Reading improves a child's vocabulary, leads to more highly-developed language skills and improves the child's ability to write well.

6. Reading develops a child's imagination
7. Reading helps kids develop empathy.
8. Because reading does all the things mentioned above, children who read do better at school
9. Reading is a great form of entertainment!
10. Reading relaxes the body and calms the mind. This is an important point because these days we seem to have forgotten how to relax and especially how to be silent.

Similarly, recreational reading improves literacy skills, academic performance, and course grades. There are eight possible outcomes of reading for pleasure and leisure: improved vocabulary, increased knowledge, engaged imagination, improved communication skills, being kept from doing more important things, wasting time, being worn out, and stress relief. Since reading is fundamental to learning in our schools, it can be assumed that secondary and university students are expected to be skilled readers, and as a result they enjoy reading. Goodwin (1996), however, claims that aliteracy [someone who can read, but chooses not to] is an epidemic among secondary students.

Students help create a new approach to reading and enjoying literature assigned in school. Reading is about spending time with characters and entering a fictional world and playing with words and living through a story page by page. (Grossman & Sachs, 2007)

Textbooks are created almost solely to be read. They are to communicate information. Texts convey information over time and distance, help to create or challenge social norms, with the information they carry, messages shaped by their purposes, writers' voices, and their audiences' interaction. Philip Thompsen, Professor of Communications at Pennsylvania's West Chester University, who has watched the rise of aliteracy in the classroom for 20 years opines that:

Students today are less capable of getting full value from textbooks than they were 10 years ago," These aliterate students he further states are "missing out on our cultural heritage.

According to Luke and Woods (2009) texts have two distinct functions, what texts say and what they do. The choice of words and the writing situation may determine what text says, but its meaning is mediated between the writer and the text, and the reader and the text. Thus, the writer and the reader may have different

interpretations. Hagood (2002) opines that the meanings attributed to texts are what readers make of them within various contexts. In the main the context of a text includes the reader's current and past experiences, the author's current and past experiences, and the many cultural and historical influences that add to the interpretation of the text. For Gounari, 2009) readers "mediate [these] texts differently through their own lived experiences and realities and make sense of them within multiple frameworks of interpretation" When a reader critically examines a text, he or she may discover both explicit and implicit meanings. "By 'reading between the lines of the message, (Torres & Mercado, 2006) as cited in Lapp & Fisher, 2010) question(ing) the intents behind them and learn(ing) how to look for alternative ways to be informed/entertained' readers enhance their comprehension of text enabling a stronger understanding of the text for the reader. Tuchman cited in Boorstin, 1986) profoundly describes books as follows:

Books are the main source of knowledge, the reservoir of faith, memory, wisdom, poetry, philosophy, history and science.

Books are the very essence of our civilization.

Without books, history is silent, literature is dumb, science crippled, thought and speculation at a standstill.

Without books, the development of a civilization would have been impossible. They are engines of change, windows on the world

They are companions, teachers, magicians, bankers of treasures of the mind.

Books are humanity in print.

Henk and Melnick (1995) present a detailed description of the Reader Self-Perception Scale and its uses as follows:

- I feel good when I read.
- I can read faster than other students.
- When I read, I can figure out words better than other students.
- My classmates think I read pretty well.
- When I read, I don't have to try as hard as I used to.
- People in my family think I am a good reader.
- I am getting better at reading.

- I understand what I read as well as other students.
- My teacher thinks I am a good reader.
- I read faster than I could before.
- I feel calm when I read.
- I read more than other students.
- I feel comfortable when I read.
- I think reading is relaxing.
- I enjoy reading.

Richard Steele's reflections on reading books further speak for itself thus:

Books are minds alive on the shelves. By taking up one of these books, and opening it we can hear people's voice far away in time and space. By reading we can hear great people of long ago speaking to us, mind to mind, heart to heart. Book is a journey through the souls, thoughts and beauty. People who read can live as many more lives as many kinds of lives as they wish.

Those that love reading have everything within their reach. For a small price one can visit other lands and great periods of history, learn from some of the greatest minds and world shapers, grapple with great issues, learn in a space of a few hours what others grappled with, researched and studied for their whole life.

Books, as Charles W. Eliot whimsically states, "are the quietest and most constant of friends: they are the most accessible and wisest of counselors and the most patient of teachers". Another famous quote by Mark Twain beautifully describes the benefit of reading good books thus: "The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who can't read them."

The corollary is what the Old Testament book of Hosea says, "My people perish for lack of knowledge." It is without doubt that knowledge is acquired through reading. The purpose of education is to give students every advantage at making a good life for themselves, and one way is to take advantage of the richness and benefits of reading (The Mark Twain Circle of New York, 1998).

An anonymous quotation on the benefit of reading good textbook sums it up thus:

I've traveled the world twice over, met the famous; saints and sinners, poets and artists, kings and queens, old stars and hopeful beginners, I've been

where no-one's been before, learned secrets from writers and cooks, all with one library ticket, to the wonderful world of books.

Types of Readers

Writing in the Washington Post of May 24 2001 on *The Aliterate Era: Read All About It, Or Not* Linton Weeks notes that Jeremy Spreitzer a graduate student in public affairs at Park University in Kansas City, gleans most of his news from TV. He skims required texts, draws themes from dust jackets and, when he absolutely, positively has to read something, reaches for the audio book. "I am fairly lazy when it comes to certain tasks," says Spreitzer, a long-distance runner who competed in the 2004 Olympics. "Reading is one of them." He is not alone. In The Nation Newspaper of May 27 Chinelo (2010) decried the dying culture of reading among children as leaders of tomorrow in Nigeria. This she observes is the pathetic state of the Nigerian society and concludes that it is either Nigerians are not reading or if they do, do so reluctantly. There are different types of readers.

Samuel Taylor Colerige [1772-1834] an English poet, critic, and philosopher known for his poems *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan*, as well as his major prose work *Biographia Literaria* divided readers into four classes as follows:

- i. Sponges - who absorb all that they read and return it in nearly the same state, only a little dirtied.
- ii. Sand-glasses - who retain nothing and are content to get through a book for the sake of getting through the time.
- iii. Strain-bags - who retain merely the dregs of what they read.
- iv. Mogul diamonds - equally rare and valuable, who profit by what they read, and enable others to profit by it also"

Beers (1996), in his analysis of readers, identifies three distinct types of alliterates. They include: *dormant*, *uncommitted* and *unmotivated*. Others are avid, unskilled and unskilled readers.

S/N	TYPE OF READER	EXPLANATION
1	Avid Readers	Enjoys reading. Makes time to read. Identifies self as reader Defines reading as "way of life". Views purpose as entertaining Has aesthetic transactions primarily Has positive feelings about other readers
2	Dormant Readers	Enjoys reading. Does not make time to read. Identifies self as reader. Defines reading as "neat experience". Views purpose as entertaining. Has an aesthetic transaction primarily. Has positive feelings about other readers
3	Uncommitted Readers	Does not enjoy reading. Does not make time to read. Does not identify self as reader. Defines reading as "knowing words" Views purpose as functional. Has an efferent transaction primarily. Has positive feelings about other readers
4	Unmotivated Readers	Does not enjoy reading. Does not make time to read. Does not identify self as reader. Defines reading as "saying words". Views purpose as functional. Has efferent transactions primarily. Has negative feelings about other readers
5	Unskilled Readers	Cannot read. May/may not make time to read. Does not identify self as reader. Defines reading as "figuring out words" Views purpose as functional. Has efferent transactions Primarily. May/may not have negative feelings about readers

What Must We Do?

One of the most vexing problems facing middle and secondary school teachers today is that many students come into their classrooms without the requisite knowledge, skills, or disposition to read and comprehend the materials placed before them. There is an urgent need to improve reading comprehension.

It is imperative that we must embark on bringing back the culture of reading. In thinking about the future of reading, many librarians and experts are going back to the beginning—the act of reading or processing information. The world celebrates World Book Day every year since its inauguration in 1998. It is a celebration of authors, illustrators, books and (most importantly) it is a celebration of reading. In fact, it is the biggest celebration of its kind, designated by UNESCO as a worldwide celebration of books and reading, and marked in over 100 countries all over the world. This is the 16th year there has been a World Book Day, and during March and April every year children of all ages come together to appreciate reading. The main aim of World Book Day is designed to promote the reading habit and encourage children and adult to explore the pleasures of books and reading by providing them

with the opportunity to have a book of their own. The British Council and Daffodil Education Network (DEN) have jointly, for two years now, organized book reading competitions aimed at celebrating the World Book Day. The 2013 had the theme "Own a book, Read a book" [<http://readingbd.org/book-reading-competition/>]. In Nigeria, the Federal government has launched the Bring Back the Book [BBB] project. The primary focus of this project is to stock our libraries with good quality books and revive the dwindling reading culture of both the students and adults alike. A growing body of literature addresses the way new generations of students—"digital natives"—will create, access, and absorb information. The amount of technology available in our homes is another source of distraction, drawing students away from recreational reading. It is not unusual for students, even the less affluent, to return home every afternoon to play video games, surf and chat on the Internet, watch television, listen to music, or talk on the telephone. The technologies powering current computing phenomena such as social networking and gaming are fundamentally changing the way our youths perceive and process written information (Nwosu & Onwubiko, 2014). The following are some of the things we must do to revive the culture of reading.

- To develop, we must cultivate the habit of reading, for in reading, we are made "man" intellectually. That there is a decline in reading culture in Nigeria today is a palpably obvious fact. A reversal of this trend requires a collective action by government, schools, family and the individual.
- Government must create enabling policies, support publishers and publishing, provide books in schools and universities bring down the prices of books, make them accessible and affordable.
- Mass promotion of reading culture, engaging the mass media and non-governmental organisations to stimulate reading among Nigerians, must be given a desired consideration.
- Schools and universities should equip their libraries with current texts, make the reading places convenient, and make provision for science, fiction, philosophy, leisure and arts in their collections.
- Parents must inculcate the habit of reading in their children, discourage too much emphasis on TV watching, and devise reading targets for the children.
- For individuals, however severe the push-and-pull of life may be, try to create time to read; cultivate the habit of visiting the public libraries and challenge yourselves with reading a book of choice each week. "Reading maketh a man", we are told.

Role of the NLA in Encouraging Reading Culture in Nigeria

The Nigerian Library Association can play several roles to ensure that the dwindling reading culture in Nigeria is revitalised. It can do this by organizing Read-A-Book competition designed to give a competitive spur to both enthusiastic readers as well as those reluctant readers who are missing out on the vast world of literature. The aim of organizing Reading Competition is to encourage children to devote themselves to literature and read aloud from their favourite book. The joy of and the fun in reading should be the centre of the competition. Choosing and preparing a short excerpt from a book motivates children to an active examination of literature. Furthermore, the competition should encourage students to listen to others, and to get a closer look into the wide variety of classic and today's literature. During this competition children should make the experience that books offer many facets of suspense, entertainment and information and open new horizons. Reading - as well as listening - should be fun! Not competing but enjoying literature should be the focus of this competition. Students should experience reading as a pleasure not an obligation. The aim of the competition is not to simply repeat a well practised text without mistake. The children should show that they manage formal reading techniques - clear articulation, correct accentuation, adequate reading speed - as well as grasping the content of the book.

What to Read?

In organizing this competition what to read is often a question that comes to the fore. It is important to choose for the students a short passage from a novel of their own choice plus a text that is unknown to them. Of course the language of the texts has to be English.

Student's choice:

- reading time should not be more than **two to three** minutes. In the beginning the student should name title and author of the novel and give a short introduction to the passage they are going to read.

Surprise text:

- chosen by the organisers
- should have the same level of difficulty for all students (no foreign or particularly difficult words)
- reading time is two to three minutes

Reading technique:

Does the contestant have the appropriate technique, to present the text in a confident way (articulation, use of voice- inflection, accentuation- rise and fall- speed)?

Understanding of text:

- Did the student choose an adequate text?
- Does the contestant manage to put the chosen excerpt into the larger context of the book?
- Is the passage well chosen, does it have a beginning and end? How was the time management? Did the jury have to interrupt the child because the passage was too long?

Presentation:

- Does the student manage to grasp the atmosphere of the text and incorporate it into the presentation?

The reading competition does not have to be limited to the contestants but could include other activities such as:

- discussions
- suggestions for the school library
- visiting the public and other school libraries inviting local authors to the school and to the place of the competition
- inviting publishers to the school and to the place of the competition

Other roles the Nigerian Library Association can play include:

- Advocacy campaign to encourage students to see reading as a sine qua non for their growth and development in society. The NLA can borrow a leaf from the federal government advocacy programme by posting posters on reading in all libraries, archives, galleries, museums and such other public places that attract young people.
- Building libraries and donating libraries to needy communities
- Donating reading materials to exceptional students in a Local Government Area and State.
- Encouraging educational competitions like quiz and debates.

- Organising story telling in primary schools and documenting such stories in furtherance of oral tradition culture and tales by moonlight culture of Nigerian that is going into extension due to urbanisation.
- Getting children to write stories, books and encouraging them by publishing it for them.

Conclusion

The importance of organizing Read-A-Book competition cannot be over-emphasised. A nation that reads is a knowledgeable nation. By implication a nation whose citizenry do not have a culture of reading is a nation with misplaced values and is not yet ready to be counted in the comity of nations. Reading culture can receive a boost through regular promotion and organization of Read-A-Book competition. It can also be encouraged by encouraging publishing firms to publish more information materials that are indigenous to the locality. There is also need for parents to have home libraries, while philanthropists and national associations like the NLA can advocate for school and public libraries in every school and local government area respectively in Nigeria. Where possible they may also donate libraries by starting off libraries especially at the grass root primary schools. The NLA can also use the opportunity of their annual and quarterly association meetings to encourage young brains to read widely by organizing quiz and debates as well as encourage them to write and possibly publish such works for them as children's literature. The student and the teacher, the rural and urban dwellers, the agriculturist and the industrialist, the prisoner asking for justice and inviolability of his rights, the citizens contending with their government, the ecologist demanding for a recognition and commitment to environmental protection, the mother and the child as partners with society in the socialization process - all ask for and need information to know better, act better and behave better. This information is in books or similar media. They must be read or face the risk of ignorance, decadence and oblivion.

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