

Importance of reading for national unity and cultural integration: a focus on the Nigerian youth

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Abstract

This paper discusses the importance of reading for national unity and cultural integration, with a focus on the Nigerian youth. This is against the backdrop that the quest for unity and cultural integration is much desired between the various ethnic nationalities that make up the nation. The absence of national unity and cultural integration makes it difficult for citizens to have a common sense of identity. The paper considers the concepts of youth, reading, national unity and cultural integration. The role of the youth in national unity and cultural integration were also highlighted. The paper goes on to consider the place of reading in national unity and cultural integration, noting the status of reading culture among the Nigerian youth. Strategies that can help in advancing or improving the reading culture among the Nigerian youth were discussed.

Keywords: Nigerian youth, National unity, Cultural integration

Introduction

An often used axiom: ‘the youth are the leaders of tomorrow’ lays credence to the recognition of the place of the youth as the backbone or bedrock of any society. This is because societies all over the world depend upon their youth for reproduction, regeneration, rejuvenation and in fact, sustainability. Gray (2018) likens the youth to the backbone of institutions having the propensity to change the dynamics to bring about new paradigm shift in the society. To that extent, they are the “nation’s strength, and their characteristic energy and capabilities support the body politic.” The National Youth Policy (2009) is of the view that the youth are “the greatest asset that any nation can have...the valued possession of any nation...the center of reconstruction and development; a good measure of the extent to which a country can reproduce as well as sustain itself” In another submission, Essays, UK (November 2018) observes that the youth are

“a major source of human capital and key agents for socio cultural, economic, and political development as well as technological innovation worldwide. Their imaginations, ideas, energies and visions are essential for

the continuing development of societies. Their training, development, intellectual perspectives and productive abilities are key determinants of the progress and future of societies.”

In essence, no nation can fully develop without the active participation of its youth. But despite their potentials and abilities, the youth cannot do much in an atmosphere of national disunity and cultural disintegration. Invariably, disunity and cultural disintegration does not encourage the spirit of oneness and in fact retards development. Therefore it is important that efforts be made to provide the right environment that will enable the youth to thrive. Opportunities must be created to prepare the youth to step into their roles, and issues that discourage national unity and cultural integration need to be identified and addressed to enhance and empower the youth. A culture of reading is one of the ways that the youth can be empowered (Adonu, 2019). This is particularly important because while the axiom ‘the youth are the leaders of tomorrow cannot be said to be a fallacy, one needs to observe that there is a gradual shift in thinking today as some individuals have made bold to say that readers rather than just any youth, are the true leaders of

tomorrow (. This stems from the fact that a youth who does not have a culture of reading thrives on ignorance and is a danger to himself/herself and the society; a ticking time bomb. On the other hand, a reading youth acquires analytical skills that enable him to evaluate situations and take the most appropriate steps that would benefit him/her and their community. This notion is succinctly captured by the late Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe who averred that “if you want to know the future of any nation, take a look at what the youths are doing today.”

Definition of Concepts: Youth

A conceptual definition of the concept of youth given by UNESCO (2017) says it is “a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood’s independence and awareness of our interdependence as members of a community” (UNESCO (2017). By virtue of this transition, the individual is considered mature enough to know not only how to behave towards him/herself, but also towards other members of his/her community.

However, although the conceptual definition of ‘youth’ is somewhat universal across cultures, what is not generally fixed across cultures is the age group that is regarded as youth. In recognition of this variation across cultures, UNESCO (2017) concedes that “youth is more a fluid category than a fixed age group.” For instance, while the UN (2017) sees youth as “those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, the African Youth Charter views youth as “every person between the ages of 15 and 35 years” (African Youth Charter, 2006). Furthermore, while Ghana agrees with the African Charter’s age group, Nigeria on the other hand, sees youth as “persons between ages 18 and 30” (Nigerian National Youth Policy Document, 2009). In clear appreciation of the existence of these variations therefore, the United Nations (UN) recognizes that member countries may define the age group they consider as ‘youth’ in line with their developmental realities and/or circumstances. For purposes of this paper, the age group 15-30 is recognized as youth.

National Unity

Simply put, national unity is when the different people/group that make up a country or nation willingly cast aside their cultural, language and tribal differences and accept to live together in harmony as one people with reference to Nigeria, Obinelo (2018) captures this notion aptly. According to him national unity is “acceptance of other ethnic components of Nigeria into the nationhood of Nigeria, irrespective of differences in religion, status, culture and geographical location.”

National unity is important for the following reasons: (1) It brings about the development of a nation (2) It helps the government of a nation to understand the people’s needs and choices (3) It strengthens a nation (4) It brings about safety in a nation and (5) It encourages people to share ideas, values and emotional bonds (Passnownow, 2018).

National unity makes it possible for members of a diverse society such as Nigeria to appreciate that there is strength in diversity as people see themselves not as separate entities but different parts of a whole system that can contribute their quota for the development and sustainability of the society. But for this to happen, members within a country, irrespective of their diversity must willingly subsume their individual, religious and ethnic cultures in preference of a national culture without fear or suspicion.

Cultural Integration

Cultural integration means a coming together of several cultures to form a new, multicultural society albeit; each culture keeps its character and many of its features and values. Cultural integration ensures that “the individual cultures, and members of cultural communities, are welcomed and accepted for what they are. There is a respect for the practices, beliefs and values of that culture” (Durham Immigration Protal, 2017).

Furthermore, nation building- of which national unity and cultural integration are a part- goes beyond implementation of “political and economic policies that will improve the lives of the citizenry, to recognition of values and other aspects of the state that would act as a national catalyst to bind the people” (Aniefok (n.d.).

Continuing, the author posits that “culture is crucial to nation building because its absence could promote fissiparous tendencies among the citizenry.”

Reading

Reading is the “process of looking at, and comprehending the meaning of written and printed words from the visual representation of symbols. It involves recognition and sometimes verbalization of symbols which represents sounds in human speech” (Aina, Okusaga, Taiwo and Ogundipe, 2011). According to Sisulu cited in Igwe (2011), reading is “one of the fundamental building blocks of learning.” Indeed, one cannot claim to be literate in the modern society if he/she does not have the skill of reading and writing. In the view of Dorothy cited in Aina, Okusaga, Taiwo and Ogundipe (2011), reading is “a total integrative process that starts with the reader and includes the following: affective domain, perceptual domain, and cognitive domain.” In their explanation, the affective domain is concerned with feelings and emotions; the perceptual domain is concerned with giving meaning to sensations or the ability to organize stimuli on a field while the cognitive domain relates to thinking, and skills development. Thus, reading tasks more than one area of human development.

National Unity, Cultural Integration and the Nigerian Youth

Right from independence, there has been a quest to unite the different ethnic groups that make up Nigeria. It is common knowledge that a deep-seated suspicion and animosity exists between the various ethnic nationalities that make up the Nigerian state. It is also known that there have continued to be questions raised about the advisability of remaining as one nation given the antecedents that led to the formation of the Nigerian state. The height of this distrust culminated in the Nigerian civil war (6th July 1967-15th January 1970), and despite post war efforts to encourage a more cohesive relationship between the various ethnic nationalities, the call to re-examine the Nigerian question has not ceased. The recent calls for restructuring of Nigeria are an eloquent evidence of that.

It is often said that the myriad of problems that beleaguer Nigeria stems from the absence of

national unity and cultural integration. Taking into consideration Nigeria’s challenges as a nation, national unity and cultural integration are important for her continuing survival. This is because although there are three major tribes in Nigeria: Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa; there are at present two hundred and fifty ethnic groups, each having its peculiar indigenous cultures, language or dialectical differences. Another reason is that there are three more widely practiced religions in Nigeria: Christianity, Islam and traditional religion with their differing practices and beliefs. There is no doubt that with this much ethnic groups in addition to the other variables, Nigeria is a potpourri of sorts.

Furthermore, with an estimated population of 200,962,237, Nigeria has the largest population in Africa, and also, one of the largest populations of youths in the world (World Population Review, 2019). But while this is an impressive number, it does not translate to political, social and economic development of the country owing to some inherent challenges. National unity and cultural integration have a very critical role to play in driving the overall development of Nigeria or any other country for that matter. But while working for national unity and cultural integration is the responsibility of every Nigerian, across age groups and segments of the society, there is no doubt that it is most important among the youth because they have a stake in how the country turns out.

National unity and cultural integration among the youth is the only guarantee for bringing the diversity of ethnic groups and cultures in Nigeria together for the benefit of every member of the country. In many developed countries of the world, the youth have taken the frontline in matters relating to national unity and cultural integration and it should not be different in Nigeria.

It is important that the youth work towards national unity and cultural integration given that the youth form the bulk of the workforce of any country, and so they are depended upon for innovations and creativity that drives development. According to Olaobaju (2008), the “youths also constitute the major resource base for any country that wants to embark on any meaningful development project” because “the extent of the youths’ vitality, responsible

conduct and roles in society is positively correlated with the development of their country.” Furthermore, the Nigerian National Youth Policy (2009) says that the youth “represent the most active, most volatile, and yet most vulnerable segment of the population, socio-economically and in other respects.” The volatile and vulnerable nature of the youth means that they are easily discontented and if that is not managed well, it can escalate to war. In the event of a war, it is from within the ranks of the youth that fighters are recruited. It is known that the youth suffer the highest casualties in any war and that wars are disruptive of both national and individual development.

National unity and cultural integration are important for the safety of every member of the society, but more importantly for the youth who for economic reasons are compelled to live outside their ethnic locations. If there is an absence of national unity and cultural integration, there is usually threat to lives and property of people. Given that the youth are the most mobile of all the age groups, they need national unity and cultural integration to feel accepted and safe among other ethnic groups.

The youth must work towards national unity and cultural integration to secure their future. In the absence of national unity and cultural integration, the youth will not be able to work together as a united body due to deep-seated hatred, suspicion and animosity. This is why presently it is difficult for the Nigerian youth to have one voice over any national issue. As a result, politicians and government officials are not held accountable for their actions and/or inactions. It is the duty of the youth to hold the government to account, to demand good governance or their future will be mortgaged, thus creating a future that is at best uncertain.

While there is no doubt that a number of Nigerian youths are doing very well in different spheres of life, it is however obvious that it is a negligible number when compared with the enormous number of youth in the country. Some reasons have been adduced for the challenges facing Nigerian youth today. While not exhaustive, Ikechi-Ekpendu, (2016) identifies (1) restricted access to functional and qualitative education, (2) unemployment/limited access to employment, (3) poverty, (4) bureaucratic and institutional

bottlenecks, (5) negative attributes of peer group influences and (6) indiscipline.

It has been asserted that Nigerian youths are more into showcasing anti social behaviours than they are about facing the challenges of a rapidly changing world, or thinking about their future. As a result, there is an erosion of morals/values, and long held virtues such as hard-work and honesty (Aniefok, n.d.). Haralambos cited in Aniefok further adds that the myriad of challenges facing the Nigerian youth have created an environment in which the “youth are cheaply available for manipulation by self-seeking politicians.”

There is no gain saying that while the majority of Nigerian youth wallow in ignorance and therefore are open to manipulation, those who are more knowledgeable and aware are the readers among them because they are not so easily manipulated. Invariably, they are also the ones that have the resources needed to bring about national unity and cultural integration (Olasehinde, Akanmode, Alaiyemola, & Babatunde (2015).

The Importance of Reading for the Development of the Nigerian Youth

While today, information is contained in other formats besides book, there is no doubt that without books the wisdom of past generations would be lost. In the same vein, if books are written but are not read the wisdom of past generations would be lost. Undoubtedly, the loss of the wisdom of past generation creates a huge gap that cannot be easily filled. In agreement, Sanders cited in Oyewole (2017) notes that reading is very important for full participation in modern society because it adds quality to live as well as provide access to culture and cultural heritage. To that extent, the place of reading in the life of an individual or society cannot be overemphasized.

In support of the importance of reading Olasehinde, Akanmode, Alaiyemola and Babatunde (2011) aver that “reading, whether for pleasure or academic purposes is an essential habit which ensures greatness in a man’s life.”

Reading about a culture is the best alternative outside of experiencing it personally. It is true that a good number of people may not have the opportunity to travel to other places or live among other cultures in their life time, but

reading provides us a peep hole into other peoples and cultures and enables us to appreciate it a little more. This appreciation moves us to be more tolerant and accepting of cultural differences.

It is also true that much of the violence that happens in Nigeria today is fuelled by illiteracy and ignorance because people who do not read do not have the analytical tools to evaluate situations or actions. Rather, they depend on hearsay and are often deceived into taking the wrong action(s). No wonder Igwe (2011) asserts that “reading sharpens the mind, makes one reason rationally and objectively as well as projects one for greatness in life.” A well-developed mind is important for success in assigned responsibilities. Aina, Okusagam Taiwo and Ogundipe (2011) further note that reading is a vital means of acquisition of knowledge, skills and expression of thought. Reading provides the information needed to expand our understanding of our environment.

It has been observed that “reading gives us access to full participation in various activities in our modern society. It adds quality to our lives by giving us access to various cultures and cultural heritage. Reading empowers and emancipates us as citizens as well as brings people together as a nation” (Olasehinde, Akanmode, Alaiyemola and Babatunde, 2015). Reading helps us to understand and make sense of the world around us, about ourselves and other people.

Furthermore, reading enhances the “chances of success at school and beyond” (Igwe, 2011). Success at school is necessary for development in the political, social and economic spheres of society. Additionally, the author notes that reading does not have a time frame neither is it location specific. In other words, reading goes beyond school and lasts all through life. Therefore, the one who reads only for school is not a reader in the true sense of the word. This is because such an individual is limited in his world view. Therefore, reading makes for life-long learning.

In the submission of Iroka and Ndulaka (2018) “the absence of a widespread culture of reading acts as an effective barrier to our development and international competitiveness.” They further note that “the economic, social and political health of our nation today depends on building

literate citizens that are able to read widely and apply it practically for development.” Doubtless, the developed countries are where they are today because of their culture of reading. An enlightened citizenry is much more able to participate in the political, social and economic lives of the society. Compare that with the developing countries where the illiteracy level is very high.

Along this line also, Yusha’u, Ibrahim and Dikko (2017) note that reading increases knowledge, educates and entertains. Itsekor and Nwokeoma (2017) posit that “reading provides a backup of information which reduces ignorance, thus empowering and promoting literacy and communication.”

Given the importance of reading, it is imperative that the youth who make up the largest percentage of the Nigerian population are literate and have a culture of reading otherwise the country stands the risk of redundancy among a population that ordinarily should be the source of solutions to the challenges of national unity and cultural integration. So, what is the status of reading among Nigeria’s youth population?

Status of Reading Culture among Nigerian Youth

Without education, it is difficult to talk about national unity and cultural integration because education is the key to national development (Umar, 2004). Umar further notes that education is important because it is a potent tool for liberating the masses from ignorance, disease, and poverty. It is a means of encouraging progress, unity and overall betterment of a people. Thus, in the author’s view, without equality in education, it is difficult to build an egalitarian society. In the same vein, education of the citizenry is a pre-requisite for reading given that it is only an educated person that will be motivated to pick up a book and read. In agreement, Itsekor and Nwokeoma (2017) note that a culture of reading can only exist in a society where a high percentage of the population is literate and can read and write.

A society is said to have a reading culture when reading becomes a part and parcel of their daily lives, a habit that is shared by members of the society. A reading nation does not only read to pass examinations or advance in their

profession or careers but also for knowledge and leisure. The citizenry become known for reading as it forms a part and parcel of the peoples' daily lives.

In their definition, Behrman cited in Ruterana (2012) sees reading culture as "an integrated pattern of reading behaviours", practices, beliefs, perceptions and knowledge."Sadly, reading culture is reported to be dwindling among the Nigerian youth and this is a cause for concern to many. But this is not particularly unexpected as it is reported that the rate of literacy in Nigeria is low. Statistically, it is reported that the percentage of young people aged 15-24 years who are able to read and write short simple statements about everyday life or who attended secondary or higher education by gender is 59.3% female and 70.9% male. In the same vein, the percentage of people aged 15-49 years who, at least once a week read a newspaper or magazine, listen to the radio and watch television is 5.5% female and 18.5% (National Bureau of Statistics & UNICEF, 2017).

To buttress the above, Henry cited in Aina, Okusaga, Taiwo and Ogundipe (2011) carried out a study into the reading culture among Nigerians. The study made some startling findings:

- Forty percent of adult Nigerians have never read a non-fiction book from cover to cover after graduating from school.
- The average Nigerian reads less than one book per year. Only one percent of successful men and women in Nigeria read one non-fiction book per month.
- Thirty million Nigerians graduate from high school with poor reading skills.

Other contributory factors to the poor reading culture is said to stem from the fact that majority are not aware of the immense benefit inherent in reading while many others cannot access reading resources (Bature, (2011). The near non-existence of libraries in most of our primary and secondary schools is another hindrance to developing a reading culture. Thus, the foundations of reading are not laid (Igwe, 2011). Moreover, illiterate parents are most unlikely to encourage reading among their children.

Other reasons advanced by Nissien cited in Igwe (2011) include: poor reading skills, slow comprehension rate, slow reading rate, difficulty in distinguishing main ideas from irrelevant details, inadequate vocabulary or word power, inadequate reading interests and habits, distractions from television and film viewing and lack of interest and reading materials.

According to Gbadamosi, cited in Igwe (2011), other militating factors include: change in Nigeria's value system, and pursuit of materialism; economic hardship prevalent in many homes, astronomical prices of books and other reading materials; and scantiness of/or low availability of indigenous reading resources, mostly because of the high cost of publishing. If these problems are not addressed there is no doubt that the quality of youth that emerge will be too shallow to take up meaningful positions in the country. This calls for development of strategies that can help to stem this bad tide.

Strategies for Improving Reading Culture among Nigerian Youth

It has been established that the youth are critical to national unity and cultural integration. It has also been established that reading is important in this quest. However, this will not be achieved if Nigerian youth do not develop a good reading culture. Bearing in mind the highlighted hindrances to developing a good reading culture, some strategies that can improve/promote good reading culture are as follows:

Government at all levels should improve access to education to enable more citizens obtain literacy and lower the rate of school dropout. Also, the quality of education should be improved through better funding of schools to enable acquisition of the skills required for life-long learning.

Establishment of libraries in primary and secondary schools should be a matter of policy. Also, such libraries should be adequately funded, maintained and equipped with relevant reading materials in different formats. Library hour should also become compulsory in the schools since the foundation for a good reading culture is laid in the early years of schooling.

Local publishing houses should be provided an enabling environment to thrive so that more people can get into book publishing. Also, when the environment is supportive, the high costs associated with publishing will be reduced thus making books more affordable.

Public libraries should revive the practice of mobile library services to ensure that library services are extended to remote areas and to disadvantaged communities.

Aggressive readership promotion campaigns such as the one being spearheaded by the National Library of Nigeria should be embarked upon by other library institutions.

Librarians should be more proactive in advocating for libraries at all levels of education. They should also develop readership programmes for in-school and out-of-school youth.

Individual librarians can also form community or neighbourhood reading clubs for different age groups.

Extension of literacy programmes to vulnerable youths will enhance the reading culture among that category of youth because it is usually from within this rank that politicians draw their thugs and lackeys.

More adult education centers should be established at state and local government levels and the existing ones strengthened /equipped and maintained to be attractive to individuals who desire a second chance at education. Also, competent teachers should be posted to such centres for effectiveness.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) need to be more actively involved in readership promotion activities/programmes to boost the reading culture among the youth. They can assist through advocacy as well as establishing and equipping libraries in rural communities and prisons. This will ensure that no one is left behind in the quest to improve the reading culture. While a number of NGOs have been instrumental in the establishment of educational programmes and donation of reading materials in Nigerian prisons, there is no doubt that more still needs to be done.

The Nigerian Library Association (NLA) at both national and chapter levels should engage in advocacy programmes to draw more attention

to the dwindling reading culture among Nigerians. They should also liaise with school management boards in the area of readership promotion campaigns. They can also mount reading contests to encourage reading among Nigerian school children.

Parents have a huge role to play in instilling the love for reading and encouraging a sustained reading culture among their children given that the foundation for reading is laid in the home. They should read to their children from an early age and give them books as gift rather than toys and computer games during their special celebrations. They can also set up a reward system geared towards compensating reading of books not only for school but also for leisure.

Conclusion

No nation can attain true development in its political, social and economic lives without national unity and cultural integration. Nigerian youth are critical in enthrone national unity and cultural integration because the youth are the key to the development of any nation given their strengths/potentials. However, uninformed and unknowledgeable youth are not in a position to contribute much to national unity and cultural integration. Reading plays an important role in equipping the youth with the skills that are necessary for engendering national unity and cultural integration. The poor reading culture among Nigerian youths poses a challenge to reading. It is important that the youth are redirected away from anti-social behaviours and encouraged to invest more of their time in acquiring knowledge through reading. A more enlightened youth remains the hope of Nigeria for national unity and cultural integration.

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