

Reading as a Panacea to Societal Problems.

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Abstract

The paper discussed the conceptual clarifications, of reading, the society, the library and the essential roles that libraries play in the inculcation of reading, given that the library has the mandate and capacity to provide, and give access to broad range of information sources, aimed to foster literacy and education. The paper further asserts that the trend of escalating and persistent societal problems witnessed in Nigeria in the recent decade, has its root in ignorance, restiveness, misinformation, and poor literacy level of members of the society, and youth in particular. Such constant breakdown of law and order has impacted negatively on the political stability, security, and economic development of the nation. The paper argues that the provision and dissemination of timely, accurate information through the services of libraries, will produce a reading, informed, disciplined, responsible and responsive, re-oriented, and enlightened citizenry, who will be able to take positive decisions which will engender stability and development in the polity. The paper proposes the adoption of the services of libraries to ensure access to, and utilization of information and knowledge with a view to empower members of the society to combat man-made societal problems, and promote national development. The position of this paper is that reading, and by extension libraries, serve as agents for life-long learning, which in turn, produces youths and adults who will champion societal development and equity.

Keywords: Reading, Society, Societal problems, Panacea, Public Libraries.

Introduction

Given the obvious steady decline of reading culture among Nigerians, cutting across the children, youth, and adults, it is necessary for well-meaning individuals, and in particular, those in the LIS, and related disciplines, being the *bonafide* curators and managers of information resources, to spearhead the campaign to promote reading, as

a veritable tool, to curb the catalogue of problems threatening to terminate our society in the information age.

The world is an information market place, where the informed thrive and excel, while the uninformed is deformed. The only option therefore, is to imbibe the culture of reading for knowledge and development.

This paper positions reading as a means to curb societal problems, in the Nigerian society. Societal problems of any kind are inimical to societal development. In recent time, Nigeria has witnessed a spate of societal degradation, most of which are perpetrated by the youth. Societal problems are characterized by agitations, born out of misconceptions, economic stagnation, and breakdown of law and order. The country has recorded insurgence in North East, militancy in Niger Delta, unknown gunmen in South East, cultism in the South-West and the ubiquitous Fulani herdsmen syndrome nation- wide. This has impacted negatively on the political stability, security, and economic development of the nation. This paper posits that inculcating the skill and habit of reading books, through the services of libraries; and in particular, school and public libraries, will provide timely, accurate information. By so doing, the teaming youth of this nation will be re-oriented, enlightened, and stimulated to take positive decisions, and actions which will engender stability in the polity.

Reading; a conceptual explanation

Reading is a complex concept, which has several absolute definitions. Wikipedia defines it as

"to look at and interpret letters or other written information; to make sense of; understand; to speak aloud, words or other written information; to infer a meaning, significance, thought, intention, from written information". It involves the conveyance of either, or both sound and meaning to written letters or words".

Reading is fundamental to learning and knowing and can be broadly categorized into functional and leisure reading. Reading is an active learning process which entails the act of decoding written symbols, words, and images to construct and understand their meanings. It is an intellectual skill which can be learned and imbibed. Reading is an agent for change and life-long learning, and will help to combat societal problems and promote societal development. It is also established that exposing children and youth to reading in their formative age, will produce youths and adults who will champion societal development and equity. Etim (2010) emphasized that the education of children, from the slowest kindergarten to the most senior college student, an abundance of printed and audio-visual materials are essential as basic tools to achieve teaching and learning.

What to Read?

Having established the importance of reading, one might ask; what are people to read? And the simple answer would be; books. The term book is applied in this context, both specifically and generically. Specifically, the printed book consists of a set of written or printed sheets of paper, fastened together along one edge, so that it can be opened

at any point. (The World Encyclopedia, 2007). The New Encyclopedia Britannica, defines a book as a non-periodical printed publication of at least, 49 pages, excluding the covers". Generically, the term book, is loosely applied to cover all types of written packages in diverse formats, including periodicals, and electronic or digital formats; e-books. (Ogbonna,2014). Books have a very long history; from the earliest writing materials, including stone, tree-back, papyrus and parchment scrolls, to paper and the internet, and who knows what else? (Ogbonna, 2014). Nwokocha (2017) adds that, books can be described as one of the pillars of civilization, and that whatever achievements attained by man, in every sphere of life, including, education, science and technology, agriculture, health, culture, and religion is traceable and associated with books and reading. There have been interesting arguments, proposing the demise of the book, owing to the emergence of her digital counterparts. Needless to belabour the point; the book has come a very long way, and is too deeply rooted to be excavated by human efforts. Instead, what we have witnessed, is continuing evolvement of more digital and ephemeral variants.

Benefits of Reading

Reading is both a skill and an art. It is the only strategy, after observation, and oral transmission, to learn. Reading activates cognitive stimulation, language development and visual ability. It also stimulates moral and emotional development and stability by providing entertainment and reducing stress, tension and depression.

Reading exposes one to places and experiences he/she may not attain, thereby broadening their horizon and perspective. In a general and academic sense, reading propagates information literacy and lifelong learning.

Information literacy, is the ability of an individual to recognize an information need, locate the relevant information resources, and evaluate the information, and utilize it ethically to solve a given problem. (Osedo,2020)

Society

Man is a social being. He has an innate curiosity to understand and relate with his environment. Man wants to know the what, how, where and when of his environment, as well as the people who live in it. This is the origin of research; to search, and continue to search for information and acquire knowledge about people, things, and events.

Conceptually, a society is a group of people living in any space, irrespective of the spatial dimensions, and bound by functional interdependence, culture, solidarity, and structure. (Ikonne and Amaugo, 2020)

The word society emerged in the fifteenth century from the French word, *societe*, which was in turn, derived from the Latin word, *societas*, meaning friendly associations. In the Social Sciences, the word society is used to describe groups of people that form a semi-closed social system, in which interactions are stipulated and regulated by the group. This does not suggest that a society is merely a population; it consists of the complex systems which dictate the norms and acceptable behavioural

conduct of both members and visitors of the society. A society is dynamic and responds to stimuli within and around it. In this wise, a society is both functional, and structural.

The history of human society has recorded the transitions from the hunting and gathering, pastoral and horticultural, agricultural, industrial, post-industrial, to the Knowledge and Information society, where the world has become a global village.

The pivot of societal development is that members of any given society are bound by, and to the norms of that society, which are geared towards the development, progress and betterment of that society. Societal development entails the overall development or a collective socio-economic, political as well as religious advancement of a society. The Holy Bible holds in the book of Genesis 2: 26-28, that Man should go into the world to dominate and populate it. In this context, man is charged to make better and maintain his world. It therefore follows, that the onus to develop and maintain the society, we live in is ours. To say that the society of the information age is deteriorating, will be to state the obvious.

By the given functions of libraries to collect, organize, disseminate, conserve and preserve information sources for use, it is not farfetched, that public libraries in particular, as well are in the fore-front of the efforts to promote reading as a panacea for societal development.

Societal Problems

A look around our society, would reveal that people and natural phenomena are deteriorating faster than they can be re-generated. Any situation that alters or has potential to alter the *statuesque* of any society, negatively, or to cause disadvantage to the component parts of the society, including its members, is viewed as a problem to that society. Furthermore, events and situations, man-made or natural, that are capable of crippling or threatening the economic, socio-cultural, or developmental progress and equity of a society is considered a problem.

The challenge of the modern society is that the basic resources are either inadequate or not functional. As a result, members of the society are engaged in the scramble for the few resources, and in the process, cause more damage to their society and one another. Consider the events and records of banditry, kidnapping, ritual killings, armed robbery, oil theft, internet fraud, global pandemics, etc, in the last decade. Our spatial society, together with its members, are definitely on a roller coaster to destruction and extinction, and this is most significant for the Nigerian nation. In the past decade, there has been an unprecedented increase in variety and toxicity of challenges in our societies, both functional and structural, which are viewed as unwholesome, and socially unacceptable in the society, (Igbo & Ikpa 2013), and which are significantly man-made. In Nigeria, we have witnessed large scale and frightening levels of corruption, plunder, grand larceny, bad governance, insecurity, robbery, economic decadence, poverty, external dependence, religious intolerance, educational deterioration, and environmental degradation, to mention only a few. Societal misconducts threaten the overall peace, progress, security and corporate existence of

any nation. Meaningful development cannot thrive in an unsecured and chaotic environment, and despite huge resources deployed to foster development strides in our nation, the results have been minimal.

People indulge in unwholesome behaviours which result in societal problems when they lack proper understanding, orientation and basic rules for existence. It can therefore be said that accessing the right information and knowledge will help to curb societal problems, and improve the overall quality of life. The paucity of information, and knowledge has made it problematic to attain social harmony, unity, order and stability for sustainable development. Ugulu and Oghuvwu (2015) noted that social cohesion cannot be achieved without timely, accurate and relevant information. There is a connection between the quantity and quality of information at an individuals' disposal, and his overall behavioural pattern and philosophies. Information can primarily be got by reading.

Reading as a Panacea to Societal Problems

An uninformed or miss-informed citizenry is a threat to national peace and this cripples development. A reading (informed/literate) person is knowledgeable, innovative, and progressively open to positive change; is a social wealth, and an investment in any given society. Psychologists have proposed the social learning theory, which posits that behaviour is learned, rather than inborn. School and Public libraries play a very important role in fostering literacy among the citizens, from the childhood, to youthful age, and to adulthood and old age. Children who are introduced to reading early in life have better chances of accessing information that will help inculcate a positive and broader views and imbibe social norms. Nwauwa and Wegwu (2021) assert that children who are thought library habits early, will have confidence, and a broad perspective, and better understanding and value for the society they live in. They further stated that the ambience of the library impacts courage, self-worth, and confidence. Exposure to a broad outlook on life no doubt will create stable and responsible adults, with value for, and capacity to solve societal problems, rather than resort to restiveness at the slightest provocation.

The question this paper is focused to answer is; how can reading play the role of a panacea; a catalyst, a solution, to the myriad of societal problems and anomalies threatening to sack us from our society?

A known cliché has it that information is power. Another says that an uninformed mind is a deformed mind. Both may be clichés, but are true. Books, reading, and by extension, libraries, occupy the central place in any effort to revamp and maintain our society. As already pointed out, an informed person is deformed, to the point of having no value for the society he lives in, nor any inclination to make efforts to replenish it. The focus of this discuss is to posit that the veritable panacea to mitigate societal ills, is reading. If information is power, then members of the society must be informed. To do this, citizens must learn and inculcate the skill, enablement, ability and habit of reading, to gain knowledge; to decode and understand the accounts of the wisdom of humanity, as recorded, preserved, and disseminated in books, and by extension, libraries.

The public library is the local centre of information that makes all kinds of information and knowledge readily available to its users, irrespective of age, creed, gender or nationality. It is established, supported and funded by the community, either through local, or state, government. It provides access to knowledge at no, or minimal cost. The public library is rightly referred to as the people's university, because it provides a wide range of information materials, to cater for the wide range of information needs of its wide range of users, thereby communicating experience and ideas from one person to another. Public libraries can help young people become productive and educated citizens, by offering its rich, vast information resources to enable members of the public to educate themselves on their own terms, and at their own pace.

Deviant behaviour or attitude is caused by lack of adequate information, knowledge and orientation. Information is a vital tool for the development of any society, by collecting, organizing, disseminating, and preserving information resources, to be assessed, utilized, and applied by members of the society, to answer everyday questions, and solve societal problems. Libraries are information store houses, established to cater for the information needs of its users. According to Ugulu and Oghuvwu (2015), the importance of the library is clearly reflected in the major roles with which it is associated and to which it is committed, including;

- custodian of knowledge for present and future heritage;
- educational role - life-long and self-learning;
- Information literacy and development
- provision of research, cultural and recreational information.

According to Okogwo (2014) information obtained from libraries can change the behaviour, attitudes, and mindset of young people. Through reading, young idle minds are engaged through the recreational services of the public library, and provides its users with factual information that will help guide their decisions and actions to foster peace and activate development in the society.

Reading provides good use of leisure time, and reduces truancy and societal crime. It helps one to socialize with other members of the society and enhances one's imagination and knowledge. Reading helps to build vocabulary and literacy. It stimulates thinking, which in turn, triggers doing. Etim (2010) dwells on the relationship between reading, thinking, and doing, and argues that reading, stimulates thinking, which triggers, and ultimately results in doing. There is therefore, a relationship between reading, and attitudinal change. By reading the appropriate information materials, one finds answers to questions; solutions to problems, and alternatives to existing platforms. Critical/functional reading involves analysis of ideas and concepts, evaluation and consideration of multiple perspectives, and exposure to new contexts. Reading moulds one's personality, develops moral values, especially in the childhood and adolescent formative years. It opens the door to social orientation; which is the desire to take part in social interactions, as against a pathological pervasive disinterest in social interactions, which is a fertile ground for anti-social life style, where the rights are ignored or violated.

Man has always distinguished himself from other mammals by his ability to consciously seek to understand his world, and record the findings of his search. In the 20th C, information has become an economic resource, competing with other production factors namely man and money or labour and capital. (Okezie, and Kanu, (2020). As a resource, the application of information affects the effectiveness and efficiency of the society. In like manner, as a commodity, information is produced, sold and bought just as other materials of production. Reading is the strategy to acquire information.

Reading can also be a panacea to societal problems by helping citizens to inculcate self-esteem and empathy, which is the ability to internalize and appreciate one's personality, and be responsive to the emotional reactions of others. Lack of self-esteem gives rise to dysfunctional behaviour which creates problems in the society.

A reading public learns to identify problems, ask question, and proffer solutions. Reading enables one to inculcate deductive reasoning, draw gaps in knowledge and make valid inferences. People who read develop intellectual self-reliance and consciousness, which produces an enlightened and literate citizenry, who are less inclined to social misbehaviours.

The New Living Translation Bible in the book of Joshua 1;8 records, thus; "study this Book of the law continually...so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you be successful in all you do". This means that one has to read/study the law, in the first instance, otherwise, one would not be able to know, and to do. Inculcating and mastering reading is definitely the way to salvage our society from a catalogue of societal problems.

Reading will guarantee that citizens of a society are stimulated to think, to reason, and are inspired to revitalize and maintain our society.

Libraries as information store houses, offer the citizens the opportunity to read and learn. The primary role of any library, and the public library in particular, is to acquire, organize, disseminate, preserve and ultimately conserve, all intellectual works, print or nonprint, to users, for the purposes of research, education, information, recreation, literacy, and life-long learning. Perceived marginalization, victimization, unequal distribution of social amenities etc, by any level of government has led to the exhibition of violence by uninformed or misinformed citizens, especially, the youth. This gives rise to insecurity, which has resulted as an impediment to national development. This therefore places demand on librarians and information professionals, the responsibility to acquire and disseminate timely, accurate information ahead of, and to troubleshoot, with a view to avert restiveness and unrest, which give rise to societal problems.

Anasi as cited in Akpokighe and Ejovi (2020) stated that libraries serve communities by "presenting them with factual information that will guide their actions and help make good conclusion that will promote peace. A public library is a local gateway to knowledge which provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision making in a social group. Life-long learning refers to a continuous cycle of

learning, from childhood, through formal education at all levels, for independent learning throughout adult-life. It promotes the development of knowledge and competencies that will enable each individual to adapt and support societal developments through the provision of relevant and current information resources. Okogwu (2014) agrees, but adds that reading is pivotal to the overall social and educational upbringing of children. Etim (2010) examined the challenges to effective readership, and outlined some factors militating against effective readership in Nigeria, and also advocated that to ensure intellectual freedom, effective readership must be entrenched. To this end, libraries are established to provide a wide range of information resources and services that will help enable the reading of the available information materials. This starts by providing rural library networks and information centers, serene atmosphere, and encouraging children activities like story time and reading challenge, to channel youthful strengths to positive productivity. Reading is one strategy that will ensure that we save the Nigerian society to bequeath to the unborn generations.

Conclusion

It is clear that reading play a vital role in the formation of the values of citizens. This paper therefore posits a case for proper funding and support of libraries, by government, for continuous delivery of the vital services that will help in combating societal restiveness and foster development through active stimulation of children and youth, to become valuable contributors to societal development.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proffered:

1. There is need to reintroduce the essential services of public and school libraries, because, they are geared towards training children and youth to read, thereby preparing them to add value to the society.
2. Reading is an agent of change. Libraries are the one place where members of the society are guaranteed access to books, for functional and leisure reading. Therefore, government should train and employ librarians and equip libraries with the necessary resources to effectively provide reading materials for diverse users.

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