Fostering Sustainable Governance in Nigeria in the 21st Century: The Role of Critical Literacy

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of critical literacy in fostering sustainable governance in Nigeria in the 21st century. The paper argues that the developmental challenges facing Nigeria could be surmounted if critical literacy is in place. It was therefore, recommended, among others, that government, mass media, educationists, parents and professional bodies should make concerted efforts towards building critical literacy skills in order to give rise to sustainable governance in Nigeria.

Keywords: Literacy, Critical literacy, Reader response theory, Sustainable development

Introduction

Literacy has proven more than the ability to read, write and use numeracy, UNESCO (2018) view literacy as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying context. It is a fundamental human right and the basis for any individual ability to learn. It is essential for social and human development and provides individuals with skills and empowers them to transform their lives in all areas of endeavours. Literacy refines foundational skills of oracy (listening and speaking) as learners explore a wider variety of texts. This expands their intellectual horizons thereby preparing them to be critical and ethical recipients of information. Dahlgren (2000) asserts that literacy gives the learner ability to make sense from what is circulated in the public sphere as well as to understand the world s/he lives in. This equips learners to express their own ideas/opinions in the public or when engaged in political activities.

Students become literate as they develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions to interpret and confidently use language in learning, communication and effective participation in society. Education Trust (2010) points out benefits of literacy which spans from personal, political, cultural, social to economic. Personal benefits include self-esteem enhancement, awareness of human rights, improve social life, leadership skills, hygiene/ health status and acquisition of critical thinking skills that drive away gullibility and improve thinking capacity. Sound political ideologies acquired through literacy assist in effective participation in politics that brings progress and good governance. This enhances economic growth that sustains development of a country.

Good Governance in Nigeria

Governance refers to the process government plans and executes policy decisions that influence economy and delivery of education to citizens. It entails the way in which government exercises power for the management and distribution of a country's social and economic resources (Ogundiya, 2010). Governance also involves the process by which a state's affairs are managed effectively in the area of public accountability, fiscal responsibility, administrative and the political responsibility, responsiveness, and transparency, all of which must show the interest of the governed and the leaders (Odo, 2015; Aina, Narthaniel & Ibitomi, 2017). According to Aina, Narthaniel and Ibitomi (2017), governance deals with institution and structural arrangement, decision-making processes, policy formulation and implementation capacity, development of personnel, information flow and the nature and style of leadership within a political system are part of the governance. It implies the way power is exercised through social, economic and political policies and the use of resources for attaining such policies in achieving developmental projects (Kadir, 2019).

For a nation to exist for the benefits of her citizens, there is a dire need for good governance. Good governance is an act of a political process that translates the will of the people into public policies. It is the rightly exercising of authority, the ability to problem-solving and conflict resolution, the capacity to manage resources efficiently for development, and high level of responsiveness to the needs and the interest of the citizens (Aina, Nathaniel & Ibitomi, 2017). The basic features of good governance include the conduct of a comprehensive management where all the critical stakeholders are allowed to have a say in decision making process (Ijoko, Okoye & Loveday-Osaro, 2022). This is carried out through efficient service delivery to all citizens that manifest into respect of human rights, transparency and accountability, equity, provision of infrastructure, adequate security of lives and property, provision of health facilities among other things (Aina, Narthaniel & Ibitomi, 2017).

There has not been good governance in Nigeria in the past decades (Ijoko, Okoye & Loveday-Osaro, 2022; Aina, Narthaniel & Ibitomi, 2017). This manifests in political instability, shortage of lecture rooms, equipment and teaching materials in schools,

rising cost of education, students unrests, exam malpractice, shortage of education personnel and unemployment (Kadir, 2019). Others are: insecurity, unemployment, kidnapping, poverty, divorce, hunger and deprivation, injustice, decay of infrastructure, non-payment of salaries and pension for retired workers, dilapidation of infrastructure, insecurity of lives and property as well as absence of the rule of law (Odo, 2015; Ijoko, Okoye & Loveday-Osaro, 2022). The primary cause of the lack of good governance in Nigeria is the absence of visionary leaders to lead the country. Most of the leaders Nigeria ever had since the return of democracy in 1999 have been in power to pursue personal, ethnic and religious ambitions. These leaders had no vision for the good of the nation (Ijoko, Okoye & Loveday-Osaro, 2022). Most of the developmental challenges Nigeria had today is attributed to these leaders who lacked good vision for the nation (Odo, 2015). Therefore, good governance requires the good role of responsible and responsive political, traditional and religious leaders.

Concept of Critical Literacy

Critical literacy involves knowledge and competence in a specific area and the ability to communicate effectively and efficiently making sense of the world (National Literacy Trust, 2017). It is a central thinking skill that a tertiary education is supposed to develop in students. It involves questioning and examination of ideas which requires synthesis, analysis, interpretation, evaluation and response to texts read or listened to. Critical literacy involves reading supplementary and multiple texts, reading from a resistant perspective, reading conter texts and having students to conduct research about topics of personal interest and challenging them to take social actions (National Council of Teachers of English NCTE, 2019). Thus critical literacy is both theoretical and practical. Students read in order to extract key information, interpret, analyze and solve practical world problems.

Critical literacy involves orientation to text and practices such as inviting students to write down messages they see in public transport, take photographs of graffiti or billboards, cut out advertisement from magazines /or messages from newspapers and collect sweet wrappers to read in class as this would help them to read everyday texts they encounter , critically having a world view. Students should engage in a text in order to learn or critique giving room for their diverse cultural knowledge to be used to develop curriculum (Vasquez & Feiderman,2012; Vasquez, 2014 in NCTE, 2019). This implies that critical literacy involves deeper reasoning and thinking that enables individuals to develop critical skills of identifying problems and ways of solving individual and societal issues. Thus critical literacy is capable of endorsing and orienting individuals into the society to become useful to their world.

Critical literacy is the ability to read texts in active and reflective manner for better understanding of things that are involved in human relationships. It is a central thinking skill and examination of ideas, and requires interpretation, analysis, synthesis and evaluation of texts or speech. Critical literacy refers to a type of literacy, or viewing and reading of different types of media, in which a person is encouraged to think critically and look for new or underlying meanings in a work (*Wiesen, 2022).* It is a central thinking skill that involves the questioning and examination of ideas, and requires one to synthesise, analyse, interpret, evaluate and respond to the texts one reads or listens to.

Critical literacy encourages readers to question, explore, or challenge the power relationships that exist between authors and readers (Norris, Lucas & Prudhoe, 2012). It examines issues of power and promotes reflection, transformative change, and action. Reading from a critical perspective involves 'thinking beyond the text to understand issues such as why the author wrote about a particular topic, wrote from a particular perspective, or chose to include some ideas about the topic and exclude others' (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 13). Lewison, Flint and Van Sluys (2002) suggest that critical literacy can:

- disrupt a common situation or understanding—where students can gain perspective by understanding the text or situation in a different way;
- examine multiple viewpoints—where students are encouraged to think about texts from the perspectives of different characters or from those not represented in the text;
- focus on sociopolitical issues—where students examine power relationships between and among individuals; and
- take action and promote social justice— invite students to determine a course of action to bring about change in an inappropriate, unequal power relationship between people.

It is not necessary that all these dimensions be included to engage in critical literacy activities. By examining texts utilising any one of these dimensions, one is being engaged in critical literacy. Readers/listeners need to see aspects of themselves in what they read/listen to. This would help them understand situations that are different from their own.

The Need for Critical Literacy in Nigeria

All students need to be provided with problem-solving, communication and thinking skills to be effective workers and citizens in the 21st century (Concannon-Gibney & McCarthy, 2012). Through application of critical literacy, citizens can explore and come to understand and appreciate the similarities and differences that they have and share these with each other (Clarke & Whitney, 2009). Everyone involved can better examine and debate multiple viewpoints. Through critical literacy, children can discuss social issues and plan ways that they can have an impact on their communities.

One is required to critically think and reflect

about the situation and circumstance around them in order to shape one's functions in life (Abdul Aziz & Chang, 2021). According to Abdul-Aziz and Chang (2021, p.18), "Critical literacy recognises the world we live in as texts imbued with power dynamics which determines our values and positions in society, and deserves to be examined, contested and reconstructed so we may create a more just and equal world.

The following are summed up by the National Literacy Trust (NLT, 2017) as a state of a nation that operates with low level of literacy:

i. Lack of Critical Literacy or Low level of literacy holds people down in every stage of life. As a child one is not able to succeed in school and as adults people are locked out of the jobs market and may likely not be able to train their children in school.
ii. Lack of vital literacy skills makes people unable to read books, newspapers, understand road maps/ signs and price labels, fill out a form and read instructions in different levels of endeavours.
iii. Low level of literacy undermines the economy of a nation with other nations. This happens especially when young people's literacy level cannot effectively support the system.
iv. Poor level of literacy brings about lowest life expectancy, being the inability to cope with the daily demands of the society.

In line with the NLT (2017), Muodumogu (2006) affirms that one who is illiterate is likely to be found in the lower class of the society and forced to do manual labour to earn a wage. This means that in most cases successful living lies in the effective acquisition/application of critical literacy skills. Similarly, Bond (2011) links critical literacy with power status stating that literacy like money can determine the course of a person's life and can be passed down from generation to generation. Bond further observes that rich and highly literate parents pass same to their children.

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws inspiration from reader-response theory. The theory was propounded by Louise Rosenblatt, Wolfgang Iser, Norman Holland, Hans-Robert Jauss and Stuart Hall in 1937 (Blessler, 1999). The theory is based on the assumption that a literary work takes place in the mutual relationship between a reader and a text. According to the proponents of the theory, the reader creates meaning from the text either by aesthetic or efferent stance. Aesthetic responses offer a continuum for attending to the experience of the beauty in reading. From the efferent stance, readers are expected to explore a range of possible meanings from a text. The meaning is constructed through a transaction between the reader and the text within a particular context. The process of developing responses facilitates active and meaning reading thereby increasing emotional and intellectual participation in the text, and provides learners with better understanding and awareness of the text. It is crucial that learners need to perform more adequate responses to texts and actively engage in dialogues to pose literal and inferential questions as well as critical and evaluative questions to explore a range of possible meanings and answers in order to foster cognitive development.

Reader response theory is related to this paper in the sense that critical literacy enables learners to acquire high thinking skills to enable them evaluate every situation rather than accepting everything hook line and sinker. Acquisition of critical literacy enables learners to scrutinise every piece of information by applying the skills they obtain from schooling system. For good and sustainable governance to be fostered, citizens need to be critically literate by not being mere receptors of external knowledge but actively engaging in the deconstruction of ideology through critique thereby creating their own learning. Higher thinking skills help in analysis of situations and events to get implicit assumptions embodied in speech or written text. Citizens cannot memorise their way out of bad governance; but they can critically think and innovate out of bad governance. This could be through the choices they make during the electoral process. In other words, when citizens acquire critical literacy skills, they will be able to ask questions and challenge the status quo respectfully within the context.

Nexus between Critical Literacy and Good Governance

Critical literacy can be linked with good governance. It trains people to make sense of the sociopolitical systems through which they live their lives. As it focuses on social issues such as gender, inequality of race, class, disability or language difference and other semiotic resources to shape understanding, it helps in decision – making that accounts for good governance (NCTE, 2019).

Critical literacy is an essential tool for good governance. It strengthens good governance frameworks in establishing promotion of justice, rule of law, understanding, the credibility of democracy in its response to people, policies, social and economic demands, promotions, checks and balances, transparency and accountability in handling gender equality, cultural diversity, corruption and violent conflicts in the society (Eze, 2016). It also increases understanding and access to higher education, job opportunities and participation in government which produces accelerated results (Eze, 2016). Thus, the transformation of a society or nation requires leaders who are highly literate and have the knowhow to tackle issues according to priorities.

Good governance is achievable based on the literacy levels of leaders in a country. When a leader's level of literacy is low, no appreciable level of development can be realized. This is because no country can develop beyond the literacy level of its

citizens. The nation educational goals can be achievable through inculcation of critical literacy skills of quick, efficient, creative, critical and imaginative reading (Orkaa, 2019). Through critical literacy, a country can achieve discoveries that cure diseases and prevailing illnesses; improve and acquire new innovations in transportation system; improve means of communications (Orkaa, 2019); improve road construction and change in attitude among the youth. This is capable of enhancing societal progress in order to boost socio-economic and political status of a country. However, the absence of critical literacy increases the level of citizens' gullibility and promotion of unfavourable government policies, nepotism, increase in crime rate and corruption.

From the foregoing, it could be deduced that good governance cannot thrive where critical literacy is not given priority attention. However, it has been observed that literacy in Nigerian schools is below expectation. Learners in Nigerian schools are mostly not exposed to extensive reading especially in secondary schools (Orkaa, 2021). This culminates in learners' inability to acquire higher reading skills that could enable them read and evaluate any information. The curriculum does not provide adequate literacy tasks that help in broadening learners' intellectual horizon. It has been observed that the reading carried out in schools is limited to prescribed texts and notebooks (Orkaa, 2019). This is incapable of giving learners the desired exposure to deep, critical and creative thinking. It inadvertently hinders learners' ability to expand intellectual horizon capable of liberating them from social ills such as parochialism or narrow mindedness, violence, corruption, vandalism, robbery, terrorism and other social ills (Orkaa, 2019).

Nigeria is faced with leadership challenges since attention is not focused on developing learners' higher thinking skills. Orkaa (2019) reported that students engaged in reading mostly notebooks, a literacy programme designed mainly for certification. Their reading activities were not geared towards enhancing critical thinking skills, but mainly to pass examinations. This explains the behaviour of those in leadership positions whereby they have difficulty in enacting policies that would bring development. They lack knowledge of the current situation in the country and how to handle such problems. The problems can be surmounted if there are policies aimed at resolving such crises. However, those in authority seem to be clueless in prioritizing issues and that explains why education can be sacrificed for solving problems of people from other countries.

Conclusion and Way Forward

Literacy plays a crucial role in empowering individuals to develop themselves which transcend to societal development. It has levels of attainment; the higher the literacy level of a country's citizens, the higher their possibilities of development. Good governance is integral to economic growth, the eradication of poverty and hunger, quality education and sustainable development. It is among other things, about being participatory, transparent and accountable. A country's prospect in development depends solely not on the available resources of the country, but the literacy level of the citizens who manage such resources. It becomes imperative that Nigeria needs to focus on critical literacy of her citizens for them to be able to develop human resources for sustainable development. Leaders who acquire critical literacy have the mental ability to think constructively on ways of managing both human and material resources to attract development. Such a leader would enact policies that attract development and qualitative education. In order to ensure the sustenance of good governance in Nigeria, the following suggestions were made:

1. Since critical literacy is a pivot on which governance revolves, learners at all levels of education should be taught critical literacy skills to acquaint themselves with higher thinking skills to evaluate every information in order to pass value judgement.
2. Government, mass media, educationists, parents and professionals bodies should make concerted efforts towards building critical literacy skills in order to give rise to sustainable governance in Nigeria.

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