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Sustaining Life-long Reading for Positive Change in Nigeria: Critical Perspectives on Ebonyi State[1]

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Abstract

The indispensable role of reading in social change and national development has, in recent years, dominated discourses by scholars and players in the education and book industries in Nigeria. However, there is little evidence of positive results from those discourses. Disquieting pointers to poor reading culture in the nation include examination malpractice, poor academic performance, high school dropout rate, high unemployment, drug addiction, substance abuse, cultism, thuggery, insecurity, poor leadership, corrupt practices, violence, insurgency, militancy, religious fundamentalism/extremism, child abuse, poverty, diseases, among several other symptoms. This paper identifies and discusses ways of sustaining life-long reading culture for positive change in Nigeria, beaming its critical lens on Ebonyi State. It focuses on promoting increase in reading materials and providing information on places to get those materials, identifying impediments to reading, and suggesting ways of eliminating the obstacles. While this study aligns with the functionalist theory of literacy, its methodology involves reading, analysis and interpretation of secondary sources, blending the findings with this author's observations and experiential references (for he is a key player in both the education and the book industries). The findings include that breakthroughs in science and technology, as in the humanities; contributions to social, political, economic and intellectual discourses and actions; and the functional physical and social structures in developed societies are largely a result of their voracious reading public. The paper concludes that key players in the education and book industries must sustain efforts at encouraging the cultivation of appreciable reading culture among the populace for the attainment of positive change in their behaviour, to guarantee the nation's match towards sustainable development.

Key words: Readership promotion, functional literacy, social change, national development, Nigeria, Ebonyi State

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Introduction

Any campaign for reading for positive change in Nigeria must necessarily derive its objectives from the nation's philosophy of education. Viewed from the functionalist perspective of being the ability to read, write, count and apply the knowledge to problem-solving, literacy is central to the attainment of the goals of education, for it conditions the degree of sustainability of a society's growth and development. According to the National Policy on Education (2014: 1), one of the sets of beliefs on which Nigeria's philosophy of education is based is that "education is an instrument for national development and social change." Thus, the different levels of education in Nigeria, from the pre-basic to the tertiary levels, are tailored to disseminate worthwhile ideas embodied in reading materials through systematic instruction. The way learners utilise such ideas forms the seedbed of the progress or otherwise of the nation. Perhaps, it is in this light that in a paper entitled "Ideas Have Consequences," Ibeneche (2010: 3) asserts that "ideas once let loose, whether good or bad, will influence the way the world runs, even in unlikely places, which is why writers are such a force in human civilisation." If the ideas contained in the materials read by our primary and secondary students (basic and post-basic levels of education) are negative or poorly interpreted, the society will pay dearly for it as development would elude it, even as there would be negative social change. Conversely, if the materials are positive and effectively read, the society stands to benefit. This is because the individual reader's utopia largely shapes the national utopia. It is against this backcloth that this study is imperative. I, therefore, commend the underlying objective of the 2018 National Library of Nigeria Readership Campaign, "Reading for Positive Change." Its theme, "Sustaining Life-long Reading for Positive Change" is timely in this era of poor reading culture not only among primary and secondary school students, but also teachers, parents and the general public.

The key problem this paper seeks to apprehend is the gap between reading and its expected positive contributions to individual and national development and social

change. Glaring pointers to dysfunctional reading in Nigeria include examination malpractice, poor academic performance, high school dropout rate, joblessness, drug addiction/substance abuse, sundry crimes, cultism, gangsterism, thuggery, insecurity, poor leadership, corrupt practices, violence, insurgency, militancy, religious fundamentalism/extremism, child abuse, poverty, diseases, among several other symptoms of a society with low reading attitude. The general objective of the paper is to foreground ways of achieving life-long functional reading for positive change. Specifically, the discussion is limited to encouraging reading among students at the basic and post-basic levels of schooling, their teachers and parents, including the general public in Nigeria, particularly in Ebonyi State; promoting increase in reading materials; identifying impediments to reading; and suggesting ways of eliminating the obstacles. The foreseeable benefits of this study include positive change of attitude to reading by students, teachers, parents and the general public in Nigeria, especially people living in Ebonyi State. The methodology of this inquiry involves reading, analysis and interpretation of secondary sources, blending the findings with this author's observations and experiential references (for he is a key player in both the education and the book industries) to arrive at the findings.

This study aligns with the functionalist theory of literacy. Otagburuagu (2007:1) explains that the functional theory emphasises significance and purpose of literacy, as it has led to the addition of numeracy to the fundamentalists' consideration of literacy as ability to read and write. According to him, for the functionalists, literacy becomes "ability to read, write, count and use numbers for problem-solving." Offormatta (2007:12), adds that "functionality is the ability to transfer knowledge gained from scholarship to solve one's or society's problems. This is why literacy is one of the life coping skills…" Since our operational word 'reading' (a derivative of 'read') is a key component of literacy, this paper posits, in line with Offormatta's (2007) view, that positive change in the nation is possible if Nigerians "transfer knowledge gained from

scholarship to solve individual and society's problems." This paper therefore interrogates the current state of reading culture and materials in the society under study, and examines the impediments to knowledge acquisition and its transfer to problem-solving, and proffers some solutions.

Overview of Scholarship

Many scholars and reference sources have attempted to explain the meaning of reading from diverse angles, all pointing to making of beneficial meaning out of the reading material. For one, the *New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* (qtd in Okpara 2001: 51) defines reading as "… to understand the meaning of symbols, signs, gestures, etc by looking at them and assimilating them mentally." The key words here include 'understand', 'meaning', 'assimilating' and 'mentally'; they presuppose that merely looking at symbols or signs or gestures doesn't reflect effective reading; after all blind people can read by touching words or with the aid of Apps. For reading to be effective, meaning must be made out of the symbols and signs (printed words or abstractions) and gestures (unspoken/unwritten communication realised through body movements and 'body language') and the knowledge so gained transferred to problem-solving. Writers and researchers in education, therefore, need to be conscious of the types of reading materials they create for our schools and the reading public, for the meanings in those materials shape the society. Discussing the need for researchers and writers to understand the needs of their readers, Wayne et al (1995: 12-27) argue that readers' interests differ, pointing out that "the most important differences are among those who read for diversion, those who want a solution to a practical problem, and those who are dedicated to the pursuit of pure knowledge and understanding." Given her cheerless historical and cultural narratives in the journey towards nationhood, Nigeria with her component states needs to refocus her readership objectives. As Jackson (1993:1) would muse, "It seems to me that no discussion or analysis of literacy learning can take place without reference to precise historical and cultural contexts," a position that validates the indispensability of socio-

cultural background in determining reading effectiveness and its likely results – positive or negative.

It is imperative to note that in 1962, the UNESCO observed that "a person is literate when he has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enables him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group or community" (Oxenham (1980) qtd in Jackson (1993:2). In the foregoing observation, 'effective functioning' implies a positive change in a person as a result of their learning through reading, bearing in mind that functional literacy is equated with positive outcomes of reading and writing. Whether reading will yield negative or positive results depends largely on the reader's interpretation of the reading material, for impediments to appropriate comprehension of the text could yield disastrous consequences for the wider society. This explains why Okpara (2003: 127-135) argues that reading materials should always conform to the reader's needs, age, educational and cultural background, sex, religious persuasion, as well as the occasion or context.

Again, the need for continuous review and increase in reading materials has been stressed by Otagburuagu (2007:6) who asserts that: "Literacy materials must be dynamic; they must grow with time and in their scope in order to accommodate the changing realities of the society and the users," and goes on to identify information and communication technologies as birthing "a new set of literacy materials in the literacy market" even as he bemoans that "only about 20% of the [Nigerian] population may have access to computers at home, less than 6% in offices and schools… ." The foregoing signposts some obstacles to access to worthwhile knowledge and skills to power the nation's craving for positive change through functional reading in a globalised world. Interestingly, Anuonye and Ukegbu (2012: 303-304) have advanced that web-based distance learning is imperative to Nigeria's national integration and security in the 21st century, as it is to educational advancement of all citizens. They relate that that youths in some

> developed societies of the world such as London, Germany or Malaysia …[have] used web-based learning to acquire skills and knowledge …against the barriers of borders, time and space. Thus, school dropouts, in-service teachers, military personnel and all sheds of human workforce have improved themselves and obtained O'Level, diploma or degree certificates through access to the web. However, Nigerian has the perennial problem of giving admissions to youths who are university-hungry. The reasons given have been poor infrastructure to accommodate students in the regular teeming programmes. Consequently, there has been increasing spate of armed robbery, kidnapping and other social malaise pervading and eroding the peace of all Nigerians.

Tansley (1967: 60-79) links some psychological and social disorders to reading failure among children and their handlers, notably teachers and caregivers. For him, reading failure could result, among other factors, from "teachers' lack of knowledge of developmental processes in the acquisition of reading skills; social and environmental factors and later learning that results from introducing children to learning situations which they are immature to meet." Perhaps it is in the realisation that as the slogan goes, no teachers, no nation that Nduka-Ozo (2001:181) asserts that "the teacher as the instrumental character in projecting the philosophy and objectives of education has more roles to perform than educating the educand." To foreground her conviction that the teacher could so affect the learners negatively or positively, she cites Watson (1925):

> Give me a dozen healthy infants, well formed, and my own special world to bring them up in, I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select- doctor, lawyer, artist. Merchant-chief and yes even a beggarman and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestry.

Thus, much of the blame for poor performance among students occasioned by their poor reading habit could be heaped on teachers. The Nigerian situation is not different; the teacher can make or mar their students. However, in Watson's England, the teacher might have a freer hand and the needed facilities to teach and mould the character of their students in contrast to their Nigerian counterparts.

Furthermore, Udosen and Afangideh (2007) examined environmental variables and found that they influence secondary school students' reading effectiveness. Besides, the economic factor has been indicted in dwindling readership in Nigeria. Studying child labour as a factor against educational policy in the country, focusing on Onitsha Main Market in Anambra State, Ibeagha and Ibeagha (2006: 107) state that "child labour has some psychological, emotional, physical and intellectual implications. Victims of child labour are condemned to lifelong poverty, misery, sickness, illiteracy and social dysfunction." Since reading is a key factor in knowledge acquisition and the success of educational policies, children involved in child labour are denied opportunity to read and can't acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to transfer to society. This review is by no means exhaustive, eve as this paper draws partly from the foregoing literature and experiential references to arrive at its discussion, findings, recommendations and conclusion.

Readership and Increase in Reading Materials

In our attempt to promote readership, we need to ask some critical questions; namely, who needs to read? What should be read? And where do we find the materials to read? In answering the first question, it is necessary to be partly guided by the National Policy of Education (2014:3) Section 1 (7) which outlines the specific goals of education in Nigeria as to:

(a) ensure and sustain unfettered access to and equity in education for the total development of the individual;

(b) ensure the quality of education delivery at all levels;

(c) promote functional education delivery for skill acquisition, job creation and poverty reduction.

(d) ensure periodic review, effectiveness and relevance of the curriculum at all levels to meet the needs of society and the world of work;

(e) collaborate with development partners, the private sector, non-governmental organisations and local communities to support and fund education; and

(f) promote information technology capability at all levels.

To realise these goals, reading must be encouraged at the various levels of education, as well as among all stakeholders in the education industry. Hence, both students in the formal and non-formal school levels (basic, post basic, career development, mass and nomadic, tertiary, and open and distance education), and teachers, parents, the general public must be considered as potential readers for the nation to attain those laudable goals.

The other questions: what is to be read? And where do we find the materials to read? are interrelated. The conventional store house of literacy materials in Nigeria, as elsewhere is the library; this is complemented by reading materials one could source from the market (in book, stationery and electronic, and allied stores) or from publishing outfits, self-published authors, and so on. In the various libraries (national, state, institutional, family, and private) one finds book and non-book materials that contain organised knowledge proceeding from researches over the years. These materials come in the form of textbooks, reference books, books of readings, Festschrifts, anthologies, periodicals, journals, newsletters, magazines, newspapers, bulletins, autobiographies, biographies, pamphlets, creative writing (novels, plays, collections of poems, short fiction) and other forms of writing (historical, scientific, travelogue, mystery, crime fiction, romances, etc.).

The emergent information and communication technologies have brought about different channels that have increased reading materials, what I make bold to call neo-modernist sources. These sources are electronic in nature, what is preferably called soft copies as opposed to the hard copies of the afore-mentioned materials. These include e-books, e-magazines, e-newspapers, and so on accessible only on computers, including cell phones of various designs and packages. Everything is now on e-format such that to survive in contemporary world one needs to be e-literate. The acquisition of functional literacy capable of promoting positive change in individuals and the nation entails a capacity to read both intensively and extensively.

In Ebonyi State, these reading materials are available in various libraries and other locations. Students, teachers, parents and general readers only need to register to use the facilities. Besides the Ebonyi State Library Board, all the tertiary institutions in the state have functional main and departmental libraries; these include Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki; Federal University, Ndufu-Alike Ikwo; Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Unwana; Federal Teaching Hospital (1&2), Abakaliki; Federal College of Education, Ishiagu; Federal School of Nursing, Abakaliki; Ebonyi State College of Education, Ikwo; School of Health, Ezzamgbo. Few of the private and public secondary schools in the state also have functional libraries. There are also some privately-owned libraries open to public patronage such as Hope Bay Book Foundation/Library, Water Works Road, Abakaliki, as well as some private subject libraries such as the Literati Temple Library, Mile Four, Abakaliki. Besides, Ebonyi State has some of the biggest and best stocked bookshops in the country. These include Ubaco Books Ltd, Micado Books, Blessed Books, Education World Books, Annet Books, Chibtex Books, Ezeobi Books, Chinyeaka Bookshop, and so on. Some are located in the main market while others are on major streets in Abakaliki, Afikpo, Okposi, etc. I must submit that the sources of reading materials in the state are quite enough for its small size.

Current Efforts at Promoting Reading in Nigeria

Besides the periodic readership promotion campaign by the National Library of Nigeria, the various tiers of government, the British Council, some foreign missions, corporate entities, institutions of learning, organisations, and individuals promote reading culture among Nigerians. For instances, besides instituting the annual NLNG Prize for Literature worth US$100,000.00, the Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas Company organises readings by its shortlisted candidates and award winners; the Korean Mission annual cultural and poetry reading/awards; the Niger State Book Development Agency, the Hill Top Arts Centre in Minna and Kebbi constantly organise readings. There are some book clubs in Port Harcourt, Lagos, Abuja, Enugu, and some other towns, as well as Society for Young Nigerian Writers and Poets in Nigeria that organise period readings. Some towns such as Abuja, Ibadan, Abakaliki, Enugu, Calabar, Awka, etc have literary societies that organise weekly or monthly readings.

The Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), the largest writers' body in Africa founded by Chinua Achebe over three decades ago emerges a champion in promoting reading in the country; it has branches in most states and organises an annual international convention, bringing its members together for readings, intellectual interaction on the subject of literature, AGM, and literary awards. Each state branch organises either weekly or monthly readings involving members and non-members. In 2012, Barr Yusuf Ali endowed an annual readership promotion campaign fund worth N3million with ANA; ever since he has never failed to redeem the money, which has seen ANA undertake reading campaigns in primary, secondary and tertiary schools in the country. In an interview with this researcher, Denja Abdullahi (2018: np), current ANA national president, summed the achievement of the Yusu Ali reading initiative thus: "We have reached over 3000 schools and 15 states are covered alternately each year, since 2012."

The Association of Nigerian Authors, Ebonyi State Branch has been part of the ANA success story since 1999 (as far as I can recall); even as it has benefited from the Yusuf Ali readership campaign fund, making it organise readings in and donate books to some schools. This is apart from its monthly readings. The Abakaliki Literary Society (ALS) founded in 2009 (under my chairmanship) has also been consistent in organising monthly readings, even hosting various personalities to public readings: Senator Anthony, 2009; Hon. Mrs Ugo Nnachi, 2012, etc. The literary society invited Her Excellency, wife of Governor Martin Elechi to flag off the READ-TO-A-CHILD-TODAY-CAMPAIGN in Ebonyi State on May 21, 2013 at the Women Development Centre. Other organisations such as U-green Foundation, Poets in Nigeria (PIN) and Hope Bay Book Library/Bookshop, Water Works Road, Abakaliki have also been instrumental to the promotion of reading in Ebonyi state. I am also aware that some secondary schools and the departments of English/Literary Studies of some of the tertiary institutions in the state have reading/literary groups.

I must also note the efforts to encourage reading in Ebonyi State by the state Ministry of Education, the Universal Basic Education Commission, the Secondary Education Board, the Governor's School Monitoring Team. Above all, the State Library Board has been the mother of all the efforts. This added to the institutional and private libraries I listed earlier, I must sum that Ebonyi State fares well in the area of promoting reading culture.

Obstacles to Effective Reading

It is glaring from the diverse anomalies in the nation in general and in Ebonyi in particular that reading has not significantly altered our people's way of thinking nor has it remarkably improved the academic performance of students. Such anomalies include, but not limited to pervasive high rate of school drop outs, poverty, diseases, social conflicts, disillusionment, insecurity, superstition, mindless hate speech/writing (especially on the

social media like Facebook), absence of national values, poor performance of students in our learning institutions, low e-literacy, child labour/abuse, drug addiction/substance abuse, prostitution, pimping, and so on. These are significant effects of reading failure or ineffective reading. This explains why, among other experts on the subject, Tansley (1967) emphasises the negative influence of reading failure on the individual and the wider society.

Factors that inhibit reading effectiveness among students in primary and secondary schools include some reading faults that impede reading speed and comprehension. Okpara (2002; 56-58) articulates some of those faults such as the reader moving their head, vocalising or sub-vocalising, pointing to words with their finger(s)/objects, moving their eyes to reread words/expressions (regression), small recognition span, low vocabulary, etc.

Besides, many teachers constitute impediment to their students' effective reading. Possessing requisite paper qualification does not necessarily make a teacher qualified to effectively teach; specific skills are required. Many teachers in our primary and secondary schools do not possess reading skills, the needed creativity to guide the students through reading, as well as knowledge of developmental processes in acquisition of reading skills: reading readiness in language, physical, sensory, emotional and social development; training in perceptual abilities, phonic readiness; teaching spelling; etc (see Tansley: 1967). Apparently endorsing the foregoing opinion, Cutting (2017: np) declares: "There are many factors that lead to reading failure, including impoverished exposure to language and early literacy activities, lack of adequate instruction, and/or more biologically based risk factors," even as Karlin (2017) observes that the incompetence of the reading teacher causes reading failure in students. So, the teacher takes much of the blame! Worse, some private schools and PTA of some public schools employ First School Leaving and or Senior Secondary School Certificate holders to teach our wards on full or part time. Besides, what are NYSC members doing in our classrooms when we

know full well that not all of them are qualified to teach reading (and other language skills)?

Apart from students and teachers, all other stakeholders in the education sector, one way or another, contribute to reading failure among students, teachers and general readers. All the tiers of government pay lip-service to demands for functional education. What percentage of the provision for funding and goals of education as articulated in the National Policy of Education (2014) is met annually? What significant efforts have the bodies charged with promoting "initiatives such as Read to be Educated, Advanced and Developed (READ Campaign)" (NPE 2014: 71) made to encourage reading?

Again, there are socio-economic factors. Most parents are poor. Teachers earn peanuts. The supposed general reader thinks only of their daily bread. Can hungry people and their children read? The fact is that students only read to pass exams; most teachers copy from textbooks to write their lesson notes because they don't read. Many of the general readers read only newspapers and sports magazines as members of Free Readers' Association at newsstands, even as some of them read things published on the social media mainly for pleasure. In Ebonyi State in particular, bad economy combines with high cost of education to force some of our children of primary and secondary school age to take to hawking; child labour (See Ibeagha and Ibeagha 2016) in farms, building sites, car/keke wash points, stone quarry sites, the mechanic village; some are barrow pushers, load carriers on their backs, and paid refuse disposers in Abakaliki International Market, Kpirikpiri market, and other markets in the state. Do they have time or energy to read? NO!

Moreover, majority of our primary and secondary schools do not have libraries; those that have caricature of libraries lack reading materials. Most parents and guidance who groan under a recessed economy cannot afford reading materials for their children and wards, especially in this era of information and communication technologies that

demands the use of computers to access e-reading materials, even as those who have computers and internet connectivity face the problem of irregular or total absence of electric power supply.

Other factors include environmental: those whose live in urban areas are better exposed to reading materials and have higher performance rate and chances of discovering solutions to their problems through reading; psychological: poverty, unhealthy living and lack of motivation and other factors affect the mind set of students, teachers and general readers; political: added to institutionalised neglect of reading campaigns by government, some political office holders prefer using young people as thugs and errand boys to encouraging them to read; socio-cultural: some societies celebrate material wealth and look down on those who give their lives to reading; and religious: some religions only encourage reading publications that promote religious fundamentalism, not social change.

Although these factors and those not examined here are scary, there is hope of reversing the negative narrative on the state of reading.

Eradicating the Obstacles

For functional reading to take place there is need to know the purpose for reading from the onset. There are diverse purposes for reading, all finding a common objective in fostering change in both the individual reader and their society. The purpose could be specific or general. One could read for examinations, pleasure, oral testing, interviews, mind-setting, etc. The individual can utilise the knowledge and skills gained through reading in solving social problems, thereby bringing about social change. This connotes improving the socio-political, economic, security, socio-cultural and educational systems; working towards harmony among the citizens co-habiting in our multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural society. It also means the exportation of a positive image of our country to the international community through altitudinal change and demonstration

of their employability in the international job market. When majority of Nigerians begin to read with the foregoing in mind, we shall begin to celebrate the success of our Reading for Positive Change Campaign. Efforts should therefore be made to implement, to the letters, the Read to be Educated, Advanced and Developed (READ Campaign) canvassed in the National Policy of Education (see NPE 2014: 71).

Existing libraries should be upgraded: some have book and non-book materials that are not current; some don't have e-library sections (where e-library sections exists, some are not functioning because of poor or absence of electric power supply and internet connectivity). Primary and secondary schools (both in rural and urban areas) should have well-equipped and functional libraries. I have, in the course of official duties in the last fourteen years, visited many schools without libraries in different parts of Ebonyi state. One could only see some rickety shelves with yellowing files and age-old books in the offices of some of the school heads.

All teachers in primary and secondary schools should as a matter of urgency undergo teacher development training in phonics and reading readiness to enable them attain a good level of competency in reading skills so as to teach their students the skills. For over ten years, I have taught phonics as a resource person in Universal Basic Education Commission Annual Re-training of Basic Education Teachers and Education Managers (see UBEC Phonics and Oral English Manual (2012)). I wonder if the beneficiaries put the knowledge and skills gained in the training to use while teaching their students.

Individuals and groups, including politicians, should complement the efforts of government and organisations to promote reading by donating books to schools and libraries, making fund available for organising reading and reading campaigns. At Section 10 (155 e), the National Policy on Education (2014:71) provides that "in demonstration of social responsibility, contractors, consultants and other social service

providers are to contribute minimum of 1.5% of contract sum/fees to a Special Education Corporate Social Responsibility Fund (SECSOF) to be established…" Ours is a nation good at formulating policies! Where is the Fund? Part of the money should be used to promote reading.

Parents and guidance should encourage their children and words to read at home and to register and read in libraries, to support the efforts of their teachers and other stake holders.

The foregoing and other viable solutions could significantly eradicate poor reading culture in our schools and among the public.

Conclusion

A person's reading ability and the materials they read undoubtedly directs their thinking, drives and contributions to society's development. While reading to pass their exams, students should note that they also need to focus on acquiring knowledge and skills to help them survive in life after school. They should not stop reading after schooling; this is even when they should read more to continually adapt to changing circumstances in their individual lives, immediate environments and the wider society. Reading has no age limit: from childhood to old age, everyone (students, teachers, parents, and all citizens) should read to position themselves to positively change human and physical conditions in the society.

Francis Bacon (qtd in goodreads.com, 2018) declares, "Reading maketh a full man…." Bacon is right because reading has been at the centre of the making of the total person, especially in developed nations such as Europe and America. The ever increasing and astounding breakthroughs in science and technology, as in the humanities; lively contributions to social, political, economic and intellectual discourses and actions; and the functional physical and social structures in those societies are largely a result of their

voracious reading public. All hands must contribute to encourage the growth of similar voracious reading public in Nigeria in general and Ebonyi in particular for noticeable positive change in the behaviour of the populace, to guarantee the nation's match towards sustainable development.

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