

*Full Length Research*

# The Role of Picture Books in Promoting Reading Culture among Nigerian Children: Implication for Libraries and Development of Leadership Qualities

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The study examined the role of picture books in cultivation of reading culture among Nigerian children and the implications for developing leadership qualities. Reading has been recognized as one of the most valuable legacy that can be handed down to children. This study placed emphasis on early introduction of children to reading using picture books. It viewed picture books as powerful, and compelling tools which have inviting influence on children, thus, making them want to read more than they would ordinarily do. The study further posited that picture books can assist children develop socially, personally, intellectually, culturally and aesthetically. Factors militating against the use of picture books for the promotion of reading culture in Nigeria were identified as poor implementation of government policies, high cost of publishing, ignorance on the part of parents about the value of picture books, lack of enabling environment for publishers to publish quality picture books, lack of available libraries in Nigeria's nursery and primary schools among others. Recommendations include: that the Government should lead the reading promotion and awareness campaign, that government should reduce or remove import duties on printed materials, professional librarians should advocate for libraries and lead a campaign against nursery and primary schools that do not have libraries. Lastly, picture books should be used to teach children acceptable values of our society, while at the same time teaching against unacceptable or unwanted values in the society.

**Keywords:** Picture books, Reading culture, Libraries, Reading promotion, Leadership qualities.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is a common parlance that children are the leaders of tomorrow. This implies that every child is a potential leader. Over the years, it has been argued by a school of thought that leaders are made and not born (George, 2012). One of the reasons for this argument is that though most people may have the potentials to become

effective leaders, it takes time to discover and develop these potentials. Until such potentials are discovered and developed, they will remain dormant. Part of child training/upbringing include, teaching and helping children cultivate a good reading habit that is interest driven. Apart from home training and formal education, one of the

greatest legacies that can be handed down to children is teaching them to read and to love reading. A child who loves reading will not only become a lifelong learner, but has a hundred percent chance of acquiring leadership qualities such as integrity, honesty, commitment, diligence, wisdom, justice, responsibility, ability to make decisions etc.

Oyedepo (2008) asserts that every committed reader is a potential leader. This suggests that a person who is committed to reading will not only become a leader, but a successful adult leader who is able to surmount the challenges and problems encountered in life. In other words, reading is synonymous with leadership. Leaders are readers (George, 2013). An important aspect of childhood development is mental or cognitive development. There are cognitive implications of reading that extends beyond the lifting of meaning and vocabulary of the content of a passage being read (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001, p. 1). Therefore, devotion to an uninterrupted reading lifestyle helps to improve the cognitive abilities of the reader in addition to the acquisition of vocabulary and knowledge.

Ilogho (2002) stressed that reading remains one of the most powerful positive preoccupation of children during childhood development, adding that children and youths constitute the bulk of active readers in any nation. It was noted from the Nigerian Tribune (2010) that lack of reading is one of the limiting factors to development in Nigeria. Children in Kaiser Foundation's report (2010) were found to devote an average 7.5 hours per day on entertainment technology such as internet, movies, video games, TVs and others. The report further revealed that seventy five percent (75%) of the children had devices in their bedrooms. On a daily basis children are gradually being entrapped in the web of the diverse information technologies, especially visual media. In most homes, we find clusters of excited looking young people around the TV, watching football matches, musicals, home videos on African Magic and several other cable television entertainment programmes, but not the same with books. Ilogho (2011) citing Trelease (1995) observed that "59% of teens own their own television sets including 33% who own a VCR". She added further that "aliterates are more prone to watching TV, home videos, computer games, peer group discussion in preference to reading books, magazines, newspapers, etc." (p. 4). The Vanguard (2009) affirms that this trend is getting worse as our children are becoming less and less attracted to reading.

This study, therefore, seeks to promote habitual reading using illustrated/picture books for children of ages 1-5 in Nigeria, identify the types of picture books, highlight the importance and benefits of reading as it relates to leadership, examine factors militating against the availability and use of picture books in reading promotion, examine the implications of readership culture on leadership quality development and

recommendations.

## THE CONCEPT OF READING

The World Encyclopedia (1995) defines reading as the ability to recognize letters and groups of letters as symbols that stand for particular sounds. It is the art of making meaning or sense from printed or written words. Reading is so important that it cannot be overemphasized. Reading is an essential competency required in the 21st century to survive the global systems, be it economic, educational, political, and social and so on. Teachers, school librarians and parents face an enormous task of trying to confront the poor reading culture environment in Nigerian. In-depth understanding and enlightenment about the issues of life is a function of the quality of time an individual devotes to reading and learning. Grandson (2011) citing from Google Dictionary Merriam-Webster defines "reading as a complex cognitive process of decoding symbols with the intention of constructing or deriving meaning (reading comprehension)" {p. 3}. Reading is the ability to interpret and decode an array of words through a cognitive process. Reading is a tool for acquiring knowledge, language, communicating, and sharing of information, including ideas. The learners' literacy demands that the individual student must be able to read any subject of interest in school. The workplace literacy also demands that a worker should be able to read materials related to the job they do. Besides reading for academic purpose and job performance, reading can be engaged in for pleasure and enjoyment.

Reading is one of the avenues for personal advancement in social, civic and economic development (Holden, 2004). Beach (1996) suggested that children should be immersed in a print-rich environment where they listen to books being read and are encouraged to discuss the stories, bearing in mind the age factor. It is not enough to provide children with quality and interesting reading materials, especially picture books. Children should have an improved reading home environment, school environment, community, including improving the image of reading, so that reading is not only school centred, it should include improved access to quality local literature (UN Resolution 54/122, 2002, p. 6). Gupa (2010) observes that reading is the finest habit a person can have. In the past when the television technology had not been invented, people spent a greater part their time reading books. It was through books that people tried to know about the world outside. Many became members and users of libraries just to have access to reading more books. Since the advent of the internet, the habit of reading books has continually dwindled. People rather spend more time chatting than reading. He further observes that whoever encourages a child to read is

giving that child a valuable gift for life. Fayose (1995) stated that the books have helped bridge the gap between the past and the future. Books have brought diverse cultures of the world together and created....understanding between man and man. Furthermore, books contribute in no small measure to children's emotional development. Reading promotes individual self worth and a source of consolation and reassurance to readers. Reading is an opportunity to rub minds with greater minds. It has been widely acknowledged that reading is one of the most valuable legacy parents can give to their children.

### CONCEPT OF READING CULTURE

Reading culture or habit describes a regular engagement in the act of reading on a continuous basis. It is an addiction to read with provable, positive effects on addicts. Reading culture involves the acquisition of positive attitude to reading among children, students and adults alike (Gbadamosi, 2007). Reading habit is the key to students' academic success (Nssien, 2008). Reading culture, therefore imbibes reading as an instrument for growth and development (Igwe, 2011). Reading is simply consistent, dedicated reading lifestyle. It is the underlying basis for lifelong learning, long after graduating from school.

### PICTURE BOOKS AND READING

Among the numerous reading materials for children, picture books are very captivating and having a powerful influence on young readers. The research study of Talk (2005) on "reading picture books is serious fun" has shown that reading picture books stimulates and advances the imagination and thinking of the children. Thus, young people enjoy reading picture books more than other text materials. The bright and coloured pictures and sometimes funny looking images are simply inviting, compelling and stimulates children's interest to read more. The images of the picture book provoke the imagination of a reader to begin to make connections and relate the pictures to what is already known to the unknown, in order to gain understanding of the message being projected.

Children learn to read pictures first before reading only worded print materials. Comics are a special type of visual medium that combines written word with visual concept. Comics provide the platform for graphic storytelling, where images are more direct than written texts (Tiemensma, 2009). The American Library Association describes a picture book as being distinguished from other books with illustrations. Essentially, it provides the child with a visual experience.

It was common to use images and sequences of pictures to communicate in early civilizations and ancient cultures. For example cave drawings, the Egyptian hieroglyphics and stained glass windows showing Biblical scenes (Sabin, 2005). Mitchell (2003) observed that picture books evoke images of bright and beautifully coloured illustrations that beg to be read. No matter what our ages are, some adults still enjoy reading picture books because of their vibrant, colorful pictures, rich, evocative languages, poignant and meaningful themes. Picture books communicate information to us in the same way photographs do. They touch our emotions, delight our senses, appeal to our whims, and bring back memories of our childhood. Picture books invite us to curl up and read them. Shutterland (1997) highlights five features or attributes of picture books for young children. They include:

- ❖ Present the story in a brief and straightforward manner
- ❖ Contain a limited number of concepts
- ❖ Include concepts that children can comprehend
- ❖ Provide text that is written in a direct and simple style
- ❖ Provide illustrations that complement the text

There are different types of picture books which are crafted with care and intelligence to provide all the necessary knowledge to a child. Russell (2009) identified different types of picture books, these are- Toy Books (board books, pull-tab books, flap books, pop-up books, cloth books, and plastic books), Concept Books (introduction to shapes, colors, alphabets, counting, and principles of grammar and time), Wordless Books are fine ways to help children improve language and narrative skills, Easy Readers are sometimes called beginning books and are also considered as transition books for children moving from picture books to chapter books. Others are alphabet books and picture storybooks. In addition, Hubbard (2009) identified the following types of picture books, these are: Baby books, toddler books, early picture books, easy readers, transition books, chapter books, middle grades, and young adults, etc.

Thus, the role of picture books on promoting a reading culture among children cannot be overemphasized. Liu, (1996) found that children liked to read picture story books because they felt they were funny. From his finding, the curiosity became the driving force which compelled children to read. When children begin to see reading as fun, they tend to become self motivated and always looking forward to reading with excitement. Furthermore, the reading interest of children was observed to change from reading picture books and graduating to other reading materials as they advanced in age. This underscores the importance and value of

engaging children in early reading using illustrated/picture books. The interest in reading, the curiosity to want to discover and know more, and the ability to sustain reading all through life can be triggered when children are introduced to the right kind of story books.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2004) observed that picture books are beneficial to helping young children develop socially, personally, intellectually, culturally and aesthetically. Picture books also help communicate self acceptance to children, model coping strategies for children who are just learning to deal with emotional issues. Through picture books children can learn about different family settings, and cultures that are in some ways similar and in some ways different. Picture books contribute to the child's cultural identity and multicultural awareness. Furthermore, Segun (1988) identified some of the values of illustrated books as sharpening the perception of children, stimulation of children's imagination, increase sense of observation, increase sense of personal identity, awareness of their cultural heritage, eliminates stereotypes and correct wrong cultural notions. Fletcher & Reese citing Adams, (1990); Bus, Van IJzendoorn, & Pellgrini, (1995), and other researchers observed that "picture book reading has been advocated as an important activity to promote children's language and literacy skills during the preschool years" (p. 65).

One of the goals reading development seeks to achieve is to provoke positive attitude towards reading, and picture books (comic books) provoke positive attitude toward reading. Over the years comics have contributed greatly to promoting reading habit among children. According to Fenwick (1998) reading comics is a way to develop a positive attitude towards reading and to get children engaged in reading. Children including some adults find comic books very entertaining, enjoyable and pleasurable. The enjoyment of reading comics gradually leads to the enjoyment of other reading materials. Children are more likely to continue reading once they think of reading as exciting. Two large surveys, both of 8,000 learners, conducted in the United Kingdom in 1977 and repeated in 1996 revealed that comics are the most potent form of periodical reading.

### **ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN READING PROMOTION**

The role and contribution of libraries to reading culture promotion among Nigerian children cannot be overemphasized. Libraries may, therefore, contribute to reading promotion in some of the following ways:

- ❖ Authorities in libraries must ensure that personnels to man the libraries are properly trained for the job.
- ❖ The professional librarians and library

officers must be emotionally intelligent and have good public disposition towards library patrons.

- ❖ Professional librarians and other support staff must be vast in knowledge about various subjects to answer all queries from clientele.
- ❖ School libraries must strive to acquire materials that will meet the reading needs all categories of readers, especially picture books for ages 1-5 years.
- ❖ The libraries should provide special reading rooms and decorated with pictures all over the reading environment for children from ages 1-5 years.

### **DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP QUALITIES THROUGH READING**

The journey to becoming an avid reader or established reading culture begins first by reading picture books from childhood, for instance ages 1-5 years. Avid reading has positive implications for personal and leadership quality development. The leading world today pride themselves on their promotion of reading (Igwe, 2011). Oyedepo (2008) asserts that every committed reader is a potential leader. Hence it makes sense to engage in habitual reading, especially as a future leader. In addition to acquiring cognitive benefits such as new vocabulary, language command, reading comprehension and a lot more, effective leadership qualities can be acquired. When children graduate to reading books with text of a variety including biographies of great leaders, they naturally tend to model the leadership qualities of these great leaders. Children who maintain the habit of reading such books would themselves become leaders. Thus, children can actually be mentored through reading of books of certain leaders (i.e. Using Bibliotherapy as a mentoring tool). This is a mentoring programme involving the use of selected books and biographies of outstanding leaders. Some of the leadership qualities addressed in the books read naturally begin to find expression in the readers.

Meyer (2012) observed that "intellectual curiosity", "learning", and search for knowledge through reading of articles and books" is a function of "employee's youthfulness". Furthermore, reading helps in learning from colleagues, professionals from other fields, including business owners and leaders. Meyer identified three reasons for reading, as: reading reminds you, reading challenges you and reading gives the opportunity to interact with others. Thus, the saying that "knowledge is power" suggests that knowledge empowers the individual. Knowledge gives us an advantage over others and one access point for continued personal growth and development is a reading lifestyle. Hence, in a matter of time the avid reader will soon become a leader haven

engaged in capacity building through reading. Avid readers are always ahead of others, and discovering new knowledge, learning new experiences from past leaders, becoming aware of current trends, acquiring skills for quality decision making, acquiring wisdom that gives them an economic advantage over others, especially in areas of ideas generation and innovations.

### **FACTORS MILITATING AGAINST THE AVAILABILITY AND USE OF PICTURE BOOKS IN NIGERIA**

Odia and Omofonmwan (2007) citing World Bank (1999) asserts that successful development entails acquiring and using knowledge as well as closing the gaps in knowledge. That to confront the challenges of development, a developing country must undertake three major tasks which include acquiring and adopting global knowledge and creation of knowledge locally. Thus, the importance of creative writing and publishing of our own indigenous knowledge that is reflective of our cultural environment cannot be over stressed. African children's literature must begin to reflect both quality and African cultural ingenuity.

The following factors and several others are responsible for the lack of quality picture books in Nigerian. These include:

- Poor implementation of government policies: different government regimes have introduced various educational reforms and policies, but failed at the implementation stage.
- Cost of publishing: the cost of publishing quality picture books in Nigeria is very high. This is because the materials used in publishing these books are imported; they are not sourced locally. This explains why most of the picture books available are foreign and expensive.
- Most parents cannot afford to buy expensive foreign books for their children when they can hardly eat. In addition, the majority of parents are unaware of the benefits gained by investing in children's literature. Ignorance and lack of awareness of the value and role of picture books by parents, has contributed greatly to poor reading culture among children. Smith (2006) notes further that African adults seldom read to their children including parents.
- Failure on the part of the Government in providing an enabling environment for publishers. The Nigerian government has not fared well in that import duty has been on the high side.

Inadequate investment in the education sector by Government: inadequate funding has been identified as one of the limitations of the

education sector, resulting in problems such as a fall in the standard of education, breakdown and deterioration of facilities, shortage of new books and current journals in the library etc. It has also affected the quality of manpower and quality of teaching.

- Lack of available libraries in most of our nursery and primary schools. Rarely can we find a Nigerian nursery or primary schools with libraries. Most schools are established without a library and no plan for one in the future. Most children pass through nursery and primary schools without the experience of actually using a library.
- The library and information professionals have failed to create sufficient awareness of the importance of using picture books for promoting reading culture among children. They have also not been sufficiently vocal in preaching the gospel and insisting on the need to have school libraries in nursery and primary schools.
- The authors focus more on writing text books rather than children's literature because no one wants to invest in books that will not sell. According to Smith (2006) the bulk of the books published in Africa is mainly textbooks rather than books for pleasure and enjoyment. The output of books published in Britain in one year is over 2,000 titles compared to Nigeria that has less than 60 titles.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Picture books are powerful materials that can effectively be used to communicate direct messages to children. Comic books are a unique type of picture books which are reader friendly. Children, young adults and even older adults, who engage in reading them, often find them very compelling, enjoyable, interesting, exciting, and sustaining attention. Picture books are visual text materials, which can effectively replace visual media such as, television, video games, play station, internet, etc. Comics are usually brightly coloured and effectively convey messages or complements the texts. Children should be encouraged to start reading very early using picture books because reading will enhance their intellectual, social, psychological, emotional and cultural development. Other benefits children derive from reading early, using picture books, include: acquisition of knowledge, sharpening and strengthening the mental capacity of children, helps children in language development, helps in building stronger bonds between parents and children, helps children develop their creative abilities, enhances analytical, critical, and logical reasoning skills in children, opens children up to the

unlimited world of possibilities, and helps children improve vocabulary and language skills among other benefits.

Picture books can be used for the following purposes in Nigeria:

Tailoring and directing the culture of Nigeria in terms of how we speak, dress; dance, etc., to the younger generation who are the leaders of tomorrow. Picture books can be used to model exemplary leadership qualities to the younger generation. Picture books can be used to teach godly virtues and all the acceptable value systems, while discouraging negative values in the society and in our national life, e.g. the need to change the mentality of Nigerians from getting rich by all means is urgent. This call for change should begin with our children. Parents, guardians, teachers must be visibly involved in encouraging reading of picture books. Government should be involved by way of investing more in education and the production and publication of picture books. Import duty on picture books should be reduced, if not completely removed in order to ensure that they are not too expensive for the average Nigerian.

Finally, publishers should encourage a reading culture by ensuring that quality picture books are published for children's consumption. School libraries should stock different types of picture books for all age categories. They should flag of robust advocacy for the compulsory inclusion of library in schools, with sections devoted to picture books as well as mount a campaign against all nursery and primary schools without school libraries. Mackey and Ingrid (1996) in their study suggested strategies that encourage reading among reluctant readers. These include: offering classroom reading time, improve selection skills by allowing a limited number of books for selection, discuss selection techniques with students, reading the beginning of a novel openly in class, providing classroom libraries with a wide range of materials such as graphic novels, nonfiction, picture books and books on a variety of cultures.

Furthermore, school librarians should encourage children to read for pleasure primarily by embarking on awareness campaigns to educate and enlighten parents, teachers and government. The minister of education should continue from where President Goodluck Jonathan stopped when he launched a nationwide campaign promoting a reading culture on December 20, 2010. The campaign was tagged "Bring Back the Book". This singular act of the president was highly commended and welcomed by Nigerians who appreciate the value of reading and the implication for national development

(Vanguard, 2010).

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