Research   Article

Tackling aliteracy, a major cause of mass failure among students in Nigerian secondary schools: any role for school libraries?

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Abstract

In the last few years, failure in secondary schools certificate examination has become a recurring incidence in Nigeria. This scenario can be traced to aliteracy which is the ability to read but choosing not to do so. The governments at various levels, the parents, teachers, school librarians and indeed the students all have roles in putting an end to this menace. This paper seek to identify aliteracy among Nigerian students, examine the roles of school libraries and school librarians, teachers and other stakeholders in the joint task of reducing to the barest minimum and indeed putting an end to aliteracy and the consequent failure among the secondary schools in Nigeria.

Keywords: Library, Aliteracy, Secondary school

INTRODUCTION

Aliteracy the capacity to read but choosing not to do so is one of the most vexing problems facing secondary educators today. Adolescents who, for whatever reasons are not motivated to engage with school related reading can be said to be alliterates in that domain. These are the students for whom reading seems irrelevant, not worth their time or effort. (Alvermann, 2007). It is a reading problem which occurs when reading ability can no more be matched by reading desire. In other words, a literate person now sees reading as a chore or a task rather than as a pleasure. It implies the ability to read but an indifference and boredom with reading for academic and enrichment purposes (Olufowobi and Makinde, 2011). It is lack of reading habit in capable readers.

The word aliteracy was first used by Boorstin, J. Daniel, a media ecology and the Librarian of Congress in 1984 in his book titled "Books in our future" when he was analyzing the statistics of American where only 50% of them read at that time as he gave a clear difference between aliteracy and illiteracy (Wikipedia).

The recurrent mass failure recorded by secondary school students in external examinations can be traced to aliteracy. Declining WAEC and NECO scores and grade inflation are two indicators that secondary school students are not made of the same academic stuff as past generations. Blame is laid at everyone's doorstep; lazy students, seductive media and technology, ineffective teachers, careless parents and apathetic government. However, despite the fact that students appear underprepared, they can read. They have the skills but they are not reading (Latty, 1996).

With every passing year, the largely unseen epidemic of aliteracy is sweeping the country's educational future, with the likelihood of crippling the country's future. For this reason, it demands to be addressed with utmost immediacy and

care as students are developing increased apathetic attitude to reading and learning .If teachers and parents ignore the warnings of this widespread lack of interest in reading, it is to invite disaster for our children and our future.

Below is the table of students' performances in the two major Secondary School Certificate Examinations (SSCE) i.e.WAEC and NECO in Nigeria between 2003 and2011 according to social statistics from National Bureau of Statistics.

Table1. Students' performance in WAEC and NECO (2003-2011)

YEAR OF THE EXAM	MONTH OF THE EXAM	EXAM BODY	% AVERAGE WITH CREDIT IN FIVE SUBJECTS INCLUDING ENGLISH AND MATHS
2003	MAY/JUNE	WAEC	19.26
2004	MAY/JUNE	WAEC	18.26
2005	MAY/JUNE	WAEC	18.68
2006	MAY/JUNE	WAEC	9.32
2007	MAY/JUNE	WAEC	7.69
2008	MAY/JUNE	WAEC	9.29
2009	MAY/JUNE	WAEC	24.99
2010	MAY/JUNE	WAEC	13.27
2011	MAY/JUNE	WAEC	30
2012	MAY/JUNE	WAEC	38.8
2OO3	JUNE/JULY	NECO	27.42
2004	JUNE/JULY	NECO	16.47
2005	JUNE/JULY	NECO	9.51
2006	JUNE/JULY	NECO	27.12
2007	JUNE/JULY	NECO	30.51
2008	JUNE/JULY	NECO	56.09
2010	JUNE/JULY	NECO	25.00
2011	JUNE/JULY	NECO	24.9

Sources: (i) National Bureau of Statistics (Social Statistics 2009)
       (ii) Nigerian newspapers

According to a report credited to Professor Ango Abdullai, the chairman Governing Council Bauchi State University in Punch Newspaper of 9th February 2012 that out of 18000 students that sat for WAEC and NECO in Gombe State in 2011 only 17 students passed with enough credits to qualify for University admission.

Ilogho(2011) asserted that Nigeria can become a major force in Africa and indeed the world, if proper policies and structures are in place to entrench good reading culture.

The problem of aliteracy among secondary school students is growing. Stakeholders need to spark and reinforce reading in all subject areas. Technology is tearing our young people away from the good habit of reading. Technology such as television; computer and internet are gradually replacing reading as an accepted form of entertainment and information getting.

There is a strong positive correlation between healthy reading habits and academic success. Lawal(2008) opined that reading is the major key to progress in learning; inability to read well which is related to poor reading attitude and interest make the children fall progressively further and further behind other members of the class.

The performance of students in examinations is related to the intensity of reading i.e. the number of books students read, how often they read, how much free time they devote to reading, how long they read and the length or number of books.(Bachmuskaya and Yankova,1996)).

There is strong positive correlation between healthy reading habit and academic success. Aliteracy is rampant among adolescents. Boys and girls in secondary schools become involved with many things that can distract them from reading such as computer and video games, extracurricular activities, the internet, sports and unsupervised television viewing to mention a few.

According to Ilogho (2011), aliterates are more prone to watching TV, home videos, playing computer games, and engaging in a peer group discussion in preference to reading books, magazines news papers, etc.

Statement of the objectives

This study is intended to achieve the following:
Identify aliteracy among the secondary school students in Nigeria
Examine factors contributing to the making of alliterates in our secondary schools.
Examine the roles of school libraries in tackling aliteracy
Emphasise the roles of teachers in solving reading problems in the secondary schools
Highlight the roles of parents in promoting reading among secondary school students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Aliteracy among Secondary School Students

In his analysis of aliteracy, Beers (1996), identified three distinct types of alliterates. They include:

Dormant readers are those who like to read and consider themselves readers but don't like to read right now. Aliteracy for this group is not related to a negative attitude towards reading but rather to outside factors which seems more pressing such as sports, social life and school work.

Uncommitted readers are opened to the idea of learning to enjoy books more in the future and may have positive feelings about other readers. They have a negative attitude towards books, they don't like to read and define reading as a skill rather than pleasurable activity.

Unmotivated readers have no future plans to begin reading and have negative feelings toward people who can read.

Mackey *and* Johnson (1996) identified another type of alliterates referred to as reluctant readers. Reluctant readers may not know that reading is enjoyable.

According to him, resistant readers are stimulated very little by assigned readings and are more at ease with short texts related to their subject of interests.

Lebrun and Pelletier(2005) identified other types of alliterates as impulsive readers who browse through a number of books with little or no concentration and selective readers who are not interested in current events and they are not interested in details. Struggling readers resist reading or are apathetic about it.

The growing disengagement of adolescent students is reaching a crisis threshold and if students are to successfully navigate the transitions from middle school through high school and the work place, they need to be engaged as readers throughout this epic journey. There is downward trend in voluntary reading by youths at the secondary schools over the past two decades (Averman *et al.*, 2007).

Humphrey (2008) asserted that teachers are encountering more and more students who are uninterested in learning. In fact some students begrudge even opening up their books whether it be to read, spell, or solve mathematical problems, These negative attitudes are believed by many teachers to have a significant bearing on the students' ability to perform well in any given examination.

Factors Contributing to the Making of Aliterates

The following factors according to Humphrey (2008) contribute to the making of alliterates in our secondary schools.

- Many secondary students are not excited by ideas presented in books. They prefer to experience life directly rather than through reading.
- Many secondary school students are unable to sit long still enough to read for prolonged period of time.
- Secondary school students most of which are teenagers are too self-absorbed and preoccupied with themselves, their problems, families and sexual roles to make connection between their world and books.
- Persistent stress from home and schools to read is constantly counterproductive for some secondary school students.
- Some secondary school students may grow up in non-reading homes with no reading role models. There is no one to pass down the value of reading.
- Many students at this level equate reading with ridicule, failure or exclusively school-related tasks.
- Some students may consider reading solitary and anti-social.
- Educators i.e. Teachers only teach the subjects, they do not teach the students to teach and there no reading teachers in many of our secondary schools.
- For some students, according to Ilogho(2011), reluctance to read may be part of a generalized resistance to perceived requirements or expectations.

The Role of School Libraries in Tackling Aliteracy

The school library is the cornerstone of the school community integral to teaching and learning. By providing teachers and students with a full range of print and electronic resources to support learning, the school library enhances students' achievement.

A well-stocked and well-staffed school library has a positive impact on students' achievement regardless of the socio-economic or educational level of the community.

School libraries provide teachers and students with a current collection of multi-perspective and multi-format resources aligned with the local curriculum and international academic standards. This collection forms the core of the schools'

information infrastructure and serves as a gateway to the world beyond the classroom (Lance, 2006). There is a close relationship between reading and school libraries. The one place where schools can count on engaging students with books is the school library. Books in the school library must appealing and be current to ensure that students will read them.

School libraries are places of opportunity where all students can strive for and achieve success with the help of professional school librarians who teach the information skills and strategies students need to become effective consumers of ideas and information.

School libraries promote equal access to resources thus leveling the academic playing field for children of   low income parents who do not have access to books and other learning resources outside the school, thus helping to close the achievement gap for these students and providing access to a broad range of print and electronic resources. They also afford access to materials that work together with classroom resources to enhance and extend the learning experience, when the school librarians work with classroom teachers on co-operative and collaborative projects, students develop a lifelong love of reading and become skilled users of ideas and information (Njoku, 1999). Therefore if schools are to close the achievement gap and increase academic achievement for all students, they need strong school libraries. Effective school libraries are a cost efficient way to provide students with the skills and knowledge they will need to achieve in the twenty-first century.

Humphrey (2008) pointed out that in spite of all our techno wonders, there is no substitute for books when it comes to encouraging reading and expanding imagination. Without access to books, academic success among students most definitely suffers. School libraries are keys to improving reading, the better the school libraries, the better the school result in both internal and external examinations, therefore attention to school libraries must be an integral component in any plan for improvement in examination results.

The school libraries should be staffed by professional librarians who are familiar with the books students like and trained to engage students in a variety of reading materials. According to Abdullai (1998) the library must be accessible; the students should have all the freedom they desire to scan through the shelves, which not only expose but give them confidence to come of age as learners to stand on their feet to possess autonomy for selection and direction in order to collect information relative to solution of a problem.

Ahmed (1996) asserted that school library helps to update knowledge and improve the standard of teaching and learning .In the light of this, school administrators should ensure they establish good libraries in schools and colleges instead of the usual conversion of a small classroom into a library.

The position of school library is becoming more important than ever before particularly at this period when the average Nigerian parents could not afford to purchase required textbooks for their children. He identified such things as location of the library and its facilities, quality of staff, adequate acquisition of books, good organization and arrangement of books and opening hours as factors that facilitate effective use of school libraries.

Lance (2006) found out in a research that performance of students in their academics depends on the level of development of the school library. In a study carried out in three states in the United States of America (Alaska, Colorado and Pennsylvania), she observed that where school libraries are better staffed, better stocked, and better funded, academic achievement tends to be higher.

However, the problem with school libraries is a nationwide problem and it contribute to the problem of aliteracy now rampant among the secondary school students.

In this era of technology, the school library should move from provision of access to reading materials to provision of access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT).There must be provision of computer laboratories with computer workstations and internet connections thereby providing information and ideas that are fundamental to functioning successfully in today's information and knowledge-based society (Halsey, 2008)

A well equipped school library with audio –visual facilities such as video and cassettes, radio and television would capture the interests of the students more and could even help in weaning them away from anti-social acts and to explore the modern world of technology.

Information resources in the school libraries

Halsey (2008) opined that the school libraries should maintain collection in a variety of media. In addition to books, magazines and newspapers, the school libraries may contain photographs, films, sound and video recordings, computers, CD-ROMs and maps; periodicals and other media. The school libraries should equip the students with life-long learning and develop their imagination enabling them to live as responsible citizens.

Secondary school libraries should have good materials for secondary education on adventure, sports, careers, and mystery fiction on sciences and humanities. Reference books such as maps, atlases, dictionaries, encyclopedia,

handbooks, yearbooks, subject bibliography and directories of local and state governments must be available in the school libraries.

According to Abdullai (1998), in the process of selecting information resources for the school libraries the school librarians must consider the type of readers, their needs and interests the teaching interests of teachers and the target group i.e. the physically challenged among the students. The collection of secondary school libraries must generally be capable of supporting instruction in Mathematics, Sciences and Technology, Social Sciences, Humanities and Foreign Languages.

The Role of Parents in Promoting Reading among Secondary School Students

Most families are involved when the children participate in activities such as vocal and instrumental music or sports but are less involved in their schools. Adolescence is a stage when continued support due to physical and emotional changes and more difficult school work.

Academic success is very dependent on what happens in homes. Schools provide the opportunity to learn reading skills. It is therefore worthwhile for schools to encourage family involvement. Children who grow up with non-reading parents in a home that is devoid of reading materials are much more likely to grow up as alliterate (Humphrey, 2008).

Parental reading habit is a major influence on the reading habit of their children; children with positive attitude towards reading had parents who spent a lot of time firmly planting the notion that reading is an enjoyable worthwhile activity. The most positive influence on the students' reading attitudes came from their parents. Students take note of their parents' reading behavior and emulate them.

Many parents do not present themselves as reading models for their children by reading in front of them. Children want to do the things they see their parents do, if they see their parents reading they will read. Families who are actively involved in their children's reading help to increase academic success. Parents ought to ensure that students are encouraged to read during evenings, weekends and school vacations(Lance, 2006).

Lawal(2008) suggested that illiterate parents should be made aware (through such media as adult literacy programs and Parents' Teachers' Association meetings) of the importance of reading materials for their children.

Humphrey (2008) opined that to encourage the parents to boost reading, the following should be done by authority of secondary schools:

- Involving the PTA in developing and executing a plan.
- Helping parents understand the overall concept of reading and the importance of parental support.
- Encouraging parents to provide access to books, newspapers, and other printed materials in their homes.
- Promoting the use of public libraries by parents and students.
- Providing examples of ways in which parents can help during parents' conferences and meetings.
- Serving as reading role models by reading and discussing books and newspaper articles with their children.
- Developing a summer independent reading program that parents and guardians will monitor and support.

The Roles of Teachers in Solving Reading Problem among Secondary School Students

Teachers must see it as responsibility to be committed to developing good reading habit and right attitudes among the secondary school students (Trelease, 1989).

In the opinion of Medahunsi (2008) teachers should do the best within their abilities to promote reading among the students. They should form reading groups, allocate time for various reading activities and to students of various ability levels.

Glogowki (2008) suggested that the students need to see in their teachers a high level of authentic engagement in reading in order to be encouraged to do the same. Teachers should be committed and enthusiastic readers willing to share their personal stories and reactions with students.

Bojuwoye (2008) asserted that a lot of improvement being sought in our schools depends greatly on the teachers and in particular on their preparation for teaching duties. Reading is imperative to the success of secondary school students; teachers must therefore take it as their teaching duties, promotion of reading among students.

Medahunsi (2008) asserted that it is not enough to teach children how to read, but teachers must teach them to want to read. The objective of the readers should go beyond producing school time readers to raising lifetime readers.

To solve reading problems among secondary school students, teachers must do the following:

- Identify the aliterates in their classes and in the whole school.
- Work one on one with the school librarians to connect the students with books.
- Subject teachers must be familiar with the goods books on their subjects and recommend them to their students.

- Encourage the students to read books on their own.

CONCLUSION

This is the last opportunity to turn these students away from aliteracy and lead them to become lifelong readers. Secondary school students become involved with many things that can distract them from reading such as computer and video games, extracurricular activities, the internet, sports and unsupervised television viewing to mention just a view. (Hymphrey, 2008).

The onus is therefore on the stakeholders (Parents, teachers, school librarians, school administrators) to get secondary school students out of this problem so that the recurrent problem of mass failure can become a thing of the past in our country. Aliteracy can indeed be tackled if the stakeholders will as a matter of urgency do every possible thing to address this menace.

RECOMMENDATION

(i)   From early childhood (right from elementary school) children should be made to realize the importance of reading and dispensability of their success on it.

(ii)   Well equipped school libraries should be established in all public and private secondary schools and they should be managed by trained school librarians.

(iii)   Students must have access to current, appealing, high interest and useful books and other reading materials in their classrooms, homes, public and school libraries and other location within the community.

(iv)   Schools must feature an environment where reading is valued, promoted and encouraged.

(v)   Time should be dedicated in the school time table for reading for a variety of purposes- for pleasure, information and exploration.

(vi)   Teachers must give students assignment and projects that will that will make them read and make use of libraries at regular intervals.

(vii)   All adults in schools, at home and across the community must serve as role models and provide guidance to ensure that reading is a priority in young people's lives because high reading achievement flows logically from homes, schools and communities that work together.

(viii)   Schools must provide a school wide atmosphere and program to promote independent reading

(ix)   In these days of ICT, parents and schools through the school library can use the ICT to promote reading by providing the students with access to useful electronic information resources that can be found on the internet and CD-ROM formats.

(x)   Government at the state and federal levels through the respective ministries of education should discourage and if possible completely wipe out the magic centers where students are prepared to pass examinations through examination malpractices without reading.

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