

**Primary Education and Africa's Transformation: Pupil-Centred Activities for
Ameliorating Reading Deficiencies in African Primary Schools.**

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BY

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Abstract

Reading deficiency of primary school pupils has remained a pointer to the failure of primary school teachers at inculcating permanent literacy and ability to communicate effectively. The first objective of this level of education has not been realised, thus has become a thing of shame and a source of concern for all. Studies have revealed an alarming statistics of pupils in primary four, primary five and even primary six who cannot read and write which are the hallmark of literacy acquisition. Primary school as the foundation of other levels of education has been saddled with the responsibility of laying sound basic education. Thus far, this duty has been unachievable. This tide has continued to occur and reoccur as years go by. This anomaly hinders economic growth and development that can lead to Africa's transformation. The cause of this malady has been placed at the door step of teachers' methodology which does not take into cognizance the nature of children at this level and how they learn. This paper therefore, traces the history of primary education in Nigeria. It discusses how children at this level learn, causes of literacy problems and its attendant effects on the social context of Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. It also considers teachers-centred methodology. The effect of pupil-centred activity based methods that could influence the achievement of pupils in reading and comprehending were also explored. Recommendations were then made and if followed, primary school pupils and primary school leavers would be able to read, write and communicate effectively to bring out creative thinking to give expressions to abstract thought and gain insight into creativity and innovations for social and economic development in Nigeria in particular and Africa as a whole.

Keywords: primary education, reading deficiencies, Africa's transformation, pupils-centred activities

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Introduction

Teachers at the primary schools are continually blamed for reading deficiencies that are prevalent in public primary school and with most primary six certificate holders who can neither read nor write. Furthermore, they lack the skills to communicate effectively in English language or preferred language and discuss meaningfully. This is indeed a pointer to the failure of the first objective of primary school which is the inculcation of permanent literacy and ability to communicate effectively (FRN, 2013). Studies have revealed an alarming statistics of pupils in primary four, primary five and even primary six who cannot read and write which are the hallmark of literacy acquisition. This deficiency hinders economic growth and development that can lead to Africa's transformation. This is because whoever cannot read or write is often hindered from maximising prospects for personal development, improvement and progress. As such, the society as a whole is deprived of the possible contributions such

individuals can give to enhance economic advancement and national transformation. According to *World Education News Reviews in Nigeria (2017)*, an educated Nigerian is capable of making a more stable, peaceful, and prosperous country possible. This signals that the ability to read, write and communicate effectively helps to bring out creative thinking and gives expressing to abstract thought and deep insights into creativity and innovations, for social and economic development of Nigeria in particular and Africa as a whole. Akinbote (2016), describes primary education as the level of education that develops in the individual the capacity to read, write and calculate in such a way that it eradicates illiteracy. Yet this has been a mirage.

Reading problems are a major concern of schools today Nelson, (2010). The cause of this problem has been placed at the door step of teachers' methodology which does not take into cognizance the nature of children at this level and how they learn. Primary school teachers adopt teacher-

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centred strategies rather than pupil-centred strategies. They either read the passage themselves or call the fluent ones to read in class while those not reading are neglected totally. These normally render most pupils inactive and disinterested in reading whereas children by nature are active. Children in upper primary class of between age 7 and 11 years are at concrete operational stage of Piaget's cognitive development (Oduolowu, 2011) where they learn by doing and doing it by themselves.

According to UNESCO (2000), reading and comprehending involves a process which needs to be taught. According to Nelson (2010), the reading to learn stage normally begins in the fourth grade, and it is at this level that many young readers without history of reading difficulty suddenly develops it. Children who can read and comprehend are able to apply reading competencies independently as they try to obtain and utilize information from a variety of sources. As many children continue to experience problems in comprehending texts, their performances in various subject areas are affected since they are not

taught the skills involved in reading and deducing meaning. According to Reading Horizon, (2016) over the years, there has been a misconception that majority of people reads automatically and learns to read with little direct instruction. This has been found to be faulty. To them, there must be a systematic and explicit reading instruction to improve comprehension.

A child who is unable to read and comprehend after primary four may only be playing catch-up in subsequent classes. Such a child may also suffer from "Matthew effect" identified by Stanovich (1986) as the gap that widens between good and poor readers all through school life (Kolawole and Ajayi, 2004). This reflects in grades pupils obtain in school work. The effect may be high rate of primary school dropout and incidence of examination malpractices in the primary school, secondary school or tertiary institution and inability to use one's initiative to be creative to add to the development of a nation and its economic transformation.

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Neuman (2004) found children's ability to read is related to skill development, not aptitude. To teachers, reading is assumed to be a function of aptitude hence they do not see it as a skill that needs to be developed. Teachers do not usually teach reading specifically in class. Reading does not just come naturally to a child. The ability to read rests on the development of the reading skill. Teachers need to teach the rudiment of pronouncing words by syllables. If such skills are not developed on time it may hinder the child from reading. Being eager to read depends on the encouragement given by a teacher. When a child is slow at reading, or falters in pronouncing or mispronouncing, he/she should not be made jest of, laughed at or made to feel embarrassed. When this happens, others not reading could be discouraged since they would not want to be embarrassed too.

Teachers need to understand that fluency comes by practice. Teachers also need to help pupils to develop interest in reading by being patient with them when they are not fluent. When children are

allowed to construct their own learning by practice through active participation in classroom situations at this period, they tend to gain much from the lessons. For teachers to foster active participation, pupil-centred activities must be encouraged. Teachers need to be creative in planning classroom activities. Such as group reading and peer reading this may be adopted to encourage non-readers.

**History and Trend of Primary Education in
Nigeria**

Societal demands dictate the different structural changes that primary education has witnessed In Nigeria. Asodike (2010) while tracing these changes reports that the duration of primary education during the period 1926-1930 was eight years. Between 1930 and 1947 it was reduced to six years. With the 1951 constitution, it was split into two, where we have the junior and senior classes. By 1952, it went back to what it was between 1926 and 1930 which was eight years duration. This was classified as four years of junior primary (Infant 1,

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and 11; Standard 1 and 11) and four years of senior primary (Standard 111 and 1V). At independence in 1960 however, the different Regional Governments adopted various systems. The Eastern region adopted seven years, the Northern region also had seven but with four years of junior and three years of senior primary. The Western region adopted six years and the Federal capital territory (Lagos) implemented eight years of primary education. This structure went on till 1976, when the Universal Free Primary Education (UPE) scheme was launched by General Olusegun Obasanjo with six year of primary education. It took effect from September 1976 and made primary education to be compulsory by 1979. It aimed at establishing equal opportunity for all children of school age in Nigeria and to gradually eliminate illiteracy and ignorance in Nigerian society (Osokoya, 2002). This has actually remained an imagination which this paper desires to bring to reality if pupil-centred classroom activities could be adopted. The UPE also brought a turning point to primary school teaching methods which proposed to

make it exploratory and experimental (Osokoya, 1997). This has remained at this level of proposition, and has not been monitored to see its implementation. In 1999, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme was introduced and launched by President Olusegun Obasanjo. Its focus was to address primarily the acquisition of the three 'Rs'; Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic by the generality of the citizenry. This is expected to meet the need of comprehension, effective communication and numeracy skills as well as promote social awareness to be able to contribute ones quota to the development of the nation. It is also meant to be qualitative, free, compulsory and functional so as to transform the lives of all. However this has been far-fetched. The current Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme maintained the six years of primary education and has remained so thus far.

The Role of Primary Education

Different words have been used by different people at different times and places to describe primary education such as elementary, basic,

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fundamental and universal education (Akinbote, Oduolowu and Lawal, 2001). It is universally regarded as the first and most important level of education not only to the individual but also to the entire human race. This assertion is hinged on the fact that primary education is usually the first and the last level of education for most people in different parts of the world. Primary education is made available everywhere in both urban and rural areas, the developed and developing countries, in both the rich and the poor nations catering to children of the official school age, which is six years in Nigeria (Nwagu (1978), Babalola (2010) and FRN (2013).

Primary education as referred to in the National Policy on Education (NPE) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 5th edition (2013), is the education given to children aged 6 to 12 years in an institution. It is considered as the key and basis for the success or failure of the whole educational system. The National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013) states the first objective of primary education

in Nigeria as the inculcation of permanent literacy and numeracy, and the ability to communicate effectively. This implies that, primary education is the level of education that is officially recognised and assigned the responsibility of developing basic literacy skills of reading and writing in the child. The successful completion of primary education should therefore equip the child with the literacy skills of reading and writing in both the indigenous and English languages.

Primary education has been described as the people's asset (O'Connell and Birdsall, 2001) since it has been strongly established that it reduces poverty and income inequality and makes its beneficiaries to contribute to and benefit from economic growth. With this primary education is supposed to bring the needed transformation. According to Godoy and Contreras (2001), primary education contributes to better natural resource management, including conservation of the tropical rain forest. Primary education as a level of education shares with other

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level of education the ability to build the essential and individual power to reflect, make choices, seek a voice in the society and enjoy a better life; all these Sen (1999) describes as "human capabilities". Exhibiting these capabilities requires a good knowledge and use of language. In Nigeria, English Language is used as a medium of instruction from primary four and also used for communication in social, political, economic and official activities.

Webster (2000) and the World Bank (1995) acknowledge primary education as serving a dual purpose: it serves as a factor in economic growth and in reducing the incidence of poverty. This implies that with good primary six school leaving certificate, it is expected that its holders should become better professionals in their respective chosen careers. So a tailor, carpenter, bricklayer, hairdresser or farmer should be a better and superior tailor, carpenter, bricklayer, hairdresser or farmer respectively. Thus, Nigeria could have been technologically advanced if primary school leavers have received quality

education and have been able to read, comprehend and write effectively as well as develop creative and critical thinking. Good quality primary education in addition, is recognised as an important foundation for economic growth and seen as instrumental to the attainment of other development objectives. Primary school is a place where the child develops the capacity to learn, write, do some calculations and read to acquire information (Babalola 2010).Bruns, Mingat and Rokotomalala (2003) sum the importance of primary education up thus:

Primary education develops the capacity to learn, to read and use Mathematics, to acquire information and to think critically about that information. Primary education is also the gateway to all higher levels of education that train scientists, teachers, doctors, and other highly skilled professionals that every country no matter how small or poor requires. When a large share of children do not complete primary education, the productivity of the labour force, the potential for knowledge-drive development and the reservoir of human potential from which society and the economy can draw are all fundamentally constrained...The role of primary education in reducing poverty and income inequality is even more strongly established than is its contribution to overall economic growth. (pg. 27 and 28)

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This means that the quality of primary education a child receives can make or mar his/her educational career and productivity.

Causes of Literacy Problems

With the school teaching methods which were proposed to make teaching and learning exploratory and experimental and still entrenched in the National Policy on Education, (2013) much has not been done in this area. Research findings still document it that teachers at the primary school still adopt teacher-centred strategy and methods. Ajayi (2004); Idogo (2005); Iroegbu (2007) and Komolafe (2010) have traced the sources of not being able to inculcate permanent literacy and numeracy and ability to communicate effectively among primary school pupils to the poor teaching and learning process of English Language. This is

because classroom teachers' instructional strategy is often too teacher-centred rather than engaging in learner-centred activities. The teacher-centred instructional strategy is the conventional strategy in which the teacher takes the centre stage and every activity revolves around him or her. It is even quite unfortunate that while teaching English Language, teachers do not teach reading and its specific comprehension strategies. This is because reading has no recognizable period on the time table (Udosen, 2004). What teachers in primary schools do is to incorporate reading into the teaching of comprehension passages where the teacher does the reading or where only the good readers do the reading. Pupils are not taught the strategies to be used to read and comprehend.

The conventional mode of teaching promotes rote learning, memorization and regurgitation of facts. This method according to

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Maduekwe (2015) only aids knowledge which is a part of cognitive domain to the entire neglect of the other two domains of learning; the affective and the psychomotor. To cater for these defects therefore, it was suggested that there should be promotion of innovative teaching and learning strategies among teachers. This will enable primary school teachers to collaborate with pupils to plan adequately so that classroom activities will be more facilitative, interactive and engaging all categories of pupils as well as give room for multiple learning experiences thus, encourage learning by doing.

**Research findings on Poor State of Literacy
Achievement**

Right from the primary school, pupils have been found to be deficient in attaining proficiency in reading (Kolawole and Ajayi, 2004). The problem that could have been

responsible for this is that the inculcation of permanent literacy and ability to communicate effectively as well as develop scientific, critical and reflective thinking has not been realised. Achievement of these two basic objectives would consequently develop into English Language mastery where an individual exhibits adequate vocabulary and reading comprehension. Yoye (1998), Akinbote *et al* (2001), Ayodele (2010) and Akinbote (2016) note that many of the products of public primary schools can neither read nor write in their own native language and more importantly the English Language. From personal experience as an English Language classroom teacher, it has been observed that some pupils cannot write their names correctly, write correct simple sentences, contribute meaningfully to discussions, read or go a step further to comprehend what is read.

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UNESCO (2000) declares that central to the success of the teaching - learning process is the level of attainment by children in the area of reading. Ezeokoli and Fasan (2013) declare that of all the skills essential for the language learners, reading is crucial to academic success. In totality, reading forms the basis for all other areas of learning. Yet, our cultural environment does not encourage reading. FGN/UNICEF (1993), declares that a successful completion of primary four is widely considered as an essential threshold for attaining literacy. Today, however, primary four pupils and even those in higher classes exhibit poor literacy in English Language. This made Okedara (1997), classify primary school leavers in Nigeria as a class of “newly created illiterate Nigerians” This is because there is a low rate of academic achievement by primary four, primary five or primary six pupils, who find it difficult to read,

comprehend, answer questions correctly in achievement tests and even contribute meaningfully to discussions outside the school environment. Edem, Mbaba, Udosen and Enang (2011), assert that primary school leavers exhibit poor language skills and have reading and writing difficulties because of the adoption of teacher-centred strategies that do not consider pupils need and how they learn by classroom teachers. The implication is that pupils find it difficult to read and comprehend in the content area and as such achievement in acquiring the ability to exhibit permanent literacy and ability to communicate effectively in English Language is low.

The Federal Ministry of Education's (2007), report found that achievement in literacy was below 50% for both primary four and primary six pupils. Primary four had 35.5% while primary six had 41.53%. In addition, the

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Global Education First Initiative (2013), report on Nigeria has it that there are 250 million children who cannot read and that the statistics for youths at the secondary level that cannot read are even more shocking especially for girls. It was further noted that three out of five pupils; that is 60% who have completed primary four and 44% of pupils who have completed primary six are not able to read a complete sentence in English Language or their preferred language. This dismal performance may be due to the fact that primary school pupils have not acquired the needed literacy skills or ability to read and write proficiently. Moreover they neither have enough of the required vocabulary to comprehend the meaning of passages set in an examination nor the adequate repertoire of words for expressing their thought when writing.

How Pupils Learn in Primary School: Pupil-Centred Activity Based Methods

Primary school pupils of between age 7 and 11 years are at concrete operational stage of Piaget's Cognitive Development (Oduolowu, 2011). At this period, they learn effectively with concrete objects. It assumes that children build or construct their own knowledge as they gain experience through active exploration and interaction with the environment to create the new experience that will be part of the child's unique knowledge base. To combat reading deficiencies it has been suggested that pupils should be made to interact with text with the use of Transactional Instructional Strategies.

Transactional Strategy Instruction (STI) is a strategy of teaching reading comprehension. It was developed by Pressley, Brown, Van Meter and Schuder (1995). It involves teacher modeling the use of comprehension strategies to demonstrate when and how to apply the strategies in different problem-solving

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situations. The key comprehension strategies are activation of prior knowledge, predictions, visualization, making connections, questioning, inferring, clarifying, verifying, determining importance and then summarizing. Teachers and pupils conduct thoughtful discussions and pupils are expected to use the strategies to generate discussions involving reflective thinking.

The process of comprehension to the advocates of transactional strategies is the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written text (Gleeson, 2013). Furthermore, research has revealed that reading strategies are the readers deliberate goal directed attempt to control and modify efforts to decode text, understand words and construct knowledge (National Reading Panel, 2000; Duke and Pearson, 2002 and Department for Education and Skills, 2005). Their submission is that

children need to be taught explicitly some strategies for understanding what they read so as to improve their comprehension of a range of text genres which teachers in primary schools fail to do. As such, a range of major research-derived strategies for improving reading were suggested. Strategies such as extensive reading, teaching decoding with emphasis on morphology, providing explicit work on sight vocabulary, use of context cues and monitoring strategies such as prior knowledge activation, constructing mental images during reading, summarization, analysing text, encouraging reciprocal teaching, as well as transactional strategies had been suggested.

It has however been noted by Udosen (2004), that most teachers developed a bottom-top/transmission model of reading while in school and so, this reflect in their classroom practices. The transmission model sees reading

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as consisting of a number of sub-skills which when individually mastered, somehow coalesced to produce a mature reader (Applegate, Quinn and Applegate, 1994). This notion results in a product model of teaching reading where the reader remains passive in the reading situation. What the reader does is to retrieve information the author has encoded in the text effortlessly. This product model of teaching is prevalent and dominates the practices in most comprehension classes. This model has been blamed for the repeated failures both within and outside Nigeria (Nduka, 1991; Tswana, 1995; Udosen, 2004; 2006; and Maduabuchi, 2008). With the understanding of cognitive psychologists who found that the process of reading is active and interactive due to what goes on in the brain while reading has led to the development of the meta-cognitive strategies which is transactional

in nature. Activities in class must be pupils oriented which will help them to learn.

**Effective Literacy and Africa's
Transformation**

According to UNCTAD (2012), one of the issues African countries have to address as they seek to transform their economies is how to boost investment, particularly in infrastructure and in the production sectors of the economy. The Economic Development in Africa Report (2014) noted that Africa's recent growth has not led to the development of productive capacities and structural transformation, which are two elements vital for generating productive employment and laying the foundation for sustained poverty reduction. Despite the continent's high and steady growth over the past decade, many countries are yet to go through the normal process of structural transformation characterized by a shift from low to high

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productivity activities, a decline in the share of agriculture in output and employment, and an increase in the share of manufacturing and modern services in output. The resultant effect of this is their ability to engage in critical and reflective thinking which perhaps remains the hallmark of creativity. With the ability to read and write, one would have access to information that can result to improving the economy of a nation and bring transformation that would enable Nigeria join the league of producers. One would notice with dismay that Nigeria is not free from being classified as one of the countries who could not invent or produce but have it citizens focusing on the boom in telecommunications activities. They engage in selling recharge cards and cell phones and ineffective repairs rather than producing such phones themselves.

According to them most countries in the continent, engage in low-productivity activities such as informal and non-tradable services that account for the bulk of the recent boom in the services sector and so it is not surprising that it has not had the expected impact on economic transformation. They also noted that increasing importance of natural resources in the growth of African economies is also one of the reasons why recent growth has not had the desired impact on economic transformation. Because of the enclave nature of the resource sector, it cannot be relied upon to create enough jobs to absorb the 15 million youths who enter the labour market each year. The report advised that in this context, there is the need to diversify the sources of growth to create employment, reduce vulnerabilities and also lay a more robust foundation for sustained growth, through public

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investments, to avoid resource waste and achieve maximum impact.

All these may not be feasible with poor foundation that had been laid at the primary school which is a pivot on which other tiers of education rests (Akande, 2007). The obvious solution lies in acquiring our literacy right; being able to read and comprehend and deduce meaning which will help us to be aware of avenues and information that could be accessed to become producers of technology rather than consumers which will bring economic growth and development.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, if teachers teaching in our public primary schools are able to adopt activity based instructional strategies that allow pupils to be actively involved in the teaching and learning process, with the use of transactional strategy where pupils are taught

how to deduce meaning from an expository text , then reading deficiencies would be a thing of the past in Nigeria and the inculcation of permanent literacy and ability to communicate effectively as the first objective of primary education would be realized. Also, the inculcation of the ability to read and write as well as communicate effectively would enable our primary six certificate holder to obtain information, utilise the information and after disseminate their findings for others to be aware since they can now read and comprehend and can critically assess information that may lead to creativity thus, contributing their quota to economic development to bring transformation to the country technologically.

Recommendations

Overcoming reading deficiencies has a direct impact at bringing transformation to the

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economic fiber of this nation. To this end, classroom teachers in our public primary school need to adopt pupil-centred activity based strategies. It should also be ensured that pupils are taught meaning deducing skills when reading. Ministry of Education may come in to organize workshops, seminars and conference to enlighten in-service teachers on different pupil-centred strategies that could be used to teach reading and enhance comprehension. The Reading Association of Nigeria should be conversant with pupil-centred strategies and take it upon itself to insist on classroom teachers adopting such strategies. Also curriculum planners and designers should desist from recommending and given teacher-centred strategies in the curriculum they prepare for classroom teachers to use any more.

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