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BOOKS: YOUNG READERS: FUTURE LEADERS

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Introduction

Today is World Book Day, 2010. It is heartwarming for me to be here with you today to share ideas on books; young readers; future leaders. I am pleased to discuss this today because I have been strictly involved in readership promotion for children and youths in the last twenty years in various capacities at different times as University Librarian and as library educator. It is then obvious why I was excited at the invitation to participate and contribute to this year's World Book Day celebration.

Reading is one of the greatest skills any child can acquire. It is also one of the most rewarding ventures of any society. This is so because reading illuminates the mind with fresh ideas. Books, when read, attract and connect people with like-thoughts while often stimulating those with opposing views to positive reactions or contemplation. However, much literature has been generated about the precipitous decline in the reading culture among youths in Nigeria. Few youths today do not read anything; some read only newspapers while most others read only when they have examinations to take. When the pursuit of certification replaces education in any country, interest in books, which is essential to any serious education project, declines. These anomalies lead to decline in attendance in libraries even at the university level. This paper will discuss reading as a concept; why reading is necessary; the changing trends in the reading habits of our youths; benefits of reading; and how reading makes a leader.

The Concept of Reading

Conceptually, reading remains a basic constant and modulating factor. Significantly, it is not an innate skill. It has to be learnt and developed; it also has to be stimulated very early in life. Research reports in the last 20 years has shown that children must develop an understanding of the concepts that underlie the act of reading and writing before they learn to read and write (Ross, 1971). This is known as reading readiness. They must understand that reading is used essentially

for the purpose of communicating meaningful thoughts, especially through writing. In the final analysis, you are what you read! Reading therefore represents a means to an end, either at the very personal level or at the level of organizations, institutions and the larger public or society.

Why Youths Must Read

It appears logical at this point to explain why we need to read. When I asserted earlier on that 'you are what you read', I was by implication suggesting that you would amount to nothing if you did not read! It should be appreciated that no exaggeration was intended when similar perspectives are reviewed. Sir Francis Bacon, English author, courtier and philosopher (1561–1626) may have even answered this question when he said, *"Reading makes a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man."* Deriving from this, reading is critical to the life of the individual since it determines the totality of his being able to function effectively as an individual and as part of the society. Man's self-development, as Bacon would insist, depends on how well he reads, how much he reads and what he reads. So reading books gives capability to speak and express oneself. Reading is an activity that can be done anywhere, anytime whenever people have the spare time and the interest for reading.

What is there to read?

The main traditional reading resources are books. They cover all aspects of knowledge. Other reading materials include newspapers, academic journals, pamphlets, magazines, newsletters, posters and a range of audio visual resources, including internet items. From all these materials, it should be possible for all those in quest and search for information and knowledge to quench their thirst through reading.

Children as Readers: A Survey

I conducted a survey of 50 students in 2007 in a government public secondary school while on teaching practice supervision of Faculty of Education students in Akwa Ibom State. My study sample was randomly selected from junior secondary school students of average reading ability. Interviews were carried out in an informal and friendly manner so that

although based on specific number of set questions, they took the form of informal discussions. The interviews were based on 15 questions:

- Do you like reading or not? Why or why not?
- Are a good reader?
- Do you prefer to read quietly or to read aloud?
- Do you read a lot at home?
- What kind of books do you like best?
- From where do you get the books?
- Do your parents read at home? How much?
- What sort of things do they like to read?
- What makes you choose the current book you are reading, if any?
- Is it a difficult book to read?
- If yes, how and why is it difficult?
- Show me one difficult word?
- When you read, what do you do when you meet a difficult word?
- Do you think students should be taught how to read?
- Why do you think grown-ups should read?

The analyzed results showed that out of the 50 students interviewed, three-fourths (75%) replied that they liked reading; although it is possible that some students may have given the reply they thought would be approved of. There were indications that certain students still regarded reading as a mastery of techniques; 25 (50%) students considered themselves good readers; 18 (36%) were doubtful; while 7 (14%) were sure they were not good at reading. 30 (72%) students said they preferred reading quietly to themselves rather than read aloud to someone else. 45 students (90%) said that books they read at home were mostly recommended textbooks. About one half of the students gave the impression that not much reading was done by their parents. In speaking of difficulties encountered in reading books, the majority of children indicated that most of them still regarded reading as a skill to be mastered at the decoding level.

Changing Trends in the Reading Habits of Our Youths.

With revolution in technology reading habits are changing across the globe, even electronic versions of newspapers and online news resources have reduced the popularity of print versions of newspapers. People have access to online newspapers early in the morning thus they

prefer not to buy newspapers. Thus it has been noticed that book reading is becoming obsolete and that CDs, DVDs and Internet culture is becoming more and more popular. Even the trend of reading soft copies or e-versions of printed books is gaining ground. Nigeria has entered the digital age, and with the emergence of electronic media and the blurring of traditional media, the bond between the book and its readers has weakened. The book culture could have been furthered by the digitized versions of printed books as everyone can not afford expensive, original foreign titles. However easy accessibility, large numbers of e-versions of books on very nominal fee, provision of unlimited access to e-books, with facility of downloading on desktops for references are the major factors influencing the habit of reading among youths. Unfortunately the traditional media is losing its attractiveness.

Benefits of Reading to Our Youths.

Reading is a great 'brain tool'. It helps people of all ages to learn and develop important life skills in terms of education, self-improvement, positive life choices and all round well-being. A lot of conclusive evidences are available proving the link between reading and achievement. Orimolade (2001) commented that '*It is surprising that books matter.*' It can be surprising to parents who do not compel their children to read books.

Reading has both mental and physical benefits; psychiatrists believe that reading keeps the mind active. Developing good reading skills produces the quality of assimilating the content. Reading is an active mental process -- unlike the television, books engage the brain and enhance creativity. Teachers at all levels recommend reading books for mental growth; and as a fundamental skill builder, reading helps clarify difficult subjects. Reading provides information that goes deeper than any classroom discussion. Books elaborate on what one takes as small chunks of information from magazines or Internet posts or e-mails; thus books make one's focus and concentration better. Book reading makes students disciplined and scheduled. The book reader is a problem solver and an expert on the topics he or she reads that then translate into higher self-esteem. Book reading exposes pupils to a huge world of new words and gives an insight into etymology. Knowing about new cultures and places is inevitable for students of elementary and secondary school. Thus reading can expand horizons by providing information and are good

resources for education. Where formal education requires time commitments, books have no late-bells or hourly commitments. Books are cheap entertainment and students can learn at their own pace. Books are portable and can be taken anywhere.

Talking about health benefits reading requires remembering details, facts and figures, plot lines, themes and characters. Many studies have shown that if memory is not used properly it starts decaying (Isaac, 2007; Orimolade, 2001). Reading, although not a game, helps one stretch memory muscles in a similar way. Books for professionals contain arguments for or against the actions within. Good books help students rationalize and differentiate between right and wrong. It has been assumed that books are good sources for child's language skills and intellectual development. Several researches (Ogunrombi & Adio, 1995; Ike, 2001) have been conducted studies showing that book reading is indeed associated with a child's use of language and giving new details about how the variety of book reading impacts on their linguistic development.

Brian Tracy (2000) has said that one way to become an expert in a chosen field is to read 100 books on the subject. He also maintained that by continuing the same way for 5 years, one will become an international expert. Most of all, books on interesting topics stop people from being bored. Reading, if turned into a habit, will reduce stress. Books have the capability to change lives just by sensitizing modern thought processes and providing freedom from old habitual patterns. Books should be the best presents to good friends. Collecting good books is a hobby for some, and having huge collection of good books is an asset for many.

How to Promote Reading in Schools

1. Parents Persuasion

It is normally said and believed that charity begins at home. Parents should initiate the habit of reading in their children at home by giving them reading periods during the week and providing a special reading corner where books and newspapers are kept for them. Giving gifts of books for birthdays and special events or holidays shows that parents appreciate and value books and reading. The home is one place where the family should read together. Parents can partner with teachers and librarians to motivate their children to read and enjoy reading.

2. Reading Competition

Reading contests (not for fast reading but reading for understanding) should be organized in schools. The children who win the contest **MUST** be honoured and given prizes while their parents must also be given incentives for inculcating reading habits in them. Research shows that prizes of books (rather than money, sweets or anything else) do stimulate the reading habit.

3. The Library Hour

One period daily should be tagged as “the library hour” and should be given to the pupils and students to visit the library and interact with the school librarian. This period if properly utilized, will develop the interest of reading as readers are exposed to different types of collections in the library and to the retrieval of information from them all by the school librarian.

4. Exhibition

Exhibition of children's literature and good reading materials should be organized in schools from time to time. Parents should make good use of such opportunities by buying reading materials for their children and motivating them to read.

5. School Library Facilities

School libraries whose main readers are assumed to be approximately eighteen years of age or less should serve as a centre that supports reading on children's literature. Facilities and services offered to the library users should aim at awakening the pleasure of reading and providing opportunities for familiarity with books and libraries as well as contributing to mutual understanding among cultures. These libraries must have updated books and other reading materials and be provided with proper ventilation that makes reading pleasurable.

6. Reading Clubs

Just as there are other clubs and associations in schools, reading clubs should emerge in schools to further strengthen and build a reading culture within the students and youths.

A Reader is a Leader

The free and compulsory educational policy in Akwa Ibom State and the provision and dissemination of reading materials to students are pivotal in promoting a virile reading culture expected to make our children thinkers and creators of knowledge. A child who does not read, cannot progress. A child with poor reading habit is without a bright future. A child who does not invest in reading is not interested in development, hence he cannot lead. By reading, one acquires information which leads to transformation. Transformation brings about all round development including leadership. One cannot listen to great men speak and understand when one does not read. **Readers are Leaders and Leaders are Readers.** This simply means that those who read lead others (the non-readers) because they are better informed and more knowledgeable. It presupposes that those who aspire to lead must be readers.

Conclusion

I wish to conclude with a popular quote by Barrow in Reading Quotes (2010):

He that loves a book will never want a faithful friend, a wholesome counselor, a cheerful companion, an effectual comforter. By studying, by reading, by thinking, one may innocently divert and pleasantly entertain himself, as in all weathers, as in all fortunes.

Reading increases knowledge; therefore, I encourage you to read and become good leaders of tomorrow.

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