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## ENHANCING QUALITY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION THROUGH QUALITY CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: IMPLICATION FOR THE CLASSROOM LITERATURE TEACHER

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### ABSTRACT

Children's literature has tremendously grown in number of titles and in variety of themes and subject matter. Critics and literary writers have observed and stated that the production of children's books is the most rapidly growing segment in the publishing industry in sub Sahara Africa. More than six hundred children's literature books were listed in the 1983 African Books in Print, and this number has since increased. Educators, librarians' writers and publishers have in the recent past had a filled day in the production of children's literature. In addition to stimulating seminars held on children's literature, the competitions on children's writings by organized publishing companies, especially Macmillan and the African University Press have increased the production of this genre. Other reasons for the rapid growth of children's literature seem to be the usually slim volume of this genre of literature, which writers illusively believe to be very easy to write. Publishers on their side, have found it to be economically expedient to produce. And these have tremendously increased the number of titles of children's literature. This has resulted in the fear that the attractive and lucrative nature of the enterprise of writing for children has blinded writers and publishers of the purpose and principles of the task. This again has resulted in the wild circulation of unhealthy books for the child's consumption, poor and very low quality books especially at the early primary level of education, which do not appear to have professional handling. To circumvent this misnomer, the paper recommends that writers of children's books should create holistic and wholesome books for children. What is needed is not an increase in the output of children's literature but an increase in number of books of literary aesthetic and value that will satisfy the societal needs of the child, so as to develop, promote and enhance the total development of the Nigerian child. The paper also suggest that the problem of the Nigerian Children's literature does not rest on the writer, the publisher and the critics alone but that the classroom literature teacher has a much more role to perform to see that the child consumes a healthy book actually meant and written for him.

**Keywords:** Quality; education; childhood education; children's literature; literature; enhancement; transformation.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood / pre primary education as referred in the National Policy on Education, [1], is the education given in an educational institution to children prior to their entry into the primary school. Primary education on the other hand is education given in institution for children aged 6 – 11 years plus. Since the rest of the educational system is built upon it, the primary level thus becomes the key to the success or failure of the whole system.

When the Federal Government of Nigeria, (2004), stated that provisions should be made in teacher education programs for specialization in early childhood education as one of the conditions to achieve the laudable early childhood education objectives, it meant in essence that through such specialization, quality childhood education will be guaranteed since these teachers will be stuffed with handy skills and techniques for the proper handling of the child's education. This they will equally impart into the child since quality teacher produces quality child.

## 2. THE CONCEPT OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

According to Nnyagu [2], children's literature denotes the totality of literature including the three genres, drama, prose and poetry, specially prepared not only for the enjoyment of children, but also for their positive upbringing. Children's literature is such literature meticulously prepared for the consumption of the child.

In the words of Chukwu [3], literature for children is that art, which has the qualities of edifying through providing entertainment. It may be presented or written by adults, but it has to depict life from the perspectives of the child by presenting child heroes in setting, where their experiences are captivating and their behaviors are constantly modified for the benefit of a tender readership. It can be works that present adult experiences which bear impacts on the lives of children.

## 3. OBJECTIVES OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Nzewi, in Anyadiegwu and Nzekwu, (2016), presents the general objectives of literature programmes as the enrichment of the individual, development of insight and understanding, transmission of cultures and development of interest in reading.

Nnyagu [2], states the objectives of children's literature in terms of the following:

- Enabling the child to understand himself, his personal problems and the problem of others
- Providing the opportunities to escape from routines.
- Developing appreciation for one's country and her ideals.
- Discovering and developing ethical standards, and promoting creativity and appreciation of the English language.

Obidike et.al. [4] include in their list of objectives, development of insight into one's own personality problems through reading about others with similar problems.

While educators in other parts of the world have recognized the importance of literature programmes in early childhood education and have implemented literature programmes with specific objectives that are geared towards the needs of the school child at each stage of development. There was no clear indication that the values of specific literature programs for the early childhood has been appreciated by educators in Nigeria.

The paper dissects the problems of children's literature in Nigeria. The research is of the view that even though these problems emanate from the writer, the publisher and the literary critic, who have failed to do some expurgation and bowdlerization on the supposed finished work, the classroom literature teacher has a very vital role to play in choosing / selecting literature books that will enhance the general development of the child. The teacher, as the child's last resort, should ensure that the child consumes a healthy and wholesome text. The paper, thus shifts attention from these people (the writer, the publisher and the critic) and looks upon the classroom teacher as the child's savior.

## 4. THE RELEVANCE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Children's literature prepares it readers for a morally rewarding life. Its contents consist of all the ethics which if imbibed, will see the child through a fruitful youthful existence and a viable adulthood. The child's culture is seen at work in this brand of study. So, the beneficiary is exposed to the tradition in which he must cope with [2].

Literature moreover provides vicarious experiences for the child. He does not have to experience every situation first hand, but rather learns a great deal from the fate of heroes and heroines whose stories he has read. He is placed in a position where he compares his feelings with those of the protagonist.

Children's literature is aimed at a normal person. The child's love for adventure should be satisfied in the contents of the works meant for him. His preoccupation with bliss should find satisfaction in a romance world that leaves him refreshed and eager to explore more and more of his world [5].

As behaviorist psychologists believe, a person is the sum of all his past experiences and learning. Harvey in Chukwu [3], sees literature as one area of learning which captures experiences, this way putting them so delightfully as to produce stable key players of the future. Children's literature functions through social developments. When children read plays, they dramatize them, beefing them up to accommodate their interests, wants and problems. By doing so, they express themselves, interact with others as well as assume the task of living and future development.

As we have seen from the above that the value of children's literature to children's all round development cannot be contested. If children's literature is so valuable to children, it should also be valuable to the people responsible for educating them – the teachers. So it is unfortunate that something that plays such a vital role in children's lives is often relegated to a less than critical role in teacher education.

How then will the teacher respond to the proliferation of poor literature texts in the Nigerian society? Nwahunanya [6], made this fact vivid when he says that one of the problems with children's literature in Nigeria is the fact that every literate adult assumes that he can write stuff which children should read, ranging from the meaningless nursery rhymes that are being fed to children in nursery and kindergarten schools, to the stories published as novelettes for more advanced teenagers. The belief that children's literature is very simple to write is a mere illusion. Children literature is one of the most difficult aspects of writing not only because the writer will bring down himself to the level of the child, but he also has to do a lot of expurgation and bowdlerization, otherwise he will feed the Nigerian child with trash. Nwahunanya continues further, "One consequence of this erroneous assumption is that these writers set out with their notions of what children books should be, with the result that they choose as their model stories which are popular in the social circles in which such writers operate. They often fail to establish and work with the ideal objectives of children's literature behind their minds".

Acholonu in Nnyagu [2], collaborated Nwahunanya when she states thus" the quality of the output of

works produced as children's literature in our society is low and frightening".

The teacher then readily comes at the centre of teaching and learning and stands between the subject matter and content of her instruction and the child to ensure that the objectives of the lesson are imparted in the learner. In childhood schools in Nigeria, the role of the teacher is so important that his status and values was enshrined in the National Policy on Education [1]. The teacher then functions in various ways to ensure that the learner gains from his resourcefulness. To become a teacher, a person must necessarily possess adequate knowledge of how to guide the learner to acquire the expected change in behavior that is usually occasioned by good teaching. In a formal classroom setting, a teacher is seen as that person, who successfully guides the learning of the learner by determining worthwhile instructional objectives, selecting and arranging learning experiences, guiding, motivating as well as assessing and correcting the learner with a view to ensuring and improving on learning. [7]. At the face of the current problem facing Nigeria children's literature, the teacher cannot pretend to be an uninterested party in an issue that seriously concerns him, else he would be likened to the proverbial one who pursues rats while his house is engulfed by fire. And so a committed teacher readily comes to mind and employs these very special skills in salvaging Nigerian children's literature and cannot afford to make mistake even when the writer and others have done so. So the teacher uses his resourceful eyes and mind to censor, expurgate and bowdlerize unhealthy aspects of children's literary texts, so that the child's development will not be jeopardized in any way. The teacher, being conversant with the objectives of childhood education as well as the objectives of children's literature, chooses and selects literature books based on the stated objectives as well as the literary and aesthetic qualities desired in literature books meant for children [8,9].

## 5. THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN SELECTING LITERATURE TEXTS FOR HIS PUPILS

Anyadiegwu and Nzekwu [10], observe that the literature teacher has to exercise judicious teacher guidance in the selection of literature texts appropriate for his pupil's reading level and the pupil's growth in the cultivation of literary taste. According to them, the selection criteria should include these considerations:

- All materials shall be of literary merit.
- All materials shall be of interest to the pupils.

- All materials shall foster understanding of the pupil's own culture as well as other culture within the nation.
- Materials selected shall represent both nonfiction and fiction.
- Materials shall be representatives of some 19<sup>th</sup> century English literature as well as both pre independence African generation of writers and the big names in African drama, novel and poetry.
- Materials included especially in the anthologies, shall be appropriate for pupils at the readership level for which each anthology is intended.
- Materials that have psychological, moral, behavioural and socio cultural effects on children need to be fully recognized and taken into consideration in selecting reading materials for children. This ensures that only the desirable personality characteristics and behavior patterns are inculcated in the children and reinforced through repeated reading of sound literature books.

Based on the qualities stated above, the literature teacher selects literature texts that ensure the holistic development of the child.

In line with the considerations above are the desired poetics for the writing of children's literature.

- The main purpose of literature is to entertain and educate the reader. But in children's literature, the entertainment function takes pre eminence. The peculiarities of children especially in West African traditional societies and which even now constitute the first contact of the child with literature, first swayed the emotions of joy, sadness, fear, anger and sympathy of the child before it subtly cupped in a few lessons. The child's world is indeed a world of play; let even his world of written literature remain so. Onuekwusi in Anyadiegwu and Nzekwu, [10].
- In portraying characters in children's literature therefore, symbolism and other attempts at ingenious artistry that may obstruct communication should be abandoned especially because of the child's limited vocabulary and intellectual ability. The thrilling actions of understanding characters should be arranged in simple plots. In the treatment of all aspects of children's fiction, the child's chronological and intellectual age should be considered. Jean Piaget's work on children's development of intellectual abilities identifies ages when a child is capable of logical, reversible, concrete and abstract

thinking. The plot of children's literature should be simple, well related and set out in an easily understandable sequence. Characteristically, children's novels should adhere to the demands of the "old story". There shall be a short exposition that introduces characters and setting. This shall be followed by a gradual development of a conflict that then leads to a complication and then a resolution that shall be easily understood. Martina Nwakobi's *A Lucky Chance* and Nze .U. Nze's *A Patient House Help* present this kind of simple plot. The complicated flashback technique in some children's literature books reduces the credit of the work. Nzewi in Anyadiegwu and Nzekwu, [10].

- The setting of children's literature shall as far as possible be those that the child is familiar with, or can easily imagine. Local scenes such as the village steam, the bush behind the hut of a lonely road, the road to the school, the school itself, the market or even the home, can be useful settings in children's literature The writer of west African children's literature needs not describe the winter, when the child is more familiar with the harmattan, or the dadofils and the tulip, when the hibiscus and the Lilly will do. In the hands of a skilful writer, setting in children's literature in West Africa can provide a useful opportunity of conjuring and preserving for the child the local scenery that is fast diminishing under the assault of developments associated with urbanization, while acquainting him with modern scenes.
- In choosing the theme of children's literature, the writer should create a picture of the world saved from vices
- The writer should create characters and situations that favor the establishment of models. The writer should, like the folktale artist, emphasize the human virtues such as kindness, patience, forgiveness, truth, industry, and peaceful co - existence of men. Chosen themes and subject matter should be within the range of the child's experience. Themes should as well be socially, culturally and morally relevant to the all round development of the child. Themes of children's literature should also emphasize these elements that are useful in forging a peaceful society. In Nigeria for instance, unity, religious tolerance and patriotism can be themes around which children's literature could be woven.
- Perhaps the greatest discredit of many titles that pass for children's literature today is the language used in communicating contents. The

language of children's literature should be primarily communication. Diction should be simple and figures of speech, idioms and other nuances of language should be avoided as much as possible. The writer of children's literature should not lose sight of the language competence of his evidence even for a moment. Although the aim of this literature is to improve the child's language through reading, this should not be done at the expense of consolidating what has been learnt.

- Again increased effort should be made towards writing children's literature in indigenous language. This is apt to save our children from the shame of being partial users of their mother tongue, which most educated adults live with today. Even as the writer uses the indigenous language, in his works, he must be conscious of the child's progressive acquisition of language.
- The efforts in this paper will be incomplete without a few words about the general outlay of children's literature books. The book should be attractive and written in bold prints. Illustrations should be very many and beautiful, especially in books for the very young children. The volume should be between 1 - 120 for elderly children, and between 1 - 30 / 60 pages for younger children. A situation whereby the West African children's literature writer uses pictures of foreign and white children on both the cover page and inside pages of children's books should be avoided, for that usually is an eye sore and a mockery of the entire work. Binding should be well made to make handling easy. Glossaries should be provided to aid easy understanding of meaning. A list of words used in a particular piece should be provided at the end of each book. This will enable the child recall quickly the words he has come in contact with at each time. This is essentially useful in building up vocabulary.
- Writers should also match the length of their works with the possible attention span of the child reader.

Aside the points stated above towards solving the problem of Nigerian children's literature, the study suggests that the following efforts should be put in place:

- Children's literature should be properly censored so that what remains will be holistic and wholesome.
- Early intervention by the teacher on what the child reads is salutary.
- Children's literature writers should be well informed about the objectives of children's

literature and the objectives of childhood education in general.

- Parents, guardians and especially teachers must make it a point of duty to monitor the type of literature the child reads.
- Literature teachers at childhood level of education should be properly motivated by the government and wealthy individuals in order to boost the moral and passion that spur them to action.

## 6. FINDINGS

The study observes that even though many literature books have been written for the child, that only few appear to be healthy for his consumption. The research work also finds out that though this problem rests with the writer, the publisher and the literary critic, that the classroom literature teacher has a much bigger role to perform towards salvaging this situation.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The paper has in the main suggested ways through which the problems associated with Nigerian children's literature could be tackled. The study is of the view that the classroom literature teacher has a lot of roles to play towards ensuring that the child consumes literature that is healthy and wholesome. He, as the child's last resort should be more concerned and committed in the interest of the child and should aptly fill the gaps created by the writer, the publisher and the literary critic, since he, being closer to the child, understands him more than any other person.

## 8. RECOMMENDATION

Thus, as part of the efforts towards ensuring quality early childhood education in Nigeria, the literature teacher should ensure the following: that all literary materials should foster the understanding of the pupil's culture as well as other cultures within the nation, all literary materials should be of interest to the child, materials selected should represent both non fiction and non fictional genres. Books meant for the child's consumption shall be readily available.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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