

USING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE TEACHING OF MORAL EDUCATION IN NIGERIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The primary purpose of education is to train moral character in children. One of the main tools used in an effective program of character building and character education, both at home and at school, is children's literature. This paper attempts to emphasize/e the importance of children's literature in building character education in children. The paper highlights the importance of Information Communication Technology and its implications in children's moral upbringing. Recommendations are made at the end of the paper which, if followed strictly, will enhance the teaching of moral education to children. The conclusion reiterates the salient issues raised by the paper.

Introduction

Children's literature can go a long way in teaching moral education to children. This paper tries to define children's literature as used here. Its characteristics or content and form and its importance in character building are explained. The paper indicates that children's literature as an instrument of moral education can be applied in the classroom. The paper goes on to show that Information Communication Technology (ICT), an absolute phenomenon of the modern times, is portrayed as a necessary evil when it comes to children and so, parents, teachers, and community leaders must be on their guard to protect children from the negative aspects of ICT.

Definition of Children's Literature

There is some debate on what constitutes children's literature. Most broadly, the term applies to books that are actually selected and read by children. Conversely, the term is often restricted to books various authorities, determine are "appropriate" for children, such as teachers, professionals, and the various critics of literature for children. Anderson (2006) defines children's literature as all books written for children, "excluding works such as comic books, joke books, cartoon books, and nonfiction works that are not intended to be read from front to back, such as dictionaries, encyclopedia, and other reference materials" (p.2). Literary elements should be found throughout all of children's literature. These important elements include characters, point of view, setting, plot, theme, style, and tone. Several common themes in traditional literature for children follow among the lines of triumph of good over evil, trickery, hero's quest, reversal of fortune, and the small outwitting the big. Because one of the purposes of folktales is to transmit cultural values and beliefs, the theme is usually quite apparent (Anderson, 2006). On the other hand, Redmond (2008) describes children's literature as writing designed to appeal to children either to be read to them or to be read by them. Materials for children's literature include fiction, poetry, biography, and history. It also includes riddles, jokes, precepts, fable, myth, legends, and folktales based on spoken tradition. Works of ancient literature such as the stories by Greek poets Homer (*The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*) and Virgil (*Aeneid*) and the English poet John Milton (*Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*), as well as writers like Robert Louis Stevenson (*Treasure Island*) and Hans Christian (*The Emperor's New Clothes*) are often adaptable to children's reading because of their simple forms. Classics of children's literature include adult books that appeal to children or have been adopted for children. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* are among such books. In Africa too, stories of Chaka the Zulu of South Africa, the Dedan Kimathi myth in Kenya, the maji-maji mystery water in Old Mali, as well as D. T. Niane's *Sundiata: an Epic of Old Mali* and the Bayajida legend in Daura, Northern Nigeria all offer inspiring stories to children geared towards building them to be morally upright. All these books, stories, myths and legends are adaptable to children's reading and they teach moral education to them. The charge of all schools, both public and private, as McCambridge (2004) *Knowledge Review Volume 19 No 1 December, 2009* observes, is to help pupils develop good character and high moral principles, and to lead an adult life of virtue.

Teaching moral education to children is necessary and cannot be over- emphasized as children are the leaders and conscience of tomorrow. Helping children to develop to full potential as citizens is an important priority of parents, teachers, and the community. Johnsen and Johnsen (2007) indicate that there is a common ground of what the society wants its children to know and be able to do - a common ground that defines citizens as productive, responsible, caring and contributing individuals. This common ground includes being successful in school, making responsible decisions,

caring about others, contributing to society, developing social and personal skills, and developing a core set of common values. Lickona (1993) stresses that moral or character education must be designed to encompass the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of morality. It must help students or pupils understand the core values, adopt or commit to them in their own lives.

Characteristics of Children's Literature

The characteristics of children's literature include, among others, the following:

- It offers fantasy and magic: children's literature is full of characters that are not real but are used to create mental pictures amongst children.
- Use of animal characters: children are fond of animal characters unlike adults, and books for children are often illustrated, sometimes lavishly, in a way that is rarely used for adult literature.
- It teaches lessons: these lessons could be mythological, philosophical, sociological, or psychological in nature.
- It has a lot of dialogue which makes children improve their spoken English.
- It has simplicity and musical language: most folktales are simple and are accompanied by songs and repetition. This makes the story interesting as the children read and sing along.
- It has happy and optimistic ending: children's literature has smooth and happy ending, giving hope and comic relief to the children.

Importance of Children's Literature

The importance of children's literature in general, and as a medium of moral education in particular, cannot be over emphasized. Some of the values are listed below:

- It helps inculcate positive, personal, social and moral education. Some children do not have these values and literature helps to develop them in children. Through literature the importance of education can be inculcated in the children.
- It influences ideas, attitudes and beliefs of children. This is why children's literature has to be carefully selected for positive influence.
- It enriches the child's horizon by helping him to learn more about the world he lives in since he has limited knowledge of the world.
- It helps the children to develop the tendency to attach themselves with the characters they read about in the stories. This makes the characters become the imaginary friends of them.
- It develops an insight and understanding of children. Literature gives children the opportunity to know and learn many things in life. The child reflects, ponders, thinks and reasons about the stories he reads. For example, if a child reads about another child who suffers because his parents are dead while his own are alive, he learns and understands certain things. He turns to appreciate the fact that his parents are alive, and he thanks them for their care.
- It helps to answer the *hows* and *whys* the children usually ask.
- It develops in the children perceptive powers. By the time the child listens to and reads folktales, he begins to reason and think of how to find solutions to his problems. When the child reads widely he will broaden his mind.
- It teaches children that life is not static; that things sometimes change for better or for worse. For example, a child who grows up in the city may think that everything is good and glistening everywhere as in the city, Children's literature helps to teach them that things are not the same everywhere and every time. It promotes creativity by stimulating the child's imagination. By telling children stories and reading texts to them, a child would be in a good position to be imagining things around him. Children's literature helps to expose the child to the environment of reading.
- It helps to develop ethical standard value system. In children's literature, children are made to know that they grow in a society where negative things abound. For example, when a child sees a mother punishing her child in the neighbourhood for stealing or for whatever misdemeanor, it will inculcate moral lesson in him. He will know that stealing is not good and if he steals, his parents will punish him.

Children's Literature as a Medium of Moral Education

O'Sullivan (2004) defines moral education as the deliberate instruction in basic values and morals ideally woven into lessons throughout the curriculum and community. He identifies some common values that should be incorporated into the curriculum as: compassion, fairness, kindness, honesty, perseverance, courage, justice, empathy, and acceptance. Each school and community could choose values that would seem to be appropriate for the population it serves. Moral education has become a subject of interest to educators and parents. Schools should therefore teach moral education, values, and citizenship because building good character in children is an absolute necessity. Otten (2002) suggests that it is best to expose children to a wide variety of literature. He recommends incorporating classics, folk literature, legends, and contemporary stories — all drawn from various cultures. This type of diversity, he says, allows children to discover similarities in values across geography, culture, and time.

According to Weaver (1994), literary characters have almost the same potential for influencing the reader as the real people with whom a reader might share a reading experience. He further affirms that character counts most in teaching children character education. He gives six (6) pillars of good character as: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship. Lickona (1991) offers a slightly more comprehensive list, which includes responsibility, respect, tolerance, prudence, self-discipline, helpfulness, compassion, cooperation, courage, honesty, fairness, and democratic values. Researchers seem to agree that there is no universal answer to the right traits for children. The mixture of qualities may vary, depending on the school and the community. Leming (1996) asserts that many character education advocates suggest that educators should involve their local communities in identifying and defining the virtues to be woven into their educational goal.

Edgington (2002), identifies eleven (11) broad principles as defining a comprehensive approach to moral education. These are:

- Promote core ethical values as the basis of good character.
- Define character comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and behaviour.
- Use a comprehensive, intentional, proactive, and effective approach.
- Create a caring school community.
- Provide pupils with opportunities to engage in moral action.
- Provide a meaningful and challenging curriculum that helps all pupils to succeed.
- Foster students' intrinsic motivation to learn and to be good people.
- Engage school staff as professionals in a learning and moral community.
- Foster shared moral leadership and long-term support for moral education.
- Engage families and community members as partners in moral education.
- Evaluate the character of the school, its staff, and its pupils to inform the moral education effort.

Application of Moral Education in the Classroom

The promotion of moral education in the classroom can occur in a variety of ways. Role-playing and the use of children's literature are two ways educators can promote character education (Edgington, 2002). Picture books and children's literature have been used over many years to entertain, inform, engage, and evoke thought in the classroom. Since teachers are already using literature with pupils, it is imperative that they make their instruction more meaningful by engaging their pupils and promoting important moral values. If children are exposed to character-rich literature in a manner that can serve those dual purposes, character education can be taught, encouraged, and promoted in the classroom. Role-playing is a type of teaching tool that has shown to have positive effects when promoting values. Moral education can be very effective when used with role-playing and children's literature since both have such promising outcome on affecting pupils' value development.

There are many strategies teachers can incorporate when utilizing literature that have important character building issues. One particular study indicates that teachers should preview the books used carefully (Lake, 2001). Having background knowledge of the issue involved in a piece of literature with a moral dilemma helps teachers guide class discussions. Teachers should ask questions and provide details that will have children begin thinking about the circumstances or the story's dilemma. Teachers also need to tell children what to listen for, and set a purpose that underscores the story's message (Jalongo, 2004). After setting the story's purpose, teachers should read the story, paying attention to enunciation, proper inflections, correct tone, and thoughtful pacing (Lake, 2001). A

good picture book allows pupils to use visual efforts to assist with the story's meaning. Teachers need to draw attention of the pupils to the point of the story as they read.

After reading stories that have important values embedded in the books, there are a wide variety of activities that teachers can utilize to help pupils comprehend and get personally involved in the story's dilemma. Role-playing, using open-ended questions, identifying with characters and their feelings, providing an emotional release or catharsis, group discussions, story expansion, and written responses (Jalongo, 2004), are just some of the different strategies teachers can use after reading literature to promote good character in children.

Jalongo (2004) also affirms that a comprehensive character education programme can be beneficial at promoting the development of good character. The relationship between the school and home is extremely important in promoting good character in children. Positive character needs should be promoted in all aspects of life. To be most effective, character should extend even beyond the school walls. Pupils should be given the opportunity to practise their positive character traits by performing community service activities.

Instructional Strategies

Effective character education goes beyond simply processing and storing information. Merely having children read about exemplary characters making good choices will do little to change their thinking or behaviour. Educators, therefore, must use a range of activities to prompt and nurture children to go beyond this. These activities may include discussion, debate, research, role-playing; and essay writing or journal keeping as explained below:

- **Discussion:** Leal (1999) places particular emphasis on the role of discussion, noting that", students' acquisition of knowledge is not limited to the personal construction of meaning, but is in fact extended, modified, and restructured as a result of the social construction of meaning. Using this technique, the children will become quite engaged not only in discussing character traits demonstrated by the characters in the book, but also they will go on to discuss these character traits in their own lives.
- **Debate:** Classroom controversy offers a promising approach to developing moral reflection. As outlined by Johnson and Johnson (1995), this approach calls for teams of students to advocate for opposing positions on an issue, then switch sides and advocate for the positions they initially opposed. When used in conjunction with literature, this method allows students to debate the often-complex issues found in their reading. Questions like this may ensue: "Was this character justified in doing what he or she did? Are there circumstances under which the character would have been justified in acting differently?" etc.
- **Research:** Searching for further information both on-line and in the library can help students gain a more profound familiarity with a given character trait. They may be able to find examples of other characters exhibiting the trait in different circumstances and different ways, thereby broadening their scope of understanding. They may also be able to bring new information back to the class, thereby generating new conversational threads and bring to light unexamined ideas. **Role-playing:** Students can delve more deeply into the natures and motivations of the literary characters they are studying by role-playing imaginary interactions. This method can be especially useful when examining qualities related to resolving conflict and living peacefully.
- **Journal Keeping or Essay Writing:** These activities allow students to reflect on their learning and apply it to their own lives. After the class studies a character trait, as illustrated in a book or story, the students write their personal responses in their journals (or in an essay) prompted by a series of teacher-directed, open-ended questions. For example the teacher may ask: "What do you think you would have done if you had been in that person's position?" or "Can you think of a better way he or she might have handled the situation?"

To be more effective, character education should extend even beyond the school walls as earlier indicated. Children should be given the opportunity to practise their positive character trait by performing community service. This type of service learning reinforces beliefs and values and encourages moral development (Conrad and Hedin, 1991). As Otten (2002) suggests, since children learn as much at home as they do at school, it is vital to involve parents in teaching character. One way of doing this is through take-home sheets that explain what children are learning and by offering ways for parents to reinforce the new knowledge.

Exposing Children to Diverse Considerations

Diversity is something all classrooms have and children's literature can be utilized to expose children to many types of culture and diversity. Teachers must be aware of their own classroom diversity. Knowledge regarding the different cultural, religious, and educational backgrounds of their pupils is essential. With that in mind, teachers can find literature that helps to deepen the understanding of the diverse classroom population. School librarians, administrators, teachers, and parents can work together to develop a list of books that encompass the population of their particular school to address their specific diverse needs.

Using children's literature to teach positive character traits is effective as well as rewarding. Children love good stories and they love to talk about the stories, the characters in them and about themselves and their experiences. Teachers will really enjoy reading favourite and famous books to children, learn about their pupils as they open up discussions and reap the rewards of character building in them. Children are exposed to good literature, learn to enjoy reading, are encouraged to relate what was read to their own experience and learn valuable life lessons (Olivito, 2006).

Information Communication Technology (ICT) and Moral Education

In many societies, moral education has always been considered the most essential component of education because the nurturing of moral persons is the prime function of schooling. The implementation of moral education has relied on the inculcation of values that reflect moral ideals. The emergence of information communication technology with a plethora of information and ideas being disseminated instantly has altered the educational landscape of the world and challenged the conventional approach to moral education (Damon, 2002). It is therefore important that educators find an alternative approach to moral education that can embrace the new realities of our modern networked world. Information and ideas from the internet should be exploited rather than shunned, and the genuine interest of children or youth should form the basis of moral education that is relevant and enlightening. Teachers, parents and organizers of non-formal education programmes should endeavour to understand the complex world of internet realities and devise means to suit contextual educational needs.

The anxiety of moral educators has to be understood in today's context of cultural diversity and social change. The conception of cultural diversity is no longer confined within the boundaries of a country, for the internet has quietly but efficiently disseminated immense volume of ideas, images and artifacts of culture among citizens of all nations that have access to it. Moreover, interaction among people on the internet presents a kind of social change that challenges our ability to think morally in a real and yet imaginary relationship.

The internet is a unique tool for moral education that embodies numerous networks which serve to facilitate instant communication among users of information communication technology. Castells (1999) rightly observes that for moral educators, the emergence of the 'cyber world' can be unsettling because of all the 'demons' that lurk within a world that we cannot see. There can be little protection of the young minds if the corrupting effects are not readily discernable from their behaviour. The kinds of disorientation brought on the presence of the 'cyber world' in form of pornography, abusive messages, insults, strange cultures, etc. pose the most serious challenge to moral education, regardless of its sites of application. This is because the 'multidirectional' networks are transforming the structure of our economic and social institutions and our established system of beliefs and values would have to be able to maintain its validity and relevance in order to survive. Our world is now connected in global networks of the information and images that travel throughout the world instantly. Without a clear and strong epistemological and axiological anchor, moral education will drift in the sea of contentious ideas and values. Moral educators, therefore, should embrace the current phenomena of uncertainty and attempt to negotiate new notions of morality and education so that they do not fall too far behind (Castells, 1999).

Dryfoos (1990), identifies two approaches to moral education and ICT based on fear. The first approach is prohibition, where pupils or students are put under the control of head-teachers and principals in schools and parents and community leaders at home. Prohibition and restrictions are established through the execution of rules and regulation. However, this approach seeks to undermine the freedom of pupils or students. The second approach is prevention, the aim of which is to shelter students from harm, to provide a safe environment for their pursuit and to ensure that they won't get into trouble. A variety of means are employed to guard against unacceptable practices and deviant behaviour of students. This is done in the name of protecting students and not letting them go astray..

This approach has been criticized because it could retard children's intellectual curiosity and imagination. The two approaches mentioned find easy resonance with the widespread concern over the effects of internet use on the psychological well-being of children and youth (Flecha et al, 1999).

Conclusion

Children are important; literature is important. Therefore children's literature is important. Teaching moral education to children is necessary and cannot be over emphasized as children are the leaders and conscience of our future. Effective character education goes beyond simply processing and storing information. Merely having children read about exemplary characters making good choices will do little to change their thinking or behaviour. Educators, therefore, must use a range of activities to prompt and nurture children to go beyond this. To be more effective, character education should extend even beyond the school walls. Children should be given the opportunity to practice their positive character trait by performing community services. This type of service learning reinforces beliefs and values and encourages moral development. Information Communication Technology (ICT), though a necessary evil, is good in teaching moral education but stake-holders of character education must watch the type of literature and other information children get from ICT. Recommendations are made at the end of the paper which, if fully followed, will be all for the better for teaching moral education in our primary and secondary schools.

Recommendations

Before concluding, we wish to recommend as follows:

- To be more effective, character education should extend even beyond the school walls.
 - Children should be given the opportunity to practise their positive character traits by performing community services.
 - « For moral education to be effective, it should be rooted in simple but generally tenable principles.
 - Children should be guided to appreciate the existence of others, care about their needs, understand their predicaments, sympathize with their plight, and respect their rights and values. With this the children will be able to gradually transcend their own self-interests and to give appropriate attention to matters of public interest.
 - Children should be engaged in out-of-school programmes such as organized social and cultural activities (Boys Scout, Boys Brigade, Young Farmers Club, etc.). In ways that are less rigid but more informal than classroom instructions, these out-of-school activities can be equally effective in inculcating desirable values and attitudes in the children (Leslie, 2002).
- * Moral educators should concern themselves with teaching children ways to accommodate diversity and change which are the salient features of the information communication technology age.
- The neighbourhood should be used as a possible site for moral education where children interact with other members of the community to discover the other side of life.

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