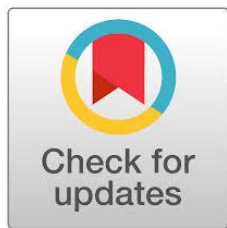


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Children's Literature and Its Relevance for Character Formation and Developments

Isaac Friday Emmanuel
Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko, Nigeria

Author email: Fraizisaac@gmail.com

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Abstract

The prominence of literature to children and their being is colossal. Literature, to some, is a path to knowledge; to others, a means of empowerment. Despite its roles, it is disheartening that little or no attention is paid to the content of children's literature. How relevant are these texts to the children? How far are they dated? Does it empower or inform them? The questions above provided the impetus for this study. This study explores children's literature and its implication for character formation and development. A descriptive research design was adopted for the study. Through a simple and random sampling, forty-three pupils and 20 principals were selected in Ondo, Ondo state, Nigeria. The instrument for the study was: The Children's Literature Questionnaire (CLQ). Three research questions were raised, and a null hypothesis was tested. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The study revealed that literary texts recommended for pupils were few [$\bar{x}=2.02$]; head teachers chose literary texts that appealed to them [$\bar{x}=3.4$]; recommended literary texts did not project the struggle of the readers [$\bar{x}=1.9$]. The study indicated significant differences in the head teachers' responses based on selected texts. The study recommended that keen attention should be paid to children's literature. Literary texts for children should be censored before filling them on shelves.

Keywords: Children literature; sustainable development; ideologies; pupils; 21st-century Ideologies

Introduction

A nation's future and legacy depend on the young generation, often regarded as tomorrow's leaders. Children are the future; therefore should be invested on as a resource with an expected return on investment (Muller, 2017). Odejide (1986) once said, "Africans accentuated the transmission of social and cultural values through oral traditions such as lullaby, play, songs, riddles and stories to the young ones" (p. xi). The purpose of this transmission, as Ayodeji (2008) rightly put it, "is to ensure continuity of the community and its development by entrenching those values, characters and attitudes that enhance productivity, honesty, diligence, positive interpersonal relations and consequently an egalitarian society" (p. 319). These socio-cultural values have been rehashed and artistically presented in prints termed literature in the modern epoch.

Literature is an artistic-cum-imaginative writing that focuses on a people's various historical experiences and cultural heritage. It enables readers to know more about other people's cultures and history across the globe. Hence, various continents or regions have various kinds of literature, such as American, Caribbean, African, etc. A critical point to note is that all kinds of literature in the world owe their faith to orality for the simple reason that speaking predates writing. Like all other literature, African literature has its root and origin in oral traditions and values. For continuity, these traditions and values are well preserved and transmitted to the evolving generation at the malleable ages, given that the infantile and adolescence phases are critical developmental stages for socio-cultural socialization in every society.

Literature is an ideological tool; its values go beyond entertainment. According to Norton and Norton (2010), literature improves peoples' attitudes toward their culture and others, which are essential for social and personal growth. Through literature, children could cultivate noble relationships with people and develop healthy social contact. Since all texts embody power relationships and represent ideologies at play, so by being given access to ideas that matter and authors who write with authenticity and integrity, children are prompted to understand different viewpoints and form opinions on challenging issues (Simpson & Cremin, 2022). Nwobodo and

Ozofor (2018), while examining the potency of the teaching of literature in schools, opined that literature contributes to the formation of responsible, successful, and caring individuals. They continued that intimating children with literature could bring about transformation, which involves total or complete change, usually from an objectionable state of affairs to a desirable one. Transformation transcends the functions of providing infrastructures like roads, hospitals, schools or industries to involve the total change of a person from illiteracy to illness or illiteracy to education.

However, essential values grow with time and change from generation to generation because each age has its particular point of concern and way of envisioning and apprehending the world. Therefore, the literature of each age is ruled by specific philosophies such that the view or the perception of one age differs from the other. Dada (1999) outlined some criteria for the selection of the content of a curriculum. They include: (1) The validity and significance of the content and how it contributes to a thinking process, (2) The appropriateness of the contents to the pupils' needs and interests, (3) Relevance to social needs and; (4) Learnability.

The recommended literary texts for children must project the present-day thinking process in that specific discourse. In light of this background, therefore, it is difficult to set a clear boundary between literary works meant for children and those intended for adults. Stakić (2014) mentioned that if aesthetics and internal cognitive value as guiding lenses are adopted, the essential differences between children's literature and adult literature almost will not exist. To him, a young adult, through the action of the protagonist in a literary text, will reveal stupidity, naivety, vanity, flattery, and insincerity that are overtly projected in a work of art, while an adult reader would be refreshed to think some of the problems of modern man and the contemporary and petty alienated society; fashion and reliance on other people's thoughts and tastes to fit in the environment at any cost, fear and human weakness to express their own opinion and personality amongst others. Stakić (2014) cited Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale. According to him, children, adults and philosophers read this piece, and each of them reveals, in addition to the aesthetic gratification, certain semantic strata that are the subject of deliberations. Nevertheless, as Schneider (2016) proposed, Children's Literature conjures images of baby books, predictable plots,

and basic illustrations. Better still be equated with artless, pointless stories in classroom, the ones with contrived vocabulary built around particular reading levels or the purified stories, stripped of real life in order to pass the scrutiny of state textbook selection committees and school boards. Part of the problem is coming up with a clear-cut classification of literature, whether kids or adults because issues revolving around developmental stages are slippery; even literature itself is elastic and intractable.

Nonetheless, for this study, children's literature (kid literature) is categorized as any material written and produced for the information or entertainment of children and young adults. It comprises all non-fiction, literary and artistic genres and physical formats (Library of Congress Collection, 2008). Stakić (2014) defines children's literature as any "literary works written for children who are yet to enter adulthood" (p. 243). Thus, children's literature is solely produced for children's gratifications and therefore, their interests and fantasies should be brought to the fore when proposing literary texts to them; their backgrounds and their inexhaustible illusions should be considered without neglecting the aesthetic tastes and the social sensibilities the texts set to relay. Today, children's texts contain deliberate pigeon-holes and ideologies that may send wrong messages to the children's readers on public bookshelves. The onus of scrutinizing literary texts before filing them for children's consumption lies on the government, parents, and schools. Therefore, teachers, parents and society should be able to differentiate between quality and mediocre literature. These safeguards children's accessibility to the best of the texts and embolden essential values that do not leave their developmental domains.

As observed, over time, so many irrational ideologies are being swept under literary texts today. If the Nigerian educational goal of raising citizens who would: (1) contribute to national development through high-level relevant manpower; (2) develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of the individual and society; (3) develop the intellectual capacity of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environment; (4) acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to be self-reliant and useful members of society; (5) promote and encourage scholarship and community service; (6) forge and cement national unity; and (7) promote national and international understanding and interaction, must be achieved,

archaic ideologies bolstering directly or indirectly that “*women’s education ends in the kitchen*”; *women are nurses; males are Doctors, sexism, patriarchal system* etc. in children literary texts must be edited to conform to the current thinking in the area of knowledge in consideration.

Besides, recommended literary texts must meet pupils’ needs and interests, be relevant to their social needs, and teach them moral values. These thoughts align with Jack Zippes, as cited in Ayodeji (2008), who maintained that children books should intend to extract a clear and interesting images of a period and address an issue to the children truthfully. With this in mind, it would be wrong for the government, head teachers and teachers to recommend literary texts that inspire 18th-century ideologies to 21st-century pupils.

The earlier stated seven lofty education goals in Nigeria can only be actualized when the right knowledge and values are communicated to the pupils by paying close attention to the kind of texts they consume. Through literary texts, children are exposed to their environment (Njemanze, 2010) and that of others. Lending credence to John Locke’s *Tabula Rasa*’s postulation, children at early developmental ages look up to older people in society; characters in literary texts for the right living. If provided with the right models and situations – tenderness, kindness, tolerance, loveliness, compassion, confidence, affection, insight and other social values, there is a greater probability that they will learn correct behavior and if otherwise, society would continue to decry upsurge of juvenile delinquency, social anomalies among her evolving *Leaders of Tomorrow*. Against this background, this study examined Children’s Literature and its implications for Character Formation and Development.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the study. (1) To what degree were pupils in primary schools in Ondo State, Nigeria, exposed to literary texts? (2) What are the bases for selecting the literary texts for pupils in primary schools in Ondo state, Nigeria? (3) Of what relevance are the recommended literary texts for pupils in primary schools in Ondo State, Nigeria? (4) What is the implication of children’s literature on pupils’ character formation and development?

Research Hypothesis

H01: There will be no significant relationship between Head-teachers' responses on the bases of selected literary texts based on school types.

Method

A descriptive research design of the survey type was adopted for the study. The population for the study comprised all the primary school pupils and head teachers in Ondo state, Nigeria. Through a simple random sampling, forty-three (43) primary school pupils in Akure South, Akoko North and Akoko South Local Government were selected for the study. Twenty-six (26) primary school pupils were drawn from private schools and seventeen (17) from public schools, respectively. The instrument for the study was a self-structured questionnaire entitled: Children's literature and Sustainable Development Questionnaire (CLSDQ). The instrument had three parts: the first section sought basic information from the pupils; the subsequent sections sought information regarding children's literature. Items on children's literature are based on a 4-point rating scale. Before administering, the instrument was tested on five (5) primary school pupils in Ado in Ekiti State to determine its reliability. The results $r = 0.79$ showed that the instrument was reliable. The research questions were answered using descriptive statistics of Mean and SD, while a t-test was used to test the hypothesis.

Results

The analysis is presented in sections. Section one is the analysis of research questions; section two is on testing the null research hypothesis, while section three is the discussion of findings.

Table 1. Frequency Distribution showing Pupils' Gender

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	Male	17	39.5
	Female	26	60.5
Total		43	100.0

Table 1 showing pupils' gender revealed that 39.5% were male respondents, while 60.5% were female.

Table 2. Frequency Distribution showing School Types

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	Private	26	60.5
	Public	17	39.5
	Total	43	100.0

Table 2 showed that 60.5% of the sampled respondents attended private schools, while 39.5% attended public primary schools.

Analysis of Research Questions

Research Question 1: To what degree were pupils in primary schools in Ondo State exposed to literary texts?

Table 3. The degree to which primary school pupils in Ondo State are exposed to literary texts

S/N		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision
1	How many literary texts did your teacher recommend?	43	1.00	4.00	2.0233	.88609	Low
2	How many do you have?	43	1.00	2.00	1.4186	.49917	V. Low
3	My teacher mandated I buy the literary texts	43	1.00	4.00	2.5116	1.05497	High
4	I pay for my literary texts as I pay for my school fees	43	1.00	4.00	2.8372	.81446	V. High
5	Every pupil in my school has the recommended literary texts for the term	43	1.00	4.00	2.1140	.66389	Low

Valid N (listwise)

43

Table 3 shows the degree to which the sampled schools placed prominence on children’s literature. This study set a mean value of 2.5 as a benchmark for decision-making. The mean value of 2.5 and above indicates a high degree, while the mean value of 2.4 below indicates a low degree. The first item with the mean value of [2.02] shows that the number of literary texts recommended for pupils is low. As few as those recommended literary texts were, the mean value of [1.41] shows that the number of literary texts possessed by these pupils is very low.

Furthermore, the result indicated that even the few who could buy the recommended literary texts were forced to buy them. Item 3 and 4 show that the teacher mandated them [Mean: 2.5] to buy the literary texts by summing it up with their tuition fees [Mean: 2.8]. Item 5 reveals a low number of pupils with the recommended literary texts [M: 2.11].

Research Question Two: What are the bases for selecting literary texts for pupils in primary schools in Ondo State, Nigeria?

Table 4. The bases for selecting literary texts for pupils in primary schools in Ondo State

S/N		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision
6	I choose whatever literary texts that appeal to me for my pupils	20	1.00	3.00	3.4500	.82558	V. High
7	I consider the background of my pupils when selecting literary texts for them	20	2.00	4.00	1.2000	.83351	V. Low
8	I place attention on the length of the texts before choosing it	20	1.00	3.00	2.5500	.68633	High
9	I consider the text readability when choosing literary texts for my pupils	20	2.00	4.00	2.1000	.64072	Low
10	I patronize street authors, sometimes	20	1.00	3.00	2.5500	.68633	High
11	I adhere to what is recommended by the Ministry of Education	20	1.00	3.00	2.4000	.82717	Low
	Valid N (listwise)	20					

Having considered the degree to which schools in Ondo place prominence on children’s literature, this aspect sought to know the bases for selecting literary texts for pupils in primary schools in Ondo State. The first item on the table with the mean of [3.4] shows that the head teachers of the sampled schools chose literary texts based on what appealed to them. The result also indicates that several head teachers did not consider the background of their pupils when selecting literary texts. More so, head teachers did not consider the readability of the texts before making choices on pupils’ behalf [2.1], probably, because they patronized street authors sometimes [2.5]. On whether they adhered to what was recommended by the Ministry of Education, the mean value of [2.4] reveals that half the sampled head teachers adhered to the government’s recommendation of literary texts while others did not.

Research Question Three: What relevance are the recommended literary texts for pupils in primary schools in Ondo State, Nigeria?

Table 5. The perceptions of pupils on the relevance of the school-recommended literary texts for their daily life

SN		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision
12	The recommended texts speak my mind	43	3.00	4.00	2.1651	.50468	Low
13	The content of the recommended literary texts reveals my inner struggle	43	2.00	4.00	1.9163	.85103	Low
14	The stories in the text are close to my background	43	1.00	4.00	2.1163	.87856	Low
15	The content of the literary texts reveals my day-to-day life	43	1.00	4.00	2.1072	.81446	Low
16	The literary texts are interesting and engage me to read beyond class	43	1.00	4.00	1.8791	.88171	Low
	Valid N (listwise)	43					

Table 5 shows pupils’ perceptions of the relevance of the school-recommended literary texts for daily living. Item 12, with the mean value of [2.16], shows that recommended texts do not

speak the mind of the pupils. Similarly, item 13 [1.9] indicates that the contents of the recommended literary texts do not project the inner struggle of the readers (pupils) and are not connected to their background. The study reveals that the extent to which the stories in the recommended texts reveal their day-to-day life is low [2.10]. Little wonder they further revealed literary texts are not interesting to them and do not engage them beyond classes [Mean: 1.8].

Research Question Four: What is the implication of children's literature on pupils' character formation and societal development?

It would not be out of context to start this discussion on the note that literature of "art for art sake," which belongs to Formalism, a school of literary criticism and theory, does not apply to pupils, especially those in primary/nursery schools. In Formalism, readers are only interested in the forms, not the contents. At the developmental stages of growth, a child reader is interested in the contents and not the structure of the literary texts. A literary text, for the pupil at this stage, is like a manual to live life rightfully. The main objective of literature in 21st century is to provide opportunities for students, as Arafik (2017) pointed out, is to develop their potentials as competent communicator in multicontext, multicultural and multimedia environment by empowering their multi-intelligence. Be that as it may, literature mirrors society, it encompasses varying moments of crisis and several degrees of moral decisions taken by characters that pupils have come to see as models (Norton & Norton, 2010). Characters in literary texts inspire pupils so much that their imprints are repressed unconsciously in the readers. During the formative years, children are malleable and can be developed into caring, friendly, loving and accommodating people. However, as they transition from the pre-operational stage to the operational stage of cognitive development, according to Jean Piaget, they become less selfish, suggesting that children focus on themselves at their earlier stage. With this in mind, therefore, literary texts that teach empathy, love and caring must be intentionally introduced to them. By so doing, good characters would be formed in them, and society would be livable. The sole role of schools, therefore, is to guide children to the range of good children's literature which is available. This implies that teachers and other stakeholders need to have a broad knowledge of different texts and also need to

develop strategies for enabling children to share their recommendations (Waugh, Neaum & Waugh, 2017).

Testing of Hypothesis

H01: There will be no significant difference in head teachers' responses on the bases of selected literary texts based on school types

Table 6 indicates that school type has significant influence on the bases for texts selection [$t(145) = -4.422, p < .05$]. Public school head teachers solely depend on the recommended literary texts by the Ministry of Education ($M=3.05; SD= 0.943$) when compared to their counterparts ($M=2.38; SD=0.851$) who recommend literary texts that appeal to their emotions. The result implied a significant difference in head teachers' responses to selected literary texts based on school types, and the formulated null hypothesis 2 was rejected.

Table 6. Independent T-Test showing the difference in the mean rating of head teachers' responses on the bases of selected literary texts based on school types

School Types	N	Mean	SD	Df	T	P
Private Schools	10	2.38	.851	145	-4.422	.005
Public Schools	10	3.05	.943			

Discussion

The degree to which primary school pupils in Ondo State were exposed to literary texts showed that the number of texts recommended for pupils was low. The findings indicated that the number of literary texts possessed by these pupils was none. Even the few pupils with the literary texts were forced to buy them out of their volition. This result showed that Nigerians trivialized issues around texts recommended for their children. These findings align with Nwobodo and

Ozofor (2018), who found out in their study that children's literature was minimally utilized in Nigerian primary schools. In the same vein, the findings substantiate that of Mohammad (2013), whose study indicated that the non-availability of literary teaching materials, and non-teaching of literature in many primary and secondary schools in Nigeria, amongst others, are factors militating against harnessing the benefits of children's literature for Nigeria's national development. The study also found that head teachers in Ondo State, Nigeria, particularly private school teachers, chose literary texts based on what appeals to them and not their pupils.

This selection was done without considering the background of their pupils, and the readability of the texts was not given any attention. Many head teachers patronized street authors because of the monetary gain they amass following that transaction. More worryingly, a significant number of the sampled head teachers did not know the ideologies foregrounded in the texts recommended for their pupils, given that no language use is ideologically neutral. More so, results on the relevance of the literary texts to pupils in primary schools in Ondo State, Nigeria, showed that recommended texts did not speak the minds of the sampled respondents. In other words, the texts did not project the pupils' inner struggles and did not connect to their backgrounds in any way. This result is in dissonance with the findings of Ayodeji (2008), who found out that the sampled literary texts were directly related to the children; therefore, they could easily relate the experiences embedded in the texts to their lives.

Conclusion

So far, children's literature has a potential role in sustainable development in Nigeria. However, the findings of this study indicated that children's literature was confronted with many problems. The study showed that schools were no longer conscious of the issues surrounding children's literary texts. This study found that the number of literary texts recommended for pupils was low, and only a few pupils had it. The results showed that the few with the recommended literary texts were forced to buy them. The study also discovered that majority of the head teachers of the sampled schools chose literary texts based on what appeals to them without considering the background of the pupils.

Overall, the prominence placed on reading and the possession of literary texts was low, and this is largely responsible for the waning of reading culture among pupils. The study further revealed that even the recommended texts did not speak to the pupils' minds nor project the readers' inner struggle (pupils). More so, the study indicated the extent to which the stories in the recommended texts affected the day-to-day life of the pupils. Therefore, literary texts were of no interest to them and did not engage them beyond classes. Hence, writers of children's kinds of literature should be encouraged to foreground issues bothering self-development, acquisition of soft skills, and creativity in the texts.

Recommendations

One of the ways through which our cherished socio-cultural heritage can be sustained is by transmitting them to the evolving generation. One of the ways to do this is by exposing them to literary texts that espouse those values since literature is a manifestation of the culture that produces it (Thomure, Kreidieh & Baroudi, 2020). Therefore, critical attention should be paid to children's literature. Literature is a world encrypted on pages; it speaks to the soul of men. Therefore, literary texts proposed for children must be subjected to society's affective, cognitive and spiritual lenses producing it for its worthwhileness. Only through this can we guarantee that antiquated and invalid ideologies are not foregrounded in the literary texts children consume.

Pupil's backgrounds and interests should be considered when proposing literary texts to them. Children's literature should be appropriate for their age and integrate their interests and struggles. A child reader would be interested in reading literary texts that portray his fears and how he can conquer them rather than reading some science fiction that he may not understand. Also, children's literature should present the current realities of the immediate society and not some alien western cultures. Even if there is a cause to introduce the pupils to western culture or environment, it must be "*carefully*" done such that the literary texts broaden the horizon of the child reader and, simultaneously, teach our values, sentiments and consciousness.

Writers of children's literature should be encouraged to foreground issues on self-development, acquisition of soft skills and creativity in their literary texts. Through this, the right values and knowledge would be repressed in the subconscious minds of the pupils. Therefore, as

they journey in life, these repressed values would positively influence their decisions at every point of their life.

Governments and educational stakeholders should be fully involved in the production and propositions of children's literary texts. As students of culture and society, governments and educational stakeholders must strive toward finding out the essential values of particular concern in the current age and carefully integrate those philosophies and models in the recommended literary texts. In so doing, children would, through reading these literary texts, imbibe good behaviors and characters that society desires.

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