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**DIRECTING AND MAKING VIABILITY CHILDREN'S  
LITERATURE FOR NIGERIA'S NATIONAL  
TRANSFORMATION**

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**Abstract**

*The greatness of any nation is highly dependent on the ability of that nation to cultivate a policy that would bring about an enduring legacy for her children who are often regarded as the leaders of tomorrow. Based on the above, this study investigated the ways of making viability children's literature to make it capable of fostering national transformation as stipulated in Nigeria's transformation agenda. Three research questions guided this study. The study employed descriptive survey research design. The population of the study consists 397 primary school English language teacher who have degree in English education. Due to the manageable size of the population, the entire population formed the sample for the study. The instrument for data collection was a thirty-five-item questionnaire measuring ways of redirecting children's literature for national transformation. The instrument was face validated by three specialists in English Education in the Faculty of Education, Ebonyi state*

university Abakaliki. The suggestions of the specialists were incorporated in the final version of the instrument. The data obtained from the instrument were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The results showed that children's literature is very minimally utilized in Nigerian primary schools. The problems militating against its utilization include de-emphasis of literature in the primary school curriculum, dearth of indigenous story books in primary school libraries, where they exist, and poor reading culture, among others. Results of the study also showed that items on ways of making children's literature viable were accepted by the respondents. In line the findings of the study, recommendations were made among which is that writers of children literatures should be encouraged to always write on issues of national transformation so that children will be better informed.

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## Introduction

Giving children access to all varieties of literature is extremely important for their success. Educators, parents, and community members should help children develop a love and passion for reading. Not only is reading literature important in developing cognitive skills to be able to succeed in a school or work setting, but it is valuable for other reasons as well. Although there are countless values in exposing children to literature, Norton (2010) identifies the value of literature for young people in her book *Through the Eyes of a Child*. Children's literature is important because it provides children with opportunities to respond to literature; it gives children appreciation about their own cultural heritage as well as those of others; it helps children develop emotional intelligence and creativity; it nurtures growth and development of the student's personality and social skills; and it transmits important literature and themes from one generation to the next.

The first value to note is that children's literature provides children with the opportunity to respond to literature and develop their own opinions about the topic. This strengthens the cognitive developmental domain as it encourages deeper thought about literature. Quality literature does not tell the reader everything he/she needs to know; it allows for some difference in opinion. One reader may take something completely different away from the piece of literature than the next reader, based on the two personal viewpoints and experiences. Children can learn to evaluate and analyze literature, as well as summarize and hypothesize about the topic. Norton says that for children, "wordless picture books are excellent stimuli for oral and written language" (2010, p. 9). Children reading wordless books like *A Ball for Daisy* (Raschka, 2011), *The Yellow Umbrella* (Liu, 1987), or *The Red Book* (Lehmann, 2004) will be able to analyze the illustrations and develop their own dialogue for the story. This strengthens children's cognitive functions in being able to form opinions on their own and to express themselves through language in summarizing the plot of a wordless book.

Children's literature provides an avenue for children to learn about their own cultural heritage and the cultures of other people. It is crucial for children to learn these values because, "developing positive attitudes toward our own culture and the cultures of others is necessary for both social and personal development" (Norton, 2010). There are many stories, some folktales, which contain blatant stereotypes and inaccuracies about certain cultural groups. This includes books such as *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* (Jeffers, 1991), or *The Rough-Face Girl* (Martin, 1992). Both of these stories depict Native Americans in a misguided way and contain misinterpretations of what actually occurred in history.

Children's literature helps children develop emotional intelligence. Stories have the power to promote emotional and moral development. Children's literature "contains numerous moments of crisis, when characters make moral decisions and contemplate the reasons for their decisions," an important skill for children to see modeled (Norton, 2010, p. 34). *GujiGuji* (Chen, 2004), for example, is a story about a crocodile who is adopted into a family of ducks. Ultimately, he must choose between betraying his adopted family and going back to his own "species,"

and he decides to remain true to his beliefs and not betray his family. *The Scar* (Moundlic, 2007) is an effective book to read with children in order to teach them about responding to grief, as it is about a boy whose mother dies. This requires a complex level of emotional intelligence, as many young children do not understand death. The topic of death would be more appropriate for an older grade level, but it is an important topic to discuss with children. Another book that encourages emotional intelligence is *Selma* (Bauer, 2002), which discusses what it takes for a young sheep to be happy. It is a philosophical story within a picture book, and challenges children to think about what happiness really is. *The Big Box* (Morrison, 1999) is a story about children who have their freedom taken away by being put into a box and the deeper problems that exist with not being given one's freedom. Children's literature encourages children to think deeper about their own feelings.

Children's literature also encourages creativity. Norton stresses "the role that literature plays in nurturing and expanding the imagination" (2010, p. 4). *The House in the Night* (Swanson, 2008) depicts the creativity that a young girl has in her dreams at night, as she flies about the dark neighborhood on the wings of a bird. Children's literature is of value because it fosters personality and social development. Children are very impressionable during the formative years, and children's literature can help them develop into caring, intelligent, and friendly people. Developmental psychologist Jean Piaget says that when children move from the pre-operational to the operational stage of cognitive development, they become less egocentric. Whereas children in preschool and kindergarten may be entirely focused on themselves, as children grow older they begin to take into account the feelings and viewpoints of others. Being able to understand other people's viewpoints and to not be selfish are important skills that adults must nurture in children, as Norton says that "acceptable relationships require an understanding of the feelings and viewpoints of others" (2010, p. 27).

Children's literature can foster social development by encouraging children to accept other people and their differences. Books like *And Tango Makes Three* (Parnell & Richardson, 2005), *Molly's Family* (Garden, 2004), *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Newman & Souza, 1989) and *Daddy's Roommate* (Wilhoite, 2000) present situations that might encourage children to become more open-minded to different types of families and understand that love is the most important thing in a family. Children's literature can also encourage children to develop relationships with people, encouraging social contact. An atypical friendship is depicted in *Loop the Loop* (Dugan, 1992), where a young child and an elderly person become good friends and share the common joy of playing with yo-yo's. In *A Couple of Boys Have the Best Week Ever* (Frazee, 2008), the boys learn to think of the needs of others when they build a diorama for the grandpa who is fascinated with penguins. Literature encourages children to be considerate and friendly people, and these traits may be consistent with developing children into quality citizens. Finally, children's literature is of value because it is a timeless tradition, one in which "books are the major means of transmitting our literary heritage from one generation to the next" (Norton, 2010, p. 3). Classic stories like Dr. Seuss' *And to Think That I Heard it on Mulberry Street* (Geisel, 1989) and *The Cat in the Hat* (Geisel, 1957) are important books to read to children because of their literary heritage. Children's literature is extremely valuable in both the school setting and at home. Teachers and parents should both be able to differentiate between quality and mediocre literature, in order to give children access to the best books to encourage these important values of literature and considering developmental domains. Children's literature is valuable in providing an opportunity to respond to literature, as well as cultural knowledge, emotional intelligence and creativity, social and personality development, and literature history to children across generations. Exposing children to quality literature can contribute to the creation of responsible, successful, and caring individuals.

Considering the importance of children's literature, it could bring about Nigeria's national transformation which involves total or complete change usually from an undesirable state of affairs to a desirable one. Transformation

should not be seen only from the perspective of total overhaul of infrastructures like roads, hospitals, schools or industries. It goes beyond that to involve the total change of a human person from ignorance to awareness or illiteracy to education. In Nigeria, transformation is needed in the area of reading culture, morality and values, appreciation of cultural diversity, politics, economy and the general world view. Mohammad (2013) agrees that children's literature is integral to the transformation of a nation. The potency of children's literature to transform a nation is probably anchored on its roles and benefits. Njemanze (2010) argues that a better way of achieving national integration is by using children's literature to expose children to their environment. Children are exposed to situations like gentleness, compassion, patience, beauty, forgiveness, hope, love, wisdom and other social values which they imbibe and utilize in their life time. Still on the values of children's literature, Mohammad (2013) states that exposure of children to children's literature is germane to their personal development. Personal development begets deep sense of responsibility, thereby engendering national orientation, consciousness and patriotism, which are vital indices for peaceful co-existence and development. The advocacy for the utilization of children's literature is linked to the Social Learning Theory propounded by Albert Bandura. One of the key elements of this theory is that children learn a lot through imitation and modeling (Bandura 1977). At this malleable age they look up to people – parents, teachers and in fact literature books – for right or correct ways of behaving. If the right model is presented to them, there is greater likelihood that they will learn correct behaviour. In other words, literature meant for children should be subject to scrutiny. Varga-Dobai and Wilson (2008) aver that children's books are complex cultural products that authorize certain values and discriminate against others and thus the messages they create and transmit should be examined critically so that as models they would be able to present acceptable patterns of behaviour to children. Thus, character moulding should be the cardinal objective of children's literature. In doing this the entertainment function of literature should be carefully exploited. Children's literature should mold character using stories that entertain and build literacy skills. For instance, Nigeria is faced with diverse national disaster which ranges from Religious riots between Christians and Muslims, farmer-herder crisis, Fulani herdsmen attack, Boko Haram attack, militancy, political crisis, flooding, desertification, poverty and greed. Important as the values of children's literature seem, they can be used to convey these messages and possible ways of harnessing them, including the roles expected of children in national transformation to children. These have not been felt in most children's literature in Nigeria.

Many challenges militate against harnessing the benefits of children's literature for Nigeria's national transformation. These, according to Mohammad (2013) include poor reading culture, non-availability of literacy reading materials, non-teaching of literature in many schools in Nigeria, non-availability of qualified literature teachers, and problem of demarcating between adult and children's literature. However, most of the views of writers on the values and extent of utilization of children's literature, as well as problems militating against harnessing its benefits, are at the level of opinions, not backed by empirical data. It is based on this backdrop that study paper seeks to find out ways of redirecting the viability of children's literature for national transformation in Nigeria.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by three research questions:

1. What are the roles of children's literature in transforming the viability of Nigeria?
2. What are the problems militating against the utilization of children's literature in transforming the viability of Nigeria?
3. What are the ways of redirecting the viability of children's literature for Nigeria's national transformation?

## Method

The study adopted the descriptive survey design. The population of the study consists 397 primary school English language teachers who have degree in English education. Due to the manageable size of the population, the entire population formed the sample for the study. The instrument for data collection was a thirty-five-item questionnaire. The questionnaire was constructed by the researcher with insights from literature. The questionnaire has three clusters; cluster A sought to find out the roles of children's literature in transforming the viability of Nigeria. It has 15 items. Cluster B and Cluster C have 10 items each. Respectively, they sought to find out the problems militating against the optimum utilization of children's literature and ways of repositioning children's literature for Nigeria's national transformation. The instrument was face validated by three specialists in English Education in the Faculty of Education, Ebonyi state university Abakaliki. The suggestions of the specialists were incorporated in the final version of the instrument. The data obtained from the instrument were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. Any item that had mean score of 2.50 and above was interpreted as 'agree', depending on the research question, while any that had a mean score less than 2.50 was interpreted as 'disagree'.

## Results

The results are presented in tables according to the research questions that guided the study.

### Research Question 1

What are the potential roles of children's literature in Nigeria's national transformation?

**Table 1: Mean and standard deviation of teachers' responses on the roles of children's literature in Nigeria's national transformation**

S/N	Item	Mean	Standard deviation	Decision
	Children's literature can be used to:			
1.	strengthens the cognitive development of children.	3.61	0.81	A
2.	Develop emotional intelligence of children.	3.52	1.11	A
3.	develops curiosity and creativity in children.	3.36	0.83	A
4.	nurtures growth and development of children's personality.	3.60	0.85	A
5.	develop children's social skills of tolerance, friendliness, respect, etc.	3.52	1.14	A
6.	sharpen children's power of imagination.	3.58	0.83	A
7.	transmits important values that build the spirit of patriotism in children.	3.36	0.93	A
8.	inculcate national consciousness to children.	3.76	0.74	A
9.	develop reading and comprehension skills in children.	3.76	0.92	A
10.	mould character and morality in children.	3.71	0.96	A
11.	It can be used in correcting prejudices and wrong notions about the nation.	3.74	1.15	A
12.	enhance socialization/positive peer relationship among children.	3.65	0.85	A
13.	promotes vocabulary development and language learning.	3.64	1.19	A

14.	develop learner autonomy.	3.56	1.19	A
15.	convey the responsibilities expected of children in transforming national development	3.69	0.82	A
	Cluster mean	3.50	0.88	A

The data presented in Table 1 reveal that all the items had mean ratings above the mean cut off point of 2.50 showing that the respondents agree to all the items in the questionnaire. In other words, they are of the opinion that children's literature can play viable roles in Nigeria's national transformation. The cluster means rating of 3.50 validate the opinions of the entire respondents.

### Research Question 2

What are the problems militating against the utilization of children's literature in Nigerian national transformation?

**Table 2: mean and standard deviation on problems militating against utilization of children's literature in transforming Nigeria**

S/N	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Decision
1.	Many children's literature books are not written in simple language that children can easily comprehend.	3.11	.94	A
2.	Poor reading culture among primary school children	3.80	.39	A
3.	Non-teaching of children's literature in many primary schools in Nigeria	3.91	.40	A
4.	Lack of qualified teachers of children's literature	1.99	.91	D
5.	Non-inclusion of children's literature books in the list of prescribed books	3.10	.78	A
6.	Dominance of children's literature books with foreign orientation, where they are available	2.57	.84	A
7.	Inability of primary school pupils to read	3.65	.36	A
8.	Over crowded curriculum	2.81	.31	A
9.	Lack of libraries in primary schools with good stock of children's literature	2.83	.76	A
10.	Most publishers are interested in publishing textbooks, not story books.	2.63	.82	A
	Cluster mean	2.92	.71	A

Data in Table 2 indicate that respondents agree that out of the ten items on problems militating against the optimum utilization of children's literature in primary schools in Nigeria for national transformation only item 4 has mean rating below the mean cut off point of 2.50. Items 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 have mean scores above the criterion mean of 2.50 respectively. Based on the cluster mean score of 2.92 it can be inferred that the items constitute problems militating against effective utilization of children's literature in transforming the viability of Nigeria.

**Research Question 3**

What are the ways of repositioning the utilization of children's literature for Nigeria's national transformation?

**Table 3: Ways of repositioning the utilization of children's literature for Nigeria's national transformation**

S/N	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Decision
1.	Teaching of children's literature as an aspect of English language in primary schools.	2.81	.63	A
2.	Training and re-training of teachers on the utilization of children's literature in lesson delivery.	2.93	.71	A
3.	Equipping primary schools with a variety of children's literature books.	3.18	.32	A
4.	Introduction of children's literary clubs in schools.	3.03	.61	A
5.	Introduction of children's literary festivals in schools.	3.39	.23	A
6.	Development of children's literature books that will suit the different ages and language abilities of children.	2.79	.55	A
7.	Encouraging authors and publishers of children's literature through provision of awards and necessary incentives.	2.61	.76	A
8.	Intensifying efforts on teaching reading in primary schools.	2.96	.51	A
9.	Writing of children's literature books that pass on Nigeria's cherished values.	2.58	.61	A
10.	Writing of children's literature books that x-ray the social ills in Nigeria and their negative effects, with suggestions for possible ways of ameliorating the problems.	2.68	.43	A
	Cluster mean	<b>2.89</b>	<b>.51</b>	

Data presented in Table 3 show that the respondents agree that all the items are ways of repositioning children's literature for Nigeria's national transformation. They have cluster mean scores 2.89 which is above the mean cut off point of 2.50. This shows that teachers agreed that these issues raised can help to harness the problems.

**Discussion**

The study found out that children's literature has many roles to play in Nigeria's national transformation. These includes strengthen the cognitive development of children; help children develop emotional intelligence, curiosity and creativity. Children's literature can also nurture the growth and development of children's personality and social skills of tolerance, friendliness and respect. It can sharpen children's power of imagination and can be used to transmit values that build the spirit of patriotism. Apart from being a source of inspiration, it is useful in the development of reading and comprehension skills. Children's literature also helps in socialization, character moulding and correction of prejudices. It helps in the promotion of vocabulary development and language

learning. In addition to being capable of helping children gain autonomy in language learning, children's literature has the potential of broadening children's outlook on life. These findings are in line with Njemanze (2010), Norton and Norton (2010) and Mohammad (2013). These researchers pointed out that children's literature has useful roles to play in engendering national orientation, consciousness and patriotism since it exposes children to their environment and makes them appreciate their culture and those of others.

This study further found out that some problems militate against the utilization of children's literature in primary schools in Nigeria. These problems include that many children's literature books are written in language that is not simple for the children to comprehend, poor reading culture, non-teaching of children's literature in many primary schools, non-inclusion of children's literature books in the list of prescribed books and dominance of children's literature books with foreign orientation. Others include over-crowded curriculum, lack of libraries with good stock of children's literature, and interest by publishers in publishing textbooks instead of story books. These findings corroborate the views of Mohammad (2013) that poor reading culture, non-availability of literary teaching materials, non-teaching of literature in many primary and secondary schools in Nigeria, among other factors, are the challenges that militate against harnessing the benefits of children's literature for Nigeria's national transformation. However, it was found out that lack of qualified teachers of children's literature and inability of primary school pupils to read, were not challenges militating against the utilization of children's literature. This could be as a result of the fact that children's literature is not in the curriculum and many children do not have access to them. Also, most primary school teachers have the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE), the basic qualification for teaching in primary schools. Again, since literature books are not available in the primary schools, it may not be correct to say that children cannot read them.

Many ways of redirecting the viability of children's literature were also found out. These include teaching children's literature as an aspect of English language in primary schools, training and retraining of teachers on how to utilize children's literature in lesson delivery, equipping primary schools with a variety of children's literature books, introduction of children's literary clubs and festivals in schools and development of literature books suitable for different ages of children. Others include intensifying efforts at teaching reading in primary schools, writing of children's literature books that pass on Nigeria's cherished values, as well as writing those that x-ray Nigeria's social ills and their consequences. Some of these findings agree with the recommendations of Mohammad (2013) that there should be legislation that would ensure the teaching and learning of national literature in all Nigerian schools, and that the first lady should create a biannual children's literary festival with prizes for best children's texts, reading and acting.

## **Conclusions**

Based on the findings of this study, it is hereby concluded that children's literature has potential roles to play in Nigeria's national transformation and there are problems militating against the utilization of children's literature for national transformation, some of which includes non-teaching of children's literature and the unavailability of school libraries where enough children's literature books should be kept for reading by children. In spite of these problems, there are many ways in which children's literature can be redirected for Nigeria's national transformation. Some of these ways include teaching children's literature as a part of English language, equipment of school libraries with children's books and the institution of literary clubs and festivals in schools.



## Recommendations

In line with the findings of the study, it is hereby recommended that:

1. Writers of children literatures should be encouraged to always write on issues of national transformation so that children will be informed.
2. The curriculum of primary schools should be reviewed in order to incorporate children's literature as a component of the English language curriculum.
3. Encouragement should be given to authors of children's literature, especially indigenous ones. Prizes should be given to children's books that are unique in imparting cherished values and x-raying the ills of the society for ridicule.
4. Literary clubs and festivals should be instituted in schools as a way of encouraging children to read and harness the benefits of children's literature.
5. Parents and guardians should be encouraged to complement the efforts of the school by purchasing children's literature books for their children and wards and encouraging them to appreciate the contents and messages in them.

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