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**Language Education for Character and Skill Development in  
Nigeria**

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**Abstract**

This article addresses the role of language education for character and skill development in Nigeria. Researches have shown that the greatness of any nation is highly dependent on the ability of that nation to cultivate a deliberate policy that would bring about an enduring legacy for her children or youth, often regarded as indispensable leaders of tomorrow. One sure way of safeguarding that desirable legacy for the tender mind is through exposure to effective language policy that lays emphasis on reading and enactment of stories from literature, especially national literature. This kind of literary experience is indeed critical to the overall children's personal development. This process of personal development brings about deep sense of responsibility, thereby engendering national orientation, consciousness, patriotism – which are vital indices for character and skill development. The aim of this paper is to examine the feasibility of language education through the instrumentality of the English language and literature as an alternative paradigm shift capable of fostering character and skill development. The research identifies challenges against harnessing language education in Nigeria. These challenges include, poor reading culture, non-availability of literary reading materials. In conclusion, the paper beams its light on viable recommendations aimed at resuscitating language education sector as bedrock of all sustainable development in any progressive society.

### Introduction

Africa is a vast continent with more than fifty countries that call for respect in its rich diversity in terms of background, languages, ethnicities, cultures and origins (Samoff, 1999). The 1950's and 1960's saw most of the African nations gain their independence from their colonial masters such that by 1960, 17 countries out of 53 nations had achieved sovereignty (Young, 2004). At independence, these countries inherited institutional legacies from the colonial era because the authorities simply handed over their colonial culture without any consideration of the existing political culture in their countries. This posed a lot of problems since the political systems of the colonial masters were incongruent with the political culture of the diverse ethnic groups and their traditional social and economic heritages (Adeyemi & Asimeng-Boahene, 1999). The decolonization era and the achievement of independence by some African nations were a defining historical moment and a culmination of an epic struggle (Young, 2004). The decolonization process was met with a sense of excitement, hope and anticipation as the "new states" appeared to shed the colonial legacy and reinvent themselves (Young, 2004; Samoff, 1999).

As a result of decolonization, the new African states were faced with a massive task of nation-building. Nation building is defined as a process of creating a sense of national loyalty and identification among a population that has traditionally been divided into numerous tribes, ethnic groups or smaller political units (Adeyemi & Asimeng-Boahene, 1999). According to Young (2004), the notion of developing new states (nation-building) after independence was not an easy one as post-colonial governments were faced with problems and pressure emanating from meeting the promises that were made during the anti-colonial mobilization and struggle. People had a lot of expectations as; the young militants who provided the muscle of nationalist movements expected opportunities for employment. Children's literature, characterised by essential ingredients such as education, enlightenment and morals is integral to the social transformation of a nation. To this end, adequate language education through the instrumentality of the English language and literature occupies a pertinent position in the socio-cultural, and socio-political sphere of a nation. Hence, its primary target is the young minds, who are widely believed to be the "future leaders."

Clearly, the educational system of any nation does not suddenly emerge from nowhere. It is a complex product of a set of historical and cultural forces, and is deeply embedded in the institutional structure of the country and its people. It can be influenced by government policies, as lawmakers try to develop new initiatives to meet the demands of local and international environments, but it is almost always strongly determined by the layers of government policy that have been inherited by current administrations. It should also be open to the various influences coming from civil

society, as various community groups seek to express their own particular visions of how new generations should be given new skills, attitudes and motivations. Education will also usually have a practical component, and here business groups will be keen to ensure that they are able to employ people with appropriate skills and cultures of work.

In essence, language policy which encourages extensive reading through different genre of literature, educate and influence the students to respond appropriately to the challenges of life, as often captured in the stories that they have come across in their reading. These challenges could be environmental, psychological or spiritual. However, the basis of this literature is character or personality molding through participation. Umukoro (2002:12) rightly avers that good literary material helps the personality to attain self-realization by educating the emotions, stimulating the intellect, and coordinating...to the wishes of the mind and spirit thereby helping the young minds to grow both intellectually and physiologically to become responsible adult members of their society. The stories and activities ascribed to children's literature are two folds: first, the old folk stories preserved orally, and second, the modern stories of adventure and human preoccupations encapsulated in literary texts. In other words, many literary texts today evolved from old fairytales are juxtaposed with modern stories for the enjoyment of the children.

Basically, one can trace children's literature back to the stories and songs, part of a wider oral tradition that adults shared with children before publishing existed. In many cultures, the history, customs and other values of the society are conveyed to children amidst entertainment. Folktales, legends, myth, or what is commonly known as the "why" stories often tried to explain the origin of certain phenomena and help broaden children's horizon about the world. All these stories possess acculturation tendencies and objectives. This paper, therefore, seeks to underscore the effectiveness of enacting excellent language policy on which character and skill development for all round development of youths capable of contributing to national development can be anchored.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

Character education is described as curriculum specifically developed to teach children about the quality and traits of good character. One means in which children can learn about good character is through the pages of high quality different genre of literature such as poem, prose, drama and most especially biography and auto-biographies. Character education describes curriculum developed to teach students especially children about essential traits needed to build good character. It is a deliberate effort to develop noble character and cultivate core virtues that are worthy for the individual and society as a whole. It requires careful, calculated planning for success (Tyra, 2012). It deals with teaching students to develop the ability to decide how to behave in an appropriate manner in various social situations with the purpose

of developing individuals who are capable of understanding moral values and who choose to do the right thing. Hoge (2002) defined character education as any overt or conscious attempt to effect the development of desirable individual traits or qualities. Although a number of definitions and interpretations of character education are found in the literature, the content of programmes typically align with the core principles and values of generosity, kindness, honesty, tolerance, trust, integrity, loyalty, fairness, freedom, equality, and respect of and for diversity (Bohlin, Farmer, & Ryan, 2001).

The development of the citizens who can contribute to the overall development of that society and into the larger society cannot be overemphasized. Schooling is regarded as more than cultivating the mind and the body. Even though other socializing agents are at work in developing the character of the child, the school is also capable of developing character, pro-social behaviours, and civic competence. DeRouche and Williams (2001) posits that:

School is a place where students have the opportunity to witness and practice civility, caring, and compassion and to develop together as a community of learners and can help develop both positive personal values and civic competences. The two major purposes of school are cognitive – academic development and character education. Together they prepare students for the world of work, for lifelong learning, and for citizenship (8).

The above statement recognizes the school as an integral part of the society which can also help to mould the character of the pupils. However, the school alone cannot achieve the objective of teaching character. It is the shared duty of the families, the faith communities, youth organizations, business, government, the media and all citizens. The family is regarded as the first school of virtues. It lays down the moral foundation on which other social institutions can build, including the school (Jwied and Rizzo, 2004; Bohlin 2005). Character education, variously known as values education, moral education, transmission of cultural values, and socialization is regarded to have been around for centuries. Farris (2001) states that historically, many leaders such as Aristotle, Quintilian, Muhammad, Martin Luther, Johann Herbart, Horace Mann and John Dewey have advocated for character education in schools. To some educators, character education helps learners to acquire the norms of the society.

Burnett (2000) in Farris (2001) opines that early in the upbringing of children, certain norms are internalized to enable them know what is appropriate behaviour or not in a given setting. Linked to acquisition of norms of the environment is emotional intelligence or the ability to understand other people and manage own emotions. This enables children with high emotional intelligence to be better learners, have better ego, have fewer behaviour problems, feel better about themselves, and are better conflict managers. Emotional intelligence simply put, can be summarized as a particular set of learned abilities and knowledge-building attitudes that enable people to tap into their

feelings and emotions as a source of energy to foster understanding, personal effectiveness, interpersonal relations, and the ability to achieve personal goals (Smagorinsky and Taxel 2005). Furthermore, it is recognized that character education is a great challenge for all and sundry including the school, the parents and the public at large.

In terms of defining good character, emphasis should be laid on:

- moral responsibility and sound ethical and moral behaviour;
- capacity for discipline;
- a moral and ethical sense of the values, goals, and processes of a free society;
- standards of personal character and ideas; and,
- identification of skills for personal development

Skill development on the other hand, is a systematic process towards identification, developing and utilization of acquired skill for personal and community advancement.

#### **Benefits of Character and Skill Development**

The benefits of character education are multifaceted going beyond the apparent outcomes of being a good person and responsible citizen. Ryan (1999) found that instruction centered on character development helped improve students' academic achievement and communication skills; thus, promoting a stronger sense of independence and self-confidence. He suggested these outcomes of character education lead to the creation of trusting learning environments where students feel good about themselves and others. Schools have an important role to play in the development of children's social and emotional growth. Educators must find ways to infuse the curriculum with character building (McElmeel, 2002). Schools with successful character education programmes reported less absenteeism, fewer discipline problems, decreased referrals for misbehaviour, a lower dropout rate, and higher performance scores on standardized achievement tests. Katilmis, Eksi, & Ozturk (2011) found character education programmes had a positive effect on both character development and academic success. Durlak, A., Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, (2011) reported the results of their meta-analysis of over 200 different studies regarding the efficacy of character education. They confirmed school-based efforts which promote students' social and emotional learning produced a positive impact on academic learning, increasing achievement test scores by 11 to 17 percentage points. This data indicate schools with effective character education programmes can enhance a child's success both in school and in life. When schools are welcoming and supportive places, students are encouraged to attend, stay on task, and improve their levels of achievement.

### **The Role of Language Policy in Character and Skill Development**

One way to bring character education into a crowded curriculum is to make it part of the literacy programme by embedding character lessons in reading and language arts instruction through the vehicle of high quality different genre of language and literature. This tactic, when coupled with excellent and skill based content, allows the teacher to cover multiple parts of the curriculum. Literature is a powerful teaching tool. The characters children and young people meet in the pages of a book can have a profound influence on them, almost as strong of an impact as that of real people they know and meet. Whenever character and skill development concepts are taught within the context of language and literature, students realize traits such as respect, honesty, courage, kindness and hardwork are real and interesting aspects of the world around them. Writers of trade books have much flexibility in their writing styles and can bring to the pages of their books richness of background, originality of style, and creativity (Gunning, 2012). Adequate language and literature integration is an effective way to teach children about positive character traits.

Researches have shown that good literature with character development themes has the power to develop, shape, and reinforce dispositions essential for instilling in students important core ethical values. Creating character intensified lessons that combine high quality appropriate with different genre of literature with effective literacy instruction is a task that should be pursued with every sense of dedication. Teachers therefore, are faced with the dilemma of finding books that will do double duty in teaching both character and literacy concepts.

The first order of business is operationalizing what is meant by character and what traits should be the focus of instruction. A character and skill based language content should tactically be based on building:

- caring, compassion, kindness, and empathy,
- citizenship,
- courage,
- fairness,
- honesty and trustworthiness,
- integrity,
- leadership,
- perseverance in establishing and attaining goals,
- respect,
- responsibility, and

- team work and cooperation.

These character traits are universally recognized by people from all walks of life and transcend religious and cultural beliefs. They are meant to be valued by diverse individuals who come from different backgrounds who may hold different beliefs. A literacy-based program, built around these eleven traits, will offer educators a unique curriculum unlike any available to date. The distinguishing factor which sets this program apart from others available, both commercially and in the research, is that embedded in the study of character development are research-based literacy instructional strategies used with high quality, and in many cases, award winning trade books. Educators will be provided with the resources needed to teach and reinforce literacy skills such as vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, phonemic awareness, phonics and other word recognition skills, while teaching and reinforcing positive character traits.

### **Schooling and the Development of Citizens**

Verspoor, (2008) posits that in Africa, schools have been used as instruments of social change and their main function has been to facilitate acceptance of change and to develop individuals with an inquiring attitude. However, research conducted in sub-Saharan Africa has shown that most of the curriculum and education policies adopted in most post African colonial societies have failed to develop a critical mind in learners (Scanlon, 2002).

At independence, African nations inherited underdeveloped and racially segregated education systems that were characterised by inequalities and regarded as irrelevant to the needs of the people. These countries set out to reform or restructure their education systems through adjusting education cycles, increasing access, changing curriculum content and aligning education and training to the perceived requirements for national and socio-economic development. Formal education through schooling was therefore, charged with the responsibility of developing citizens by preparing young Africans for their roles in the global economy through providing them with knowledge, skills and work discipline (Samoff, 1999).

### **Language Policies**

Some countries in Africa like Nigeria at independence adopted the use of English as a medium of instruction in schools even though other countries like Tanzania have maintained the use of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction in schools. The discourse on education seems to be aligned to the use of English as a medium of instruction with very little consideration of its emergence and continued use as a hegemonic tool. In countries like South Africa, Namibia and Botswana, English has been adopted as a medium of instruction in schools, colleges, technikons and universities. The justification for the adoption of English as a medium of instruction

has been its international importance particularly its use in international, technological and industrial communication (Nekhwevha, 1999). It is further argued that English remains the language of diplomacy and international commerce. The use of English as a medium of instruction is viewed as a way of preparing citizens to fit into the global arena and the global market.

However, some critics have argued that the use of English in schools as a medium of instruction and as an official language is hegemonic in that its presence in the world today is a result of imperialism and colonialism. One of the critics of the use of foreign languages is Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his classic works, *Decolonizing the mind*, when he argues about the effects of the cultural bomb and how it divorces people from their own cultures, language and identity. Given this scenario, it is imperative for us as Africans to re-examine our education systems and how they contribute to the development of citizens. One scholar is quick to remind us that "no country has ever achieved high levels of economic development where a large number of its citizens were compelled to communicate or learn in their second and/or third languages" (Nekhwevha, 1999, p.503). Therefore, Africans have to critically examine their use of English as a medium of instruction in schools and resuscitate their indigeniety if they want to develop by using their vernacular languages to learn during the formative years of schooling or better still, hybridize their use of English with local language content. The typical example is the emergence of popular Nigerian English.

The first is the development of a vision for one's life that includes the discovery and/or defining of one's life mission and desired lifestyle. The second is the development of one's character, dealing with concerns of direction and quality of life. The third deals with the development of competence and the skills that deals with concerns of how well one is able to do something. Similarly, Walsh (1990) defines education as the process that prepares young people for their social inheritance and advocates three dimensions of education--development of knowledge, training of mental abilities, and development of character. The issues of vision and competence permeates other sections of these materials (e.g., information processing, abstract thinking, critical thinking, conation/volition.) The focus of this section will be the issue of character.

### **Impacting Moral and Character Development**

Campbell & Bond (1982) state there are four major questions to be addressed when focusing on character development:

- what is good character;
- what causes or prevents it;

- how can it be measured so that efforts at improvement can have corrective feedback; and
- how can it best be developed?

As previously discussed, good character is defined in terms of one's actions. Character development traditionally has focused on those traits or values appropriate for the industrial age such as obedience to authority, work ethic, working in group under supervision, etc. In terms of what influences character development, Campbell and Bond (1982) propose the following as major factors in the moral development and behaviour of youth in contemporary America:

- heredity
- early childhood experience
- modeling by important adults and older youth
- peer influence
- the general physical and social environment
- the communications media
- what is taught in the schools and other institutions
- specific situations and roles that elicit corresponding behaviour.

These sources of influence are listed in approximate order of least tractable to most tractable in order to suggest why we often seek solutions to social problems through schools. It is important to realize that while schools do and should play a role in the development of character; families, communities, and society in general also have an important influence (Huitt, 1999). The measurement of character has proven difficult since character, by definition, involves behaviour, but character is often defined in terms of traits (i.e., honesty, integrity, etc.). Some possible measures suggested by Campbell and Bond (1982) are:

- student discipline;
- student suicide rates;
- crimes: assault, burglary, homicides;
- pregnancy rates of teenage girls; and
- prosocial activities.

In addition to technical skills, employees have been found to need generic 'employability' skills such as problem-solving, basic computer literacy, language and communication skills to make them employable (Aggarwal, 2010). The importance of

soft skills in each of the sectors, including communication skills, has been identified. In particular, lack of English skills is being cited as a major factor in many contexts across the region.

### **Challenges**

There are some challenges, militating against harnessing the language education for character and skill development. Some of these challenges include the following:

- Poor reading culture: Children and youths these days lack enthusiasm towards reading. They rather prefer to watch films for hours. The culture of reading is therefore, gradually dying away in contemporary Nigerian society. This affects the harnessing of language education as a tool for character and skills development.
- Non-availability of literary reading materials: Literary reading materials are in short supply. Where they are available, they are not affordable. This definitely affects exploring different genres of language education for inculcating refined character and exposing the youths to different language and literary oriented skills.
- Non-teaching of Literature in most secondary schools. Literature as subject is not taught in most public schools. No reason is however, given for this act of neglect. This situation affects harnessing of language education for character and skill development.
- Non-availability of qualified language teachers: Qualified language teachers who can effectively handle the teaching of language are not readily available. Language teachers who are non-Literature specialists are often made to teach Literature. This hampers the harnessing of language education for character and skill development.

### **Conclusion**

Most children develop speech and language skills effortlessly, but some are slow to develop these skills and then go on to struggle with literacy and academic skills throughout their schooling. Available theoretical and empirical literatures have shown that the language content and communication environment is a more dominant predictor of early language than social background. In the early stages of language development, it is the particular aspects of a child's communication environment that are associated with language acquisition rather than the broader socio-economic context of the family. The child's language and their communication environment influence the child's performance at school, especially as it concerns character development and skill acquisition. The notion that "Leaders are readers" draw attention to the importance of language education through different excellent genre of language contents and literature in our national life. Reading begets inspiration for taking

informed decisions and developing of affective and cognitive skills necessary for processing information.

### Recommendations

The importance of language education through different genre of language content and literature in our national life should be treated with every sense of direction. Based on the key issues that were highlighted in this paper, the following recommendations are drawn:

- There is need to create a legislation that would ensure the teaching and learning of excellent language in different genre of literature especially national literature in all Nigerian schools.
- The federal government should institutionalize children's and youths literary festival with prizes for exhibition of outstanding performance and brilliance in mastery of literary texts, reading, acting and most importantly writing.
- The African intellectual should task themselves with writing informative and inspiring stories that will serve as national orientation and inculcating in the Nigerian people, especially the youths, with the spirit of love, oneness and above all, unity in diversity.
- There is also the need for scholars to identify and lay emphasis on language skills capable of making a second language learner of the English language to become a viable employer of labour rather than perpetual job seekers.

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