

# LITERATURE IN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES AS ESSENTIAL TOOL FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND NATION BUILDING: THE CASE OF IGBO.

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## **Abstract**

*The study sets out to examine the policy of implementing literature in indigenous languages such as Igbo as a core subject of its own in primary schools in Nigeria for nation building. The problem of indiscipline among the youths is becoming unbearable in our society. This therefore motivated the researcher into finding out how to control this high level indiscipline prevalent in our society. Presently, adequate attentions are not given to the teaching of literature in indigenous languages in primary schools. During its period in the time-table, the teachers usually see it as a time to do "other important things". The thrust of the study is therefore an effort to curb youths' indiscipline, using literature in Igbo Language as a subject, as a veritable instrument in primary schools. As a matter of fact, primary education is the bases of all the other levels. There is the need for a solid foundation to be laid in the lives of children in their primary school age. This paper is therefore asserting that literature in Igbo language, which is the mother-tongue, will play a vital role in laying such solid foundation which will help the children to become reasonable and responsible human beings that care for others. This will in future lead to nation building. There is the need for urgent orientation for primary school teachers who fail to attach importance to the teaching of literature in indigenous languages as Igbo. The many functions of literature as studied in school, reveal that its adequate teaching and learning right from primary level of education will have positive influence in the lives of the children. It will inculcate in them good mind-set, good behaviour and right moral values.*

## **1.0 Introduction:**

The management of youth indiscipline in the contemporary Nigeria is becoming more problematic. Good discipline is the “life-blood” of any system or organization. But experience have shown that indiscipline among the youths in particular is the order of the day in Nigeria educational institutions. The Nigeria government past and present have continually tried to work out modalities to combat indiscipline and crime among children and youths. For example, the government have in the past launched War Against Indiscipline (WAI), War Against Indiscipline and corruption (WAIC), Civil Defence Corps etc. all these measures have almost proved abortive.

The rate and manner the children and youths indulge in unruly behaviours calls for some necessary questions such as: (i) What is really wrong with the home where these children and youths come from? (ii) What is actually wrong with these children? (iii) Are the parents of these children actually playing their role at home? (iv) Is the government playing their own part (v) What is wrong with our school system? (vi) What should be done as a remedy to rescue our educational system in particular and the society in general from total collapse? The paper submits that implementing the policy of effective teaching of literature in indigenous language such as Igbo as a core subject right from primary school can be an effective instrument for inculcating good mind-set, good behavior and right moral values in our pupils and children who are definitely going to be the future leaders of the society.

## **2.0 Literature In Indigenous Language:**

Literature in this study will strictly focus on products of imaginative or creative work in a particular language. Literature as

a products of imaginative or creative work embraces fiction, drama and poetry. In the words of Chinweizu et al (1), the term literature in its broadcast sense:

must include all the genres of publicly communicated written matter of the society. Thus in addition to prose, drama and poetry, we consider essays, biographies, addresses and oration a vital part of literature.

Looking at literature in this direction, Egudu (1) notes that literature is “a mode of expression. Obi (487) asserts that literature is an important means of understanding and interpreting human beings and aspects of society such as politics, religion, economics, social conflicts, class struggle and human conditions through the medium of language. According to Caudwell (145), the task of literature is keeping the collective imagination of a society alive, such that its members will be able to channel their energies to communal social construction. From the above explanations and definitions, we observe that literature does not only reflect, it equally affects the society and the citizens.

On the other hand, an indigenous language is a language that is native to a region and spoken by indigenous peoples, but has been reduced to the status of minority language. The language would be from a linguistically distinct community that has been settled in the area for many generations. Indigenous language may not be national language. According to *Oxford English Dictionary* (215) an indigenous language is the language of the people regarded as the original inhabitant of an area. It is the native language of the tribe that owns it. It is commonly referred to as the mother tongue (L1).

Indigenous languages registers our culture. As a result of this, development of a cultural group according to Pei (97) is printed in its languages. UNESCO (55) asserts that, education is best received in the indigenous language. This has been scientifically supported by research findings in the words of Fafunwa (2);

... to deprive the indigenous speaker of the use of his Language for education is like removing his soul. Education in the mother tongue removes all the inhibitions that beset the use of a foreign language.

Now literature in indigenous language is that literature written in the people's native language or mother tongue. Obviously, literature in indigenous language is literature that is rooted in the people's culture. The literary artists usually carefully articulate various aspects of the people's culture into the genres of literature. The artists articulate themes that will focus on fundamental principles of life that will enable the children imbibe good behaviours. In discussing in this direction, Ezikeojiaku (47) notes that;

Any literature worthy of its name ought to be written in the society's language, for a proper creative assessment of the work. Literature does not exist in a vacuum; it is imaginative work of art embodying ideas significant to the culture that produces it.

Ezikeojiaku therefore upholds that literature in indigenous language is an embodiment of aspects of people's culture. Because it is natural to think more creatively in one's mother tongue (L1)

than in a second language (L2), the literary writers using indigenous language such as Igbo always chooses themes and topics that will instill in the children at primary school age how to form desirable character. This is where the foundation for nation building is laid. Good literary artists consider their target audience; that is the group of people the work is meant for. As such at primary level, literature in indigenous language contains the ideas that will help the children at this level to develop properly in the right direction. For example, the literary work at this level will lead the children to learn that if one do good, he/she will get good reward and if one do evil, he/she will be rewarded with evil. With this idea, the children will always intend to behave well in order to attract good reward.

### **3.0 Brief Survey of the Present Situation:**

Nigeria is still grappling with the problem of indiscipline especially among the children and youths. This problem has so escalated that the government both past and present have continually tried to work out modalities for curbing indiscipline both in our educational institutions and in the entire society. All the measures so far used have almost proved abortive.

The policies of effective teaching of literature in indigenous language as a core subject in school have not actually been in use. And that is a serious error and it must be corrected if actually the issues of children and youths indiscipline in schools and in the wider society will be controlled. Presently in the school curriculum, literature in indigenous has not been given a place of its own as a subject. It is embodied in Igbo language. This means that the Igbo

language teacher shares the time allotted for Igbo language between:

- (1) Igbo Grammar (Utoasusu)
- (2) Igbo Custom and institution (Omenala) and
- (3) Literature in Igbo language (Agumagu) which comprises of Igbo folktales

and fables, riddles, proverbs, Igbo songs and poems, Igbo prose fiction and Igbo drama. Literature in indigenous language is so encompassing and as such it has to be treated as a subject of its own if actually we want to harness it and see its wonderful impact in pupil's lives right from the primary level of education.

Obviously, during the little period of literature in Igbo language in the school time- table for example, the teachers see it as a free period when they will do "other important things" due to lack of knowledge of the vital role of the subject to the lives of the children in primary school level. Teachers usually tell the children to go outside under a tree and tell stories which the teacher will not even be there to supervise. She of course will go to meet her colleagues and tell their own stories all through the period of literature in Igbo language. And his continues all through the term. I am just speaking from personal experience because this method has just been in use since. The pupils are happy with going to tell stories outside under a tree because they are still too young to know that the teacher is cheating them. The impact which literature in indigenous language; their mother tongue (I) suppose to create in the pupils' lives is not taking place. This is because the teachers don't know actually what he/she suppose to do during the subject period. So the teacher tries to maneuver his/her way by asking the pupils to go outside and tell stories which they will obviously prefer at the primary level. Okonkwo (116) notes that "literature at

this level sharpen the imagination and help to develop keen sense of observation...". It was a powerful means of educating the mind and imagination of the Igbo child in particular and all the children in general. The problem is that the teachers cannot give what they don't have. They were only teaching the same way they were taught.

Literatures in indigenous language suppose to be an interesting subject in the hand of a competent teacher. The text will be read by the teacher or the pupil. The story of what happened in the text will be narrated. Then the teacher will bring it home in a way the pupils will be touched emotionally. But the issue is that many Igbo teachers in our schools so to say cannot read Igbo language, and so he/she cannot read the recommended texts in the three areas of literary genres. If that is the case, he/she cannot do any other magic; rather than to shy away from the teaching of the subject.

Therefore if the governments actually want to adopt the policy of using literature in indigenous language as a subject of its own right from primary school level to check indiscipline and violence among children and youths, its actual teaching has to be monitored. To adopt a policy is one thing and its actual application is another. If competent teachers handle the subject effectively it will bring a remarkable change in the lives of the pupils and this will in turn bring about nation building.

#### **4.0 The Relevance of literature in indigenous language as a core subject in primary school:**

Written literature in indigenous language such as Igbo is modern and contemporary literature authored by individual literary artist

through the medium of writing. The genres comprises prose, drama and poetry. As already pointed above, literature in any indigenous language is very broad. For example, literature in Igbo language comprise Igbo folktales and fables, riddles, proverbs, Igbo songs and poems, Igbo fictions and Igbo drama. It is really so vast and cannot be housed under Igbo language, which also have its own branches. Literature in Igbo language has not been playing the vital role it suppose to play because adequate attention which it deserves has not been given to it by the curriculum planners.

Literature (be it Igbo or English) suppose to be given adequate attention in the school curriculum for its numerous functions and impacts in the pupils and the entire society. Our focus in this study is applying the policy of effective teaching of written literature in indigenous language as Igbo in the areas of the genres of prose, drama and poetry for nation building. The paper advocates that if these literary works be properly harnessed as a subject of its own in our primary schools without housing it under Igbo language, it will play vital role in character and behavioural training of the primary school pupils which will in turn prepare them for nation building.

Literature as a subject right from primary school offers training in logical and critical reasoning. It also sharpen the imagination and also help to develop sense of observation in the children. The people's culture which has to do with human value are carefully articulated in the genres of literature by the literary artist. This implies that as the children are reading these genres be it prose, drama or poetry, they are studying their language and culture. That is to say that language and culture can be well taught through literature. Oku (128) quoting Ogbalu notes that;

In literature, language, culture and human values merge. The study of language through literature is ideal and it is hoped that the Ethics of the people which is usually embedded in the literature will provide the children with sustaining human values to guide them in lives and realizes themselves.

Literature, in other words increases the knowledge of the learner. This is because the learner will be expose to various experiences through literature in indigenous language. The children will have better understanding of the whole lesson since the literature is in their mother tongue (L1). The various experiences will elicit different emotional feelings.

Mckeon (1380) notes that;

Emotions are all those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgments, and that are also attended by pain or pleasures. Such are anger, pity, fear and the like with their opposites.

These enable the children to extend their sympathy and empathy. They will learn to put themselves in the position of the characters they see in the stories they read.

Ubahakwe (158) upholds this view as he asserts that literature “offers individual insight to values different from those he has acquired in his immediate environment through his own culture. This inculcates in the pupils an enhanced moral sensitivity thereby enhancing pupils knowledge and understanding of human

behaviour". Mckeon (1388) observes that literature posses the quality of providing instructions to the learners by way of providing second hand or substitute experience which will help the pupils to change or drop a negative behaviour. That is to say that literature has a purging effect on the learners when handled in the class by a competent teacher.

All these assertions are pointers that literature in indigenous language such as Igbo will play vital role in the character development of the children. However, this can be achieved in the hand of competent teachers who are vast in Igbo language and literature. Such teachers will be able to read the text, drill the pupils in pronouncing difficult words, and then analyse the text by letting the pupils know what the text is talking about especially in the case of short story or novel and drama.

Now let us use Okeke's *Aka Aja Aja* and *Okosisi*, which are a typical primary school pupils novels and see examples of typical literature teaching model in primary school.

In *Aka Aja Aja*, the story centered on a boy called Nwangwu, who lost his parents when he was a small boy. He hailed from Ikere. As this boy was growing, he did not allow his being an orphan to stop him from becoming what God planned for him to be. The boy, Nwangwu was very industrious. He learnt how to make basket and can make up to five a day. He was making a lot of money from his basket sales. As he was growing, he keep hearing of the story of his relation, John who struggled a lot to go to school and he is now living abroad. On hearing these stories about John, Nwangwu wishes to see John. Eventually, John who is now working at abroad comes home. He was so handsome and neat. Nwangwu wishes

that John will allow him to go back to America with him. When John wanted to go back, having heard a very pathetic story of Nwangwu, he allow him to go back to America with him to start school there because Nwangwu is a very good boy.

In the second novel titled *Okosis*, the author Okeke told a story about a man called Mgbike who hailed from a town called Uzoba. Mgbike was intimidating his people, acting as if their lives are in his hand. Whoever tries to disagree with his opinion, he kills that person. He fought tirelessly with people that want to plant church in his town, Uzoba. When Mgbike became old, he wanted to hand over the throne to his son, Ikeobi. Ikeobi, who embrace Jesus Christ refused. Later Mgbike became very sick and eventually died. This shows that the devil can never be more powerful than God.

The teacher will help the children to understand that the message of this novel to them is that God, as the creator and possessor of heaven and earth is ultimate in power. That according to Daniel 11:32b (1250) "those that know their God shall be strong and do exploits." If the children grow with this type of mind-set, they will definitely be useful and responsible members of the society who will help in nation building. The teacher can still give the explanation of difficult words and ask the pupils to read the passage for the day.

Obviously, the children will learn a lot of lessons from these stories and other similar ones. They will also have emotional feelings of sympathy and empathy. The teacher will ask the pupils to say the lessons they learnt one after the other. These important lessons transmitted through literature helps the children in inculcating the virtues of being industrious and that of living a moral life both in

school and in the wider society. The children will have consciousness of God and will not do evils. The pupils will also be encouraged to read the text on their own at home. Many of them will enjoy to read it because they will wish to get the full story since the teacher have summarised the texts. In order to make the pupils read the texts, the teacher can ask questions that covers where he/she will prompt them to do in-depth reading at home before answering the questions as the ones that follows:

Ajuju

1. Gini bu aha nna Nwangwu?
2. Kedu aha obodo Nwangwu?
3. Gini bu aha nne ya?
4. Kedu oria nna ya rara wee nwuo?
5. Umu ole ka nne Nwangwu mutara?

With these type of questions from the texts the children will be motivated to read the texts for them to be able to answer the questions.

Also in the area of Igbo poetry, in Ofomata's *Ibisi*, an Igbo poetry book which contains many children poems for early primary level. One of the poems is titled "Omume Oma" (Good behavior) and it goes as follows:

"Omume Oma" (good behavior)  
Uzo e si ekute mmiri onunu  
Ugwo na-akwu onwe ya  
Anyana-ahu ihe  
Ekele na-eju abo  
Nwaanyi omumu zuru ahu  
Ogaranya anu juru akpa  
Osisi nwere mbaraka  
Mee ya

Ka mma zuo gi ahu.

(The way to fetch drinking water  
Payment that pays itself  
The eye that see something  
Greetings that fill basket  
Woman that bear children all over  
Her body  
The rich that have his bag full of meat  
Tree that has branches  
Do it  
For beauty to be all over your body.)

This is a typical children's poem. It is so simple and only nine lines of poem; teaching the children on "Good behavior". In teaching the children this Igbo poem to make it play the role of literature, the teacher will first of all read the poem to the hearing of the pupils. He/she will explain words that the children might find difficult to understand.

The teacher explain the message the poem is passing across to them on good behaviour. That the poem is calling on them to behave well. And when one behaves well beauty will be all over him/her. From the poem, the teacher can draw questions which he/she will tell the pupils to take home and answer as home assignment as follows"

Site n'abu a zaa ajuju ndia:

1. Kedu uzo e si ekute mmiri onunu?
2. Gini bu ugwo na-akwu onwe ya?

3. Omume oma bu.....na-eju abo
4. Omume oma bu.....omumu zuru ahu
5. Gini ka omume oma ga-ebutere mmadu?

In striving to answer these questions, the message of the poem will be clearer to the pupils. Their tendency will be to behave well so that beauty will be all over them which is the main message of the poem. Obviously, everybody want to be beautiful or handsome as the case may be.

Let us still look at the second poem titled “Mmekorita” (Relationship) and it reads as follows:

Metu m ahu  
Ka m bitu gi aka  
Chiara m ochi  
Ka m gosi gi eze m  
Kwuoro m okwu  
Ka m kooro gi akuko  
Konye m aka  
Ka aka m makuo gi  
Mmekorita  
Bu mkpakorita na nnokorita

(Touch me with your body  
And I will touch you with hand  
Laugh for me  
And I will show you my teeth  
Talk to me  
And I will tell you story...  
Put your hand on my neck  
And I will embrace you  
Relationship

Brings conversation and staying together.)

Here, in teaching this poem to the pupils, the teacher will first of all read it while the children listen attentively. He/she will give the necessary explanations. The teacher will try to find out whether the pupils can make effort to read the poem. He/she will thereafter give the summary of the poem and the main message the poet tend to pass across. The poem is teaching on the need to relate well with fellow human beings. Let the pupil know that relating well does not end only in our homes. That they need to maintain good relationship wherever they find themselves both in the classroom and outside the classroom. That good relationship lead to love and remove hatred. This point is very important at this period of primary level. Presently, there is lack of genuine love among the members of the society due to absent of this type of teaching. Many families are under pressure that there is no room to relate among themselves at home. It means that children from such families will only learn to relate in the school as the poem is teaching. The teacher will further ask the children to say the lessons they learnt from the poem. The teacher can as well decide to ask the pupils questions they will answer in the class orally or the ones they will take home.

If the primary school teachers handle their literature classes this way, its effect in the lives of the pupils will be so glaring. They will always tend to emulate the positive characters and behaviour they see in the texts they study. One observes that literature can say to be the expression of the whole man. In literature more than any other subject, man meet themselves face to face. It is also through literature that the children learn to relate among themselves, express themselves and examine thoughts. However, the major problem challenging literature in indigenous language

such as Igbo as a school subject in primary school level is lack of dedicated and competent Igbo teachers and that of housing Igbo literature under Igbo language. As a result, adequate time and attention is not given to the all important subject in Primary school.

### **5.0 Summary And Conclusion:**

One outstanding finding in this research is that literature in Igbo language which is known to be very broad is embodied in Igbo language. As a result of that adequate time and attention are not directed to the teaching of literature in primary school. Also in addition to this, the same teacher who teaches other branches of Igbo language such as Grammar is meant to teach Igbo custom and belief as well as literature in Igbo language. I see this as an error. It is just like not doing literature at all as a subject. One also observes that another problem challenging the subject is lack of competent and dedicated teachers to handle the subject.

It is also observed that for literature in indigenous language to play its vital role of character training in the lives of the pupils, careful teaching model have to be adopted. This will make the subject interesting to the children and thereby it will affect their lives as literature is said to have a purging effect on the learners. All these problems of kidnapps and ungodly killings in our country is because we are not teaching literature the way it will affect and influence the lives of the children right from primary school. The children grow up with wrong mind-set and lack of emotional feelings. As they grow in these wrong direction and enter secondary school and universities, they mis-place their priority wasting their precious time browsing both day and night on irrelevant things that will eventually waste their lives in internet.

In conclusion, since literature in indigenous language such as Igbo as a subject in primary school is very broad and comprise many branches, it will be treated as a subject of its own in the primary school curriculum. This will allow it to play its vital role in the lives of the children.

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