

The State of Reading in Selected Secondary Schools in Oyo State, Nigeria (pp. 388-398)

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Abstract

The paper is a survey of reading in selected secondary schools in Oyo State, Nigeria. It covered schools selected across the three senatorial zones of the State. In undertaking the study, the researcher with the support of research assistants first observed the teachers and students in the schools in their reading activities and later administered a self-designed questionnaire on them. The questionnaire sought information on the reading related activities of teachers and students as well as the availability or otherwise of materials to facilitate reading in the schools concerned. Descriptive statistics of frequency and percentage counts were used to analyse the data generated from the study. The outcome of the study revealed that reading is not given adequate attention in the schools the way it ought to, all the subject teachers do not handle the teaching of reading while the reading activities in the school are left to the discretion of students. Among the teachers who give attention to reading, we found a majority of them who failed to give students the necessary motivation to strengthen their interest in reading. It was also found out that most school heads contributed to the poor reading culture of the students by their attitude to issues that bother on reading and how it can be promoted in their schools. This is because most of the schools have no functional libraries and other facilities that can promote effective reading of reading. Based on the foregoing, adequate recommendations that would promote reading at the secondary school level in the State have been made in the paper.

Introduction

Oyo State is one of the thirty-six states in Nigeria with a population of 3.5 million people (Oyo State Government Diary, 2007, p. 1). It was carved out of the old western region in 1976 to promote a rapid development of the state and to create access to good quality of life for its people. This led to the establishment of more primary and secondary schools and today, there are one thousand and one hundred public and private secondary schools in the three senatorial zones of the state. These schools have a total of 2,773,418 students (FME, 2006, p. 111). The various governments of the state since its creation have made provision for the employment of qualified teachers to teach the millions of pupils/students in the schools. In spite of this provision however, most of the students do not perform well academically at the end of their stay in the school. Several factors, among which are poor reading culture, lack of reading materials and other socio-economic, have been adduced for their poor performance.

Reading is very important in the life of everyone and in every school system. In fact, evidence abounds everywhere in the world and in the field of reading to show its influence in improving students' performance in academic subjects and in later life. The quotation given below underscores the importance of reading in the life of Ben Carson – a boy who was rescued from the pits of moral and academic failure by the gestures of his mother who chose to make him read instead of watching television programmes endlessly while his books suffer. According to him, his mother remarked that:

Bennie, “she said again and again”, if you can read, honey, you can learn just anything you want to know. The doors of the world are open to people who can read’. He later confessed that: ‘as I continued to read, my spelling, vocabulary and comprehension improved, and my classes became much more interesting (Carson, 2000, p. 10)

One of the fundamental objectives of education is to produce a literate citizenry and as a consequence, all educated people in the world are expected to be able to read and write a particular language of instruction. Thus, any person who is unable to read and write is regarded as an illiterate, no matter the amount of commendable knowledge such a person possesses. The attempt to avoid the problem of illiteracy in the world has led to the considerable efforts being made in Oyo State and elsewhere to promote reading and

writing in schools. Basically, there are four language skills that are universally recognized by linguists and language educators. They are listening, speaking, reading and writing. These skills are procedural and behavioural. While listening and reading are categorized as receptive skills because they help to receive and process information, speaking and writing are categorized as expressive skills – they are used to process information and apply knowledge. Significantly, these mutually inclusive skills are basic and indispensable in learning because they are skills, which in the word of Unoh (1968), help learners seek for information which they need as they make progress in life and school. The importance of reading to educational attainment was highlighted by Falayajo, Majoku, Okebukola, Onugha and Olubundun (1997) when they noted that ‘generally, reading is considerably vital to the attainment of literacy in school’. Hence, Onukaogu (2002) pointed out that reading is the fulcrum or cornerstone of literacy and that without it, there can be no literacy. With every activity of meaningful reading comes expansion of the horizon of learning, hence, the more a student reads, the more background knowledge he or she acquires about other ways of life, behaviour and thought. Furthermore, education also depends on intensive and extensive forms of reading because reading is basic to learning. So, a child’s ability to read is the centre of the child’s educational process. The life of Ben Carson cited above helps to further illustrate this point.

One of the most significant features of post-independent period in many developing countries of the world and particularly, Nigeria has been the enormous and rapidly rising demand for educational opportunities for all. It is quite obvious that illiteracy can no longer be tolerated and that the days are gone when the inability to read and write was hardly regarded as a handicap to the fulfillment and improvement of the quality of human life. That is precisely what Aboderin and Orisawaju (1980) mean when they remarked that it is not an overstatement to claim that no man can have all the knowledge, experience and information needed to keep abreast of the modern world by merely listening to what people say. It can be unequivocally stated that anybody who is not able to read therefore, will not survive in the present global world where so much depends on the skills of reading and writing. It can also be noted that no government can remain idle where its people are largely illiterate and ignorant of goings-on in the world and around them.

It is a simple truth also that one cannot write without reading. Reading is an inherent part of the writing process and it is the basis of our system for

monitoring the meaning we construct when we write (Ohia and Ogunbiyi, 1999). In recognition of the vital role of reading in education, the government of Oyo State expects that reading and other activities related to it are going on steadily in its secondary schools in particular. This is because the government believes that it has provided adequate materials and qualified teachers to promote reading. But unfortunately, the situation of reading occasioned by students' negative attitude to it in the secondary schools in the state shows that the government's expectation is not being met at all. The evidence to corroborate this is the poor state of most school libraries, negative attitude to reading and students low academic achievement.

The situation painted above is a sad reflection of the state of things in Nigeria where national educational policy tacitly underplays the importance of reading in the educational development of the country. For instance, Section 5(21, p. 13) of the National Policy on Education (2004, p. 13) states that the broad goals of secondary school education shall be to prepare the individual for useful living within the society and higher education but without stressing the importance of reading. It would have been more effective if the policy had indicated the importance of reading is moving to higher education level because reading is a crucial requirement at that level.

Higher education in Nigeria encompasses various institutions such as universities, polytechnics and colleges of education and many others where reading is emphasized. The advancement or progress to this level is therefore dependent on success at the secondary school level. Both levels of education regard reading as a major ingredient. Since reading is the students most important tool for learning, they need to use this tool with precision and at a rate appropriate to the task of learning and coping with the rigour of academic activities on their various campuses. In addition, they need to have the support of quality teachers of reading, good textbooks, other materials and a conducive school environment to help them to have positive attitude to reading. Commenting on the centrality of reading in education, most especially at the secondary school level, Bright and McGregor (1970) state that teachers are in agreement that reading skill is central to all school subjects. They both observed, however, that all over Africa, secondary schools are producing students who have read very little and this is not good for the quick development of the continent. Information available to us today indicated that the situation has not changed in any significant way going by the views expressed in the late eighties, nineties and the present time.

For example, Adesemowo (1992) had re-echoed the view of Unoh in (1982) that students find it difficult to read for the gist, a trend that Ezeokoli corroborated in 1998. Studies by Bewaji (2000) and Ugwuegbu (2000) and several others maintain that many secondary school students perform below expectation because they lack some reading skills required for effective study in the particular subject. The annual WASSCE's Chief Examiners' reports indicate that students find it difficult to read and understand comprehension passages and that usually affected their performance negatively. Further studies have also shown that secondary school students do not have interest in reading because of their negative attitude, lack of motivation by teachers, lack of reading materials, inadequate attention to reading, absence of reading on the time-table of schools and the influence of home videos, computer games and peer pressure (Kolawole, 1999 and Ogwuegbu, 2000).

Statement of the Problem

It has been noted that the problems that affect reading at the secondary school level in the state are a carry-over from the lower level of education. Akinbote, Kolawole and Kolawole (2007) found out that reading skills in English are not being taught well at the primary school level in Oyo State. They also found out that most primary school pupils had no materials to read, teachers are not working hard to promote reading while parents could not give adequate support to their children due to their level of poverty. Also, Kolawole and Kolawole (2007) remarked that most primary schools had no functional libraries, books and teachers who can promote reading at that level of education. The cumulative consequence of these problems is that most pupils in the state leave primary school level inadequately prepared to cope with the challenges of reading at the secondary school level.

The situation painted above is a reflection of the loss of value in our education over the years, but attempts have been made in the recent past to improve the situation so that students, teachers and those who are concerned with improving students' performance in their academic performance at the secondary school level can work together harmoniously. But how far has the situation changed today? The attempt to answer this very important question and to find out whether what was previously reported in a preliminary study earlier carried out across the south west in 2005 by this writer motivated the current study.

Both the immediate past and current government of Oyo State have made claims that they have improved the state of infrastructural facilities and the quality of teachers in secondary schools in the state over the last couple of years. Thus, it is expected, to be reflected in the provision that has been made to encourage both teachers and students to see reading as an important activity that will promote students performance. The study therefore, sought to assess the state of reading, facilities available to promote reading, the position of reading in the school time-table and the state of school libraries in selected secondary schools across the three senatorial zones of the state. To carry out the study, appropriate questions that captured the issues that are central to this study were raised and answered.

Methodology

The descriptive survey design was adopted for this study. This is because all the issues of concern to the researcher are available in the schools. The design was considered adequate because it help the researcher to capture all the information that was needed through observation, check-list, interviews and the use of self-designed questionnaire.

The researcher, with the assistance of some postgraduate students, identified the zones where the study was to take place, selected the schools using some criteria which helped to isolate some schools that would not meet the minimum standard required for this kind of study and visited the schools to observe teachers and students in the type of reading activities they got involved in, visited some libraries and collated data on the types, quality and quantity of books available going by students population, assessed the state of classrooms in terms of provision of furniture and also looked at class time-tables to find out whether reading was reflected on them. This observation was carried out sometimes without teachers being aware that they were being observed. Some teachers were however asked questions where it was necessary to clarify the information that had been gathered while they also completed the questionnaire and the check-list. In all, the study lasted over a period of six weeks. The data that was generated on the study were analysed using frequency counts and simple percentage.

Findings and Discussions

The findings are presented as follows. All the teachers observed have the required academic qualifications to be teaching in secondary schools. In addition to the mandatory bachelor's degree in relevant subjects, 45% of them have additional qualifications while those who initially had bachelor's degree without teaching qualifications have obtained the required postgraduate diploma in teaching. 70% of them were female while the rest 30% were male. The minimum teaching experience of those that were observed was three 3 years. It was discovered that reading was not being taught or given adequate attention by close to 70% of the teachers observed. This is why none of the other subject teachers taught reading but only language (English, Yoruba and French) teachers made students read, gave pattern reading and taught vocabulary development during their comprehension lessons. Out of the total of 200 teachers that were interviewed among those that were observed, 120(60%) of them claimed that 'they thought that reading was to be handled by language teachers who they further argued were taught reading during their training'. The remaining 80(40%) indicated that they encouraged students to read their books/notes if they wished to do well in their academic work. Our library observation showed that close to 90% of the schools visited had no functional library, the 10% that indicated that they had libraries, had no adequate and comfortable furniture, current and adequate books in school subjects for students.

Few copies of the books supplied by the government in the area of English language, Mathematics, Biology, Government, and science related subjects were found in make shift libraries. However, some big schools in most of the big towns in the state have well-spaced and moderately equipped libraries which can be turned to good use if adequate furniture is provided, current and adequate books are provided and students are encouraged to have library period. Most of the students who were interviewed indicated that 'they read their books mainly when they had examinations to write'. Some of them who were not in the habit of reading indicated that they would have read more if their teachers had made them understood the need for them to read. It was also found out that majority of the students did not cultivate reading habit because they did not have the linguistic facility that would help them to and this is the most worrisome aspect of the problem of reading at the secondary school level in the state. It was surprising to note that most of the students in secondary schools could not read the basic text in English fluently

due to their poor socio-economic background which made it difficult for them to have access to story books as well as the recommended texts.

Generally, it was discovered that the school environments did not in any way encourage the development of positive attitude to reading because most school heads - principals and their assistants - do not have any policy that will promote reading. In addition, the level of noise in most schools and the general physical state of the libraries, books and furniture in close to 80% of the schools visited is not conducive to reading and reading activities. What is however, painful about the schools visited is that all the activities and facilities that are lacking in public secondary schools are available in the private ones whose students are performing better than those in the public schools.

The consequence of the above situation is that most public secondary school students in Oyo State will continue to remain as poor, struggling or frustrated readers because they do not have the required policy, facilities and personnel that will help them to become good readers. This is because one of the effective ways of becoming an effective reader is through exposure to reading and motivation to read. A situation where most teachers are ill-prepared to handle reading, where there is lack of conducive atmosphere and adequate books and facilities to promote reading can never produce good and efficient readers.

Conclusions

It can be concluded that nothing has changed significantly at the secondary school level in the state as far as reading is concerned. This is because the state of facilities such as libraries, books, journals and furniture that are helpful for developing a good reading skill and culture is low and something drastic has to be done about it. Finally, the government, at all levels in Nigeria, has to intervene urgently to address the poor state of reading in secondary schools if it is interested in actually reducing the present 2.9% (EFA, 2005, p. 20) that Nigeria contributes to the world total illiterate population by 2015. It is in the light of this that the following recommendations are made in this paper.

Recommendations

One way by which the situation can change is that school principals be encouraged to spend part of the financial allocation to them on the purchase of books and sponsorship of programmes that will promote reading among

their students. In fact, an intercollegiate competition in reading can be introduced among secondary schools in the state. There is the need to urgently intervene in the state of reading among secondary school students in the state. This is one way of ensuring that our collective effort at improving the standard of students' performance is not wasted.

Since it is not possible to harvest where nothing has been sown, it is important to draw the attention of the government to the need to urgently have a policy on reading in place in its schools. This will make it mandatory for teachers to come to terms with the fact that it is part of their duty to promote the teaching of reading and help students to cultivate a desirable reading culture. The time to start this is now before it becomes too late. In addition, the government has to embark on immediate training of secondary schools teachers of all subjects on strategies of teaching reading. This is corroborated by Hoffman and Pearson (1999) who noted that there is a dire need to specially train teachers of reading for our schools if our attempt at banishing illiteracy and ignorance is to become effective. Similarly, the government has to urgently embark on the renovation of school libraries, recover those that had been converted into 'rest rooms' for teachers and construct good ones in schools where none is in existence now.

There is no gainsaying the fact that a good and conducive library has a magic to attract students to books and book related materials. In addition to this, teachers have to be encouraged to create supplementary readers in their classes to serve as a form of motivation to students. At least one day in a week has to be devoted to sensitizing both teachers and students to the need for them to cultivate good reading culture. And to sustain this, the model of Qu'arnic recitation where good and attractive prizes are given to those with the best recitation has to be adopted in the secondary schools if all the stakeholders are to win the battle of developing and sustaining secondary school students' interest in reading.

All secondary school teachers in the state have to be mandated to join the Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN) as a first step to their becoming members of the International Reading Association (IRA) as is being done in the United States of America, Europe and other developed countries of the world. This is one important way by which the quality of our teachers can be improved because these associations will expose them to reading quality materials and help them to capture their students at their formative years.

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