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Sustainable Lifelong Reading in the Digital Age: Benefits, Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract

In the digital age, it is fast becoming out of fashion to see someone having a book in his his/her hand and reading. However, one is more appreciated when seen viewing one's smart phone even while walking on the street. Why the moribund reading culture? And what are ways of reviving reading among the children, youths and adult? It is an attempt to providing answers to these questions that this paper focuses on concept of lifelong reading, benefits of lifelong reading, stakeholders in lifelong reading and their roles. Also challenges of sustaining lifelong reading (which could be attributed to the advent of ICT, negative attitude towards lifelong reading often shown by these Nigerians generally and other notable factors like absence of reading development at the formative stage, poverty, inadequate or total disappearance of reading materials and absence of functional libraries in most communities and societies) are identified and solutions toward their eradication proffered. The paper notes that libraries, librarians, parents, and teachers, among others are fundamental to actualization of sustained lifelong reading. Involvement of government and all stakeholders in the advocating for improved reading culture of both involvement of all stakeholders in the advocating for improved reading culture of both the children, youths and adults for society development are recommended.

Keyword: *Reading culture, Lifelong reading, Libraries, Digital age, Challenges, Solutions, National Library of Nigeria*

1.0 Introduction

Many reference sources and scholars have attempted to explain the meaning of the term 'reading' from diverse angles, all pointing to making of beneficial meaning out of the reading material. Okpara (2001) citing the New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language defines reading as "to understand the meaning of symbols, signs, gestures, etc

by looking at them and assimilating them mentally". This implies that for reading to be effective, meaning must be made out of the symbols and signs (printed words or abstractions) and gestures (unspoken/unwritten communication realized through body movements and 'body language') and the knowledge so gained transferred to problem-solving.

Libraries are integral part of the education and development of the children, youths and adults. This is because lifelong reading has the capacity of making people to be better informed, understand themselves and others, understand the society and the world at large. Reading helps one to become thoughtful and constructive contributor to a democratic and cohesive society, thereby bringing about a positive change in the nation. Thus, positive change engendered by lifelong reading will enlighten, reform, and reawaken individuals and make the Nigeria better.

The need to encourage effective reading culture in Nigerian has been receiving attention from organizations especially the National Library of Nigeria. The National Library of Nigeria (NLN) took up the responsibility of sponsoring readership promotion campaign in the country since 1981, as part of her mandate. Since 1981, readership promotion campaign (RPC) been an annual ritual of the apex library as part of the strategies to stimulate reading culture/habit in the Nigerian citizenry. The objectives of the readership promotion campaign include but not limited to the following:

- To encourage more reading Nigerians;
- To promote the increase in production of reading materials in Nigeria, both in quality and variety and
- To identify the major obstacles that inhibit reading in the country and also find ways of eliminating them.

Citing Aina and Neboh, Okafor (2019) discloses that the main objective of the nationwide readership campaign was to encourage reading among Nigerians through carrying out sensitization activities and provision of reading materials, while also describing it as a collective effort with other stakeholders in order to proffer solutions that would ameliorate the poor reading culture in

Nigeria. Similarly, Neboh (2019) asserts that the exercise was designed to encourage reading among the populace, despite one's age, profession, gender or class in the community, and also to arouse people's in interest towards reading, so as to maximize the numerous benefits it confers.

It is important to note that every year, the readership promotion campaign comes up with a different theme but all geared towards the same goal of making Nigeria a reading nation. Akidi (2018) notes that the RPC 2018 theme entitled: 'Sustaining Lifelong Reading for Positive Change' was apt. It was designed to make Nigeria a lifelong reading nation, with the view of imparting positively on individuals and the nation at large through exposing them to the inherent benefits of lifelong reading as well as ameliorating inherent challenges. The theme was coined based on the premise that the National Library of Nigeria, having carried out many themes on inculcation of reading habit acknowledges that the Nigerian society, should be of age to move to the level of sustaining the habit/culture instilled in the populace so as to become lifelong readers. More so, it is equally believed that sustaining lifelong reading will bring about positive changes, as the country has been passing through a lot of challenges that require positive changes on individuals and the nation at large. Most people believe that reading liberates a man, makes a man, widens horizon, makes man governable, brings lifelong development, makes people leaders, gives wisdom, emancipates etc.

Despite the seeming benefits of lifelong reading, it is, however, unfortunate that as many are moving to the stage of nurturing reading habit created and sustaining lifelong reading, some are yet to developed reading habit, owing to many reasons like poverty, distractions, and particularly the incursion of information and communication technology and its paraphernalia like

computers, handheld electronic devices, and social media platforms/networks.

Series of questions may come to one's mind, which include: Who is a reader? How can lifelong reading be inculcated? What does it mean to be a lifelong reader? Who plays the role of building lifelong readers? What are the impediments to lifelong reading? How can one tackle these impediments in order to achieve and sustain lifelong reading? Does lifelong reading have the ability of bringing about positive change? Attempt has been made to address these questions in this paper.

2.1 Literature Review

Okilagwe in Gbadamosi (2007) defined reading as reasoning that involves meaningful interpretation of words, phrases and sentences, which require all forms of thinking like critical, analytical, imaginative, evaluative, judgmental and problem solving. Reading can be seen as the foundation upon which other academic skills and activities are built. It offers a productive approach to improving vocabulary, word power, and language skills. Reading is the art of interpreting printed and written words, the most effective process of conscious learning which influences the extent and accuracy of information as well as the attitudes, morals, beliefs, judgment and action of readers (Devarajan & Gray in Edeole & Adejoke, 2016).

2.2 The Benefits of Lifelong Reading

Lifelong reading enables the reader to continually know about the world and its environment. Omekwu (2001) opined that students and youths who read are likely to have background knowledge, familiarity with new topics or subjects, and thus, find learning easier and interesting. EduNote (2018) highlighted eight benefits of reading as follows:

i. Reading gives satisfaction to the reader;

enhances concentration power and focus;

ii. It imparts knowledge, which will assist the reader to participate in fruitful discussion and decision making; and exercises/stimulates the brain.

iii. It involves reduction of stress;

iv. It enhances analytical thinking, as reading not only enriches knowledge but sharpens the reader to be able to analyse and evaluate things;

v. and improving the vocabulary and the writing skills of the reader.

Lifelong reading can therefore be one important way to help raise educational standards, combat social exclusion and essentially, brings about positive change in the life of the individual and nation at large.

2.3 Agents/Stakeholders Responsible for Sustaining Lifelong Reading

Joining the Sustainability Series (2009) we can ask "Who are the stakeholders? A stakeholder is an individual or group with an interest in the success of an organization in fulfilling its mission – delivering intended results and maintaining the viability of its products, services and outcomes over time. Who are the stakeholders in the endeavor to improve student outcomes in reading and to sustain those increased levels of achievement? To whom does it matter that more students learn to read well and to succeed in school – and that improved outcomes hold up over time? Table 1 identifies key constituencies in the realm of reading outcomes and suggests what members of each group have at stake. Keep in mind that some "stakes," of course, are held by more than one constituent group.

Table 1: Key Educational Constituent Groups and their “Stake” in Students’ Reading Success

Constituent Group	What’s at Stake?
Students	Personal success throughout school, future opportunity
Parents	Pride, success, and opportunity for the students they care about
School staff	Professional efficacy and job satisfaction
School & district staff	“Adequate yearly progress,” meeting accountability expectations
School board	Fulfilling the district’s mission, media coverage, accountability
Taxpayers	Getting a good return on their tax “investment” in schools
Business community	Ability to hire graduates with skills needed, community economics
Other community members	Community pride and “livability,” real estate values

Source: Sustainability Series, 2009

2.4 Internal and External Stakeholders

i. Internal stakeholders are those who work within the school system on a daily basis and who largely control what goes on there. They include school staff, district staff, and, to some extent, school boards. *ii. External stakeholders* are those outside the day-to-day work of the schools who have a strong interest in school outcomes but who do not directly determine what goes into producing those outcomes.

There are empirical evidences on the contributions of many stakeholders in library development and inculcation of reading habit on children and young adults. Sustainance of such effort will help in sustaining lifelong reading in the Nigerian society. These agents play different and significant roles in the life of the lifelong reading in the Nigerian society. These agents play different and significant roles in the life of the lifelong reader. The agents/stakeholders include: the government, educational institutions at all levels, teachers at all levels of education, all types libraries, religious organizations parents/guardians, publishers, and authors, philanthropists, non-governmental organizations, international organizations (like UNESCO, Carnegie

Corporation, Book Aid International, among others), and individuals.

2.5 Challenges of Sustaining Lifelong Reading

i. Poor State of Libraries and Library Resources

Regarding the poor state of libraries and library resources in Nigerian Opara (2016) observes that one of the solutions proffered by experts in solving the issue of low reading culture among Nigerians is the provision of well-stocked libraries at homes, schools and strategic points across the country. The idea is that if the awareness were backed by availability of good books, many Nigerians would be encouraged to embrace it.

Prior to this time, well-stocked libraries were located in accessible places in different parts of the country. These were mainly run and maintained by the government and good-willing Nigerians that supplied the facilities with relevant books and journals among others. While many of these national libraries still exist, their condition should be the major concern to stakeholders. For, it is not enough to say there are libraries in the country. But how modern are these facilities?

Have they been upgraded to reflect what now obtains globally in this respect? And if not, are steps being taken to do so?

ii. Advent of Information and Communication Technologies

The advent of information and communication technologies like computers, handheld electronic devices, Internet, and social media platforms/networks has significantly affected lifelong reading in Nigeria. This is sequel to unproductive use of ICT by the youths, young adults and even adults. The magnitude of this problem jeopardizes the future of our primary, secondary schools, and has equally extended to tertiary institutions where we are supposed to be seen in the African continent, and Nigeria in particular based on empirical evidence that the reading habits of primary and secondary schools pupils and students, university undergraduates and graduates as well as adults is fading and dwindling at regular interval.

iii. Lack of Interest in Reading

In Nigeria, a study carried out by Henry in Edeole and Adejoke (2016), revealed that 40 percent of average Nigerian adults never read a non-fiction book from cover to cover after finishing school; and that the average Nigerian reads less than one book per year, and only one percent of successful men and women in Nigeria read one non-fiction book per month. The study further revealed that 30 million Nigerians have graduated from high school with poor reading skills. Thus, it is important to note that as pupils, students and young graduates find it difficult to read, so are the old retirees who may not even afford to buy reading materials or are too weak to visit the library. In a related development, UNICEF as cited Haliru, et al (2015) equally maintained that nearly a billion people entered the 21st century unable

to read a book or write their names.

iv. Influence of the Digital Age

Research has equally shown that this digital age is characterized by much browsing of the Internet and Websites, use of social media, playing with trendy handheld electronic devices and sending receiving nonstop short message services (SMSs), while reading a book in a library or at home is relegated the background. It thus becomes obvious that while technology is slowly taking a steady control over individual lives; lifelong reading is in the decline. The outcome being that most students spend many hours watching television or using their handheld devices for fun and not in a productive way, among others. In addition, many students read only when there is examination to write, some read when they are compelled to read, others claim reading with their cellular phones, while others bluntly refuse to read and thereby eschew lifelong reading activities.

Other factors militating against reading habit include: poverty, corruption, noisy environment, undue importance attached to wealth, inadequate libraries, lack of adequate and current reading materials in the libraries, reading not being given the deserved attention.

3.1 Solution to Moribund Reading Culture

Although the above enumerated challenges and others not examined here are numerous and difficult to tackle, there is hope of reversing the negative narrative on the state of reading in the country. In his attempt to proffering solutions, Okpara (2018) discusses ways of eradicating the obstacles which include:

- I. Need to know the purpose of reading – one could read for examinations, pleasure, oral testing, interviews, mind-setting, etc. The individual can utilize the knowledge and skills gained through reading in solving social problems

thereby bringing about social change.

- ii. Existing libraries should be upgraded: some have book and non-book materials that are not current; some don't have e-library sections (where e-library sections exists, some are not functioning because of poor or absence of electric power supply and internet connectivity). Primary and secondary schools (both in rural and urban areas) should have well-equipped and functional libraries.
- iii. All teachers in primary and secondary schools should as a matter of urgency undergo teacher development training in phonics and reading readiness to enable them attain a good level of competency in reading skills so as to teach their students the skills.
- iv. Individuals and groups, including politicians, should complement the efforts of government and organizations to promote reading by donating books to schools and libraries, making fund available for organizing reading and reading campaigns.
- v. Parents and guidance should encourage their children and words to read at home and to register and read in libraries, to support the efforts of their teachers and other stake holders.
- vi. In addition, and perhaps the most important, the government must play its own role by not only formulating policies that encourage education and readership but also enforcing their implementations by stakeholders (both private and government).

Without the support of functional libraries, schools cannot successfully achieve the goals of reading, lifelong reading, learning and

education, which revolve around engendering positive change in the following areas as indicated by the National Policy on Education: “the inculcation of national consciousness and national unity; the inculcation of the right type of values and attitudes of the individuals and the Nigerian society; the training of the mind in the understanding of the world around, and the acquisition of appropriate knowledge, skills and social abilities and competencies that will equip the individual to live and contribute to the development of the society” (FRN, 2016).

Conclusion

Sustaining lifelong reading is important because it brings positive change. The paper has established that lifelong reading fundamentally requires reading from cradle to the grave. It involves inculcating reading culture at formative age, nurturing to adulthood and till death. Sustaining lifelong reading is very important as it brings about positive change in the individual and society at large. Benefits of lifelong reading are numerous both to the child, young and old, such that all stakeholders are implored to engage themselves in sustenance of lifelong reading so as to enhance positive change in Nigeria.

The authors believe that libraries (especially school libraries, public and national libraries), government, parents and teachers are fundamental to the actualization of lifelong reading. Libraries are integral part of the educational development of school children, youths, and even adults.

Recommendations

1. The paper recommends that there is the need for establishment and maintenance of functional libraries at all levels of Nigerian educational system.
2. In this digital age, children, youths and adults should make functional and positive use of information and

communication technology (ICT), social media platforms/networks, handheld devices, so as not to allow it form a sort of distraction to sustaining lifelong reading.

3. Parents should provide supportive home environment, establish family libraries, and monitor how their children use their time at home.
4. Parents and teachers should also assist the children in discovering educative websites, where extensive reading, sharing of ideas among peers, and connecting readers can be achieved.
5. Adequate fund should be provided to the National Library of Nigeria to enable more extensive and fruitful readership promotion campaigns (RPCs).
6. In addition, the National Library of Nigeria through its advocacy programmes, should solicit TETFund sponsorship of RPC so as to take it to the grassroots, among others.
7. Most importantly, publishers and authors should comply with legal deposit obligations and willingly deposit their publications with designated libraries, so as to encourage reading and sustain lifelong reading in Nigerian society.
8. Others stakeholders are the Booksellers; Corporate bodies; Philanthropists; Reading Association of Nigeria; Nigerian Authors Association, Nigerian Library Association; Librarians Registration Council of Nigeria; Nigerian Book Trust Fund, among others. These bodies are significantly involved in stimulating reading interest and sustaining lifelong reading in Nigeria.

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