

THE READING CULTURE DIALOGUE

A PANEL DISCUSSION ON THE PROMOTION OF READING CULTURE IN NIGERIA

A REPORT

DATE: SATURDAY, 26 NOVEMBER 2022

TIME: 5:00 PM WAT

**PREPARED BY THE
LITERARY RENAISSANCE FOUNDATION (LRF)**

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BACKGROUND OF THE EVENT

As a country with an estimated population of 218 million people, making it the sixth most populous nation in the world, Nigeria is no doubt a globally significant entity. One of out every four black people is Nigerian. The nation has also produced many great figures in many different disciplines, and sections of its population have migrated to various countries in other parts of the world such as Asia, America and Europe where a number of them have made significant contributions and even become leading experts. Indeed, due to this influence, both positive and negative happenings in Nigeria have the potential to impact the entire world.

Over the years, the country's reading culture has considerably declined, with socio-political realities having caused a mindset shift among its youth, leading to the pursuit of easily acquirable wealth and other pleasurable activities. The result of this is a progressively dying value system of reading and learning.

In light of this, the Literary Renaissance Foundation (LRF) took up the mantle of addressing the decline of poor reading habits in Nigeria. The LRF recognised that any attempts to resolve this problem would require the development of systematic and structured interventions. While it had raised some propositions and developed some strategies, it also acknowledged the need for more insight into both the viability of those propositions and strategies and development of new ones, for which it organised a citizen engagement deliberation event, tagged Reading Culture Dialogue, for stakeholders in the books, learning and educational sectors. The Dialogue has been scheduled to continue as a quarterly event to assess the progress of the initiative and suggest ideas for improvement where necessary.

FORMAT OF THE PROGRAMME

The recently held Dialogue was the first of an event now scheduled to take place on a quarterly basis. The session was undertaken as a focused and intentional deliberation by participants of various ages and walks of life to assess the state of reading culture in Nigeria as well as examine the various initiatives undertaken by the LRF to promote reading culture in Nigeria.

Programme date: Saturday, 26 November 2022

Programme venue: Zoom

Facilitators: Babatunde Oladele (moderator) and Dotun Olagbaju (note taker).

Participants*: Becky Olorunpomi (Lagos), Opeyemi Kareem (Lagos), Rodiat Ajuwon (Ibadan), Omatseye Oti (Lagos), Mariam Fatai (Ibadan), Niran Adedokun (UK), Aisha Lamidi (Ibadan), Edith Aiyede (Lagos), Kamal (Unknown), Bede Ehiogu (Ibadan), Edi Lawani (Edo), Olamide Lawal (Ibadan), Agnes Audu (UK), Luqman Babatunde (Zaria), Dr Samuel Okere (Lagos).

**Other participants were present as listeners.*

The Dialogue began at 5:00 pm WAT and continued till 8:30 pm. The participants were all Nigerians, including students, teachers, writers, authors, publishers and others with keen interest in books and reading. The programme was made as inclusive as possible, with participants who chose to speak invited continually to read different sections of the programme notes.

Before discussions began, some ground rules were laid down and agreed to by all.

Ground rules:

- ❖ Focus on the options and actions we can take nationally and in our communities.
- ❖ Consider all options fairly.
- ❖ Listening is just as important as speaking.
- ❖ No one or two individuals should dominate.
- ❖ Maintain an open and respectful atmosphere.
- ❖ Everyone is encouraged to participate.

Discussion structure

The discussion for the improvement of reading was approached from three aspects. After the participants had shared their perspectives and personal experiences on the issue of reading, the exchange of ideas commenced along these three propositions:

- ❖ Option One: Reading at home
- ❖ Option Two: Reading in schools
- ❖ Option Three: Reading in the workplace

The conversation was centred around analysing the pre-developed actions that could be taken to promote reading in each of those three Options, as well as the drawbacks of each action. Participants were also encouraged to raise other viable ideas that could be included as strategies in those Options.

Option One: Reading at home

The family, being the basic nucleus of society, was identified by the LRF as a key area from which a reading consciousness could be promoted, i.e. through family activities championed by parents.

The following actions were considered:

- 1) Parents and children should make time to read as a family on certain days and at specific times of the week.
- 2) Parents should encourage children to read in their free time, rather than watch TV.
- 3) Parents should make a variety of reading materials available to children, including comic books.
- 4) Parents should make their children write a daily or weekly report of their book readings with incentives for compliance.

Possible impediments to these action points were listed as drawbacks (with each drawback being an obstacle to the action stated on its corresponding number):

- 1) Fatigue of work, stress from traffic and domestic chores for lower-income families may not make this sustainable.
- 2) Parents may not always be around to enforce the reading.
- 3) Low-income families may not be able to afford to buy books not recommended in the curriculum.
- 4) Socioeconomic realities or other pressing family priorities may not make this sustainable.

These points were discussed at length by the participants, with some suggesting other creative ways for parents to influence their kids into imbibing a reading culture, such as book dates, adapting park experiences and outings to reading, and spicing up the choice of books to be read. However, the drawbacks were equally recognised as veritable challenges. The literacy level of parents was identified as a major hindrance to Option One, with illiterate parents typically unable to raise their children in a reading culture at home.

Option Two: Reading in schools

Schools were marked as capable of creating viable opportunities for learning due to their standing as institutions of learning. However, the current system of learning has not always provided a structure conducive to the development of a reading habit.

The following propositions were discussed:

- 1) Schools should set apart days of the week when students would participate in collaborative reading exercise.
- 2) Schools should organise interclass reading competitions for the students.
- 3) Local education authorities should organise reading competitions for the schools in their districts.
- 4) Schools should establish reading clubs to encourage the students to participate in reading as one of their extracurricular activities.

The drawbacks to these propositions were also duly presented for deliberation:

- 1) In secondary and tertiary schools, time devoted to reading takes time away from math, science, technology, engineering and arts/design, which provide skills that may have greater economic value than literacy skills.
- 2) All the students may not be involved, except for those who are already active readers.
- 3) The best students may be the ones who get to participate while other students are alienated.
- 4) Not all the students will want to participate, particularly if it is not compulsory.

The potential of the school setting to cultivate healthy reading habits was elaborated on in this section, with it being noted that time could be found within normal school hours to emphasise on reading. It was posited that this action needs a redevelopment of the school curriculum and learning process. Moreover, a number of participants pointed out that the divide between local consciousness and the foreignness of the language of instruction was a challenge for many young students. The proposition in view of this was to contextualise learning in the local environment using local analogies.

Option Three: Reading in the workplace

While it is primarily a place for business, a few opportunities to promote reading at the workplace were highlighted.

- 1) Offices should create a scheduled timeout at least two days a week for workers to read.
- 2) Management should make workers submit a weekly report of their independent reading initiatives.
- 3) Management can introduce interunit or interdepartmental reading competitions to encourage reading among their workers.
- 4) Management should invest in an office library and buy books which should be distributed to their workers to read.

The drawbacks identified from those propositions and addressed in the debate were respectively as follows:

- 1) It may be difficult to enforce, and if introduced, some people may not read but use the time for other non-reading activities. The option can also lead to a short-term loss of productivity.
- 2) It may lead to plagiarism and copyright infringements as those who do not want to read can go online and copy the reviews or reports of others to pass as their own.

- 3) Action point 3 may create an unforeseen gap between highfliers and those who are just catching up and may discourage the latter from picking up any further interest in reading.
- 4) There may be constraints of space and budget for creating an office library or buying books for the workers.

Dialogue around Option Three revealed hesitance for the workplace to be used as a tool for impelling workers to read. Some suggested that the workplace should be “left as it is” and for activities there to focus on the primary goal, which is business. It was further opined that workers, majority of whom are adults, are set in their ways; and, moreover, they would find a way to wriggle out of reading tasks if they found them disagreeable. The participants decided that an indirect method of influence would be more beneficial to cultivating a reading habit in the work setting. Such indirect methods include a healthy competition and the visible progress of others through reading.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

All key aspects of the development of a reading culture outlined at the start of the programme were duly discussed, and their impact as well as the factors that could hinder them were outlined. Further, all participants spoke freely and were offered satisfactory time to offer their views. The ground rules were also properly adhered to during the Dialogue.

Recurring points among speakers include the following:

- ❖ There is a need to incentivise reading. When people see a readily available reward for them, they will be encouraged to read, until it becomes a habit and they start to gain the benefits of reading itself.
- ❖ There is too much of an emphasis on passing exams. Schools should focus on what the children can learn for their improvement, rather a cram-for-examination culture which leaves the students blank after the examinations are over.
- ❖ There is a need to train the teachers. School pupils can be better engaged academically when teachers are better trained. This can also help them get the best out of activities in the school curriculum such as Comprehension.
- ❖ Reading should be viewed as a tool to improve the mindset, way of thinking and way that technological advancements are applied for the benefit of everybody. The majority of people are still deprived despite advancements in science and technology and that speaks to a problem in mindset and the application of those technologies.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made:

- 1) Reading can be incorporated into the curriculum without extending school hours. An hour or two should be selected each day to creatively

drill children in reading. This includes pupils reading to the class from books selected by the class teacher or reading what has been written on the board.

- 2) There is a need to refocus the school curriculum from an emphasis on passing exams to an emphasis on functionality, understanding and learning. Schoolchildren should be taught from the perspective of their own academic, literary and mental improvement, not from the perspective of passing examinations.
- 3) Lecturers in higher institutions should not spoon-feed students, but should instead make them do independent research. Students should be sent to do more research to learn key course topics that have been introduced in class.
- 4) In the workplace, workers can also be encouraged to do independent research at work for their own development. They could be given tasks whose completion requires them to do personal research.
- 5) Learning at work can be made a sharing experience, with reading habits inspired by healthy competition and the success of others.
- 6) There is no need to set up a library at work, but workers can be encouraged to read and then share their knowledge to colleagues at short team meetings.