

CRITICAL LITERACY SKILLS IN ELEMENTARY EDUCATION FOR AFRICAN'S SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Oluwatoyin A. ODELEYE

Department of Primary Education

Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo, Nigeria

Odeleye.oluwatoyin1811@fcesoyo.edu.ng; todeleye@gmail.com;

Abstract

Critical literacy skills are imperative for the overall development of the elementary school learner in the 21st century. These skills incorporate analytical thinking, empathy, and the ability to question the rationale for the status quo. Through critical literacy, pupils can respond intelligently to various kinds of information that develop around them, processing them for their own personal growth and that of the society in which they live. For critical literacy skills to thrive, the classroom should be able to provide an environment for the children to optimize their individualities as they inculcate creative thinking and questioning skills. With sustained motivation from school proprietors, administrators, teachers, governments, and other stakeholders, elementary school children may become the drivers of Africa's attainment of sustainable development goal number 4. To help African children to catch up with their peers in the global space, this paper suggests that teachers need to regularly update their knowledge and imbibe 21st-century teaching and learning skills, so they can effectively teach the children cutting-edge proficiencies. Suggestions are also made for activities that teachers could use to help young learners develop critical literacy skills.

Keywords: Critical literacy skills, Elementary education, Sustainable development

Introduction

Literacy is an essential aspect of elementary education, indeed, every aspect of education, because it helps an individual to gather information and gain knowledge. Much emphasis is placed on literacy at the elementary level because it is the bedrock of educational foundation. Many international organisations like the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) now known as United Nations Children's Fund, put in a lot of effort to ensure that quality literacy education is provided for children worldwide. A lot of progress has been made by these organisations but despite the great progress made in literacy worldwide, at least 771 million young people and adults still cannot read and write, and 250 million children are failing to acquire basic literacy skills (UNESCO, 2022). The effect of covid-19 pandemic may have caused an increase in these figures. Literacy plays an important

role in an individual's life and society. Having literacy skills does not benefit the reader only, but everyone within the community regardless of age, race, gender, or background.

As essential as literacy and its skills are, UNESCO (2022) affirms that literacy has gone beyond the traditional concept of reading and writing skills and it is now conceived as a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication. Literacy has become a continuum of learning and proficiency in reading, writing and using numbers throughout life and is part of a larger set of skills, including education for sustainable development. Though literacy skills may be the focus in language, they are equally necessary and cut across other subject areas like Mathematics, Science, Art, Music, and so on.

Elementary education, also known as primary education, is the first stage traditionally found in formal education. In Nigeria, the 2014 National Policy on Education categorized basic education to cover early childcare and development education (daycare), pre-primary education, primary and junior secondary education (Future Learn, 2021, Odeleye, 2010). Therefore, primary education is captured under basic education and the age range of children at this level of education is between 6 to 12 years of age. Primary education is the bedrock of any formal education. It is the foundation on which other educational levels are built, that is, it is the building block for other levels of education. It is therefore important for it to be of topmost quality. In a broader context, primary education is also a stage to inculcate critical literacy skills into pupils. This can be built up by consistently familiarising pupils with literacy in elementary school.

The process of all aspects of literacy starts with reading skills and they are critical to eventual success for most students. These skills form the foundation for all other learning. In the 21st century, however, it is no longer enough to be able to read and write, there is a need to interact with the text, by analysing, interpreting, understanding and making links between what is written and what is being read. This is known as critical literacy. Jones (2006 in Norris, Lucas, and Prudhoe, 2012) compared critical literacy to a pair of eyeglasses that allows one to see beyond the familiar and comfortable. Norris et al (2012) posit that critical literacy encourages readers to question, explore, or challenge the power relationships that exist between authors and readers. Critical literacy is a person's ability to critique a text and view it from various angles or through different lenses. Being critically literate is about asking and understanding the 'why' of a text or why an author did something (Green, 2021).

For any meaningful development to occur in a nation, education plays a vital role. Education is crucial for social transformation and sustainable development. According to Ezekwesili (2022), primary school enrolment in sub-Saharan Africa has reached an astounding 99.9%. This implies that international programmes like the millennium development goals (SDGs) and education for all (EFA) put in place by United Nations and other international organisations have yielded great results. Unfortunately, access to education alone has not guaranteed that children are learning or getting quality education in schools. Ezekwesili (2022) further reveals that nine in ten children in Africa cannot read and comprehend by the age of 10, a phenomenon she referred to as 'learning poverty'. Winthrop (2022) affirms that children in Africa find it difficult to master basic literacy and numeracy skills which are vital for success in every educational endeavour. It is almost impossible to explore and master various curricular subjects without strong reading abilities. Citing UNESCO's recent Global Education Monitoring Report, Winthrop (2022) posits that only 18 percent of all primary school-age children in sub-Saharan Africa are proficient in reading. With these statistics, little wonder that Africa struggles with development and sustainability.

Development is a desirable phenomenon in every society, more importantly, such developments need to be sustained. United Nations General Assembly, (1987 in Tomislav, 2018), defines sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Tomislav (2018) views the concept of sustainable development as one based on three other concepts namely, concept of development (socio-economic development in line with ecological constraints), the concept of needs (redistribution of resources to ensure the quality of life for all) and the concept of future generations (the possibility of long-term usage of resources to ensure the necessary quality of life for future generations). Tomislav gives an explicit description of sustainable development thus:

The essence of the concept of sustainable development derives from the Triple bottom line concept, which implies the balance between three pillars of sustainability – environmental sustainability focused on maintaining the quality of the environment which is necessary for conducting the economic activities and quality of life of people, social sustainability which strives to ensure human rights and equality, preservation of cultural identity, respect for cultural diversity, race and religion, and economic sustainability

necessary to maintain the natural, social and human capital required for income and living standards (p.68).

To maintain the quality of the environment that would result in the quality of life of the people, preservation of cultural identity and economic sustainability necessary to maintain the natural, social and human capital required for the living standards, critical literacy is required.

Literacy is the foundational base of education. By the age of 10, a child in school should be able to read and have the foundational skills necessary for further learning and the development of advanced skills that would promote sustainable development. Without these basic skills, many African children are unprepared for the learning that comes next and thus are not guaranteed the ability to meaningfully learn in secondary or any further education (Ezekwesili, 2022; Odeleye, 2016). This paper, therefore, posits that not only should importance be placed on quality education with an emphasis on literacy and numeracy skills, but there is an urgent need to develop critical literacy skills in elementary education for Africa's sustainable development.

Concept of Critical Literacy

Critical literacy practices were made popular by Brazilian educator and theorist Paulo Freire. His work in the late 1940s focused on critical consciousness and critical pedagogy. Freire's work included the notion that literacy education should highlight the critical consciousness of learners (Vasquez, 2017). According to Vasquez (2017), Freire and his colleague Macedo popularised the concept that reading is not just about decoding words, but exposure to words simultaneously exposes you to the world. In other words, as you read the words, you read the world.

Various theoretical views and perspectives have influenced the definitions of critical literacy. According to Vasquez (2016), critical literacy is "viewed as a concept, a framework, or perspective for teaching and learning, a way of being in the classroom, and a stance or attitude toward literacy work in schools." No matter the perspective of a theorist the goal of critical literacy remains the same- "understanding the relationship between texts, meaning-making and power to undertake transformative social action that contributes to the achievement of a more equitable social order" (Vasquez, 2016). In this paper, critical literacy shall be considered as a concept.

Critical literacy as a concept is a learning approach that expects pupils to interact with different texts and critically analyse and evaluate their meanings as they relate to several topics. It is

a reading and writing-based learning process that encourages pupils to accept, reject or reconstruct ideas presented in texts by authors (Tophat.com). Green (2021) describes critical literacy as a person's ability to deconstruct a text, pulling it apart to consider it from various angles. Critical literacy helps us as readers to avoid being misled, influenced, or persuaded by authors. To buttress this view, Green (2021) cited the example of journalists who may emphasise certain facts or deliberately omit others. Critical literacy means going beyond the written words and imagining the author's intentions, decisions, motives, contexts, and influences. To be critically literate, a pupil has to be detailed in his/her thoughts while interacting with a text and should be able to ask and understand 'why' an author did something (Peterson, 2018; Green, 2021).

Comber (2013) describes critical literacy as 'an evolving repertoire of analytical and interrogative practices that move between the micro features of texts and the macro conditions of institutions, focusing on how power relations operate through these practices'. An 'evolving repertoire' in Comber's definition denotes the fact that several other views and perspectives will unfold in the near future concerning the definition and practices of critical literacy. There is an unfolding of critical literacy in an ever-changing world. Though critical literacy skills are often considered in the context of reading, they are relevant to all types of texts created with the intention of sending a message from one individual to another (Green, 2021). Apart from encouraging pupils to question, explore, actively analyse the text and think critically, critical literacy also enables pupils to find ways to solve problems and challenge the relationships that exist between authors and readers (Rini, 2018; Norris et al, 2012).

Critical literacy is different from critical reading in that it introduces a connection between schooling, reading, and text understanding to democratic principles of society and transformative social action in the interest of the most vulnerable and oppressed communities (Blixen & Pannell, 2020). Critical literacy, however, does not operate outside of reading. Reading is a 'tool' subject in literacy and language development. It is a complex process that provides a bridge between speech and writing and gives the ability to construct meaning from written materials (Odeleye & Adetuyi, 2016). Several researchers (Odeleye & Adetuyi, 2016; Wagner, 2016) consider reading as one of the most important activities in the lives of pupils to develop vocabulary and acquire knowledge that is fundamental to intellectual growth. Odeleye & Adetuyi (2016) opined that a child's educational progress is hinged on the ability to read. The major level for learning to read and write is assumed to be elementary school, usually the early years. As important as reading is to literacy, however, it

has been discovered that the ability to read is no longer enough. There is a need to analyse, interpret, understand, and make links between what an individual reads and the world in which he or she exists. Therefore, the attention being given to literacy at the elementary level should be extended to critical literacy.

Critical Literacy in Elementary School

Having a deep discussion on the establishment and application of critical literacy for pupils in elementary schools has become an important phenomenon (Rini, 2018; Norris et al, 2012). It has become essential to examine and analyse the best practices that would work to introduce critical literacy for pupils in elementary schools. Exposing pupils to critical literacy skills at an early stage not only provides them with the ability to face the rapid development of technology and information but also encourages them to be active recipients of information, who always analyse and prove the validity of every piece of information they receive. Rini (2018) opines that critical literacy can be implemented simultaneously in the teaching and learning process as well as text-based learning. She further suggests that critical literacy should be implemented as early as possible, that is at the early stages of education, so as to have an intelligent and cultured nation. This implies that an intelligent and cultured nation would be made up of intelligent and cultured citizens who would gladly pursue sustainable development for their nation as well as the community they find themselves.

Literature (O'Brien, 2001; Vasquez, 2017) reveals that critical literacy work with younger children began in the 1990s, specifically with the work of Barbara Comber and Jenny O'Brien (1998) on creating spaces for critical literacy in an elementary school classroom, using newspaper and magazine advertisements. Vasquez (2017) further developed critical literacy with children in her work with children between ages three to five. Her work opened the field for exploration in settings involving very young children by using their inquiries about the world around them to question issues of social justice and equity, using every day as text (i.e., food packaging, media advertisements, popular culture), as well as children's literature. Methods used to teach critical literacy at the earlier stage in elementary school were critically reading and deconstructing texts. These were used to help students question versions of reality in the world around them (Vasquez, 2017). Janks (2010) noted that texts can be "deconstructed—unpicked, unmade, the positions produced for the reader laid bare" because texts are constructed word by word and image by image. This would help pupils

review and reconstruct texts from their own perspectives and understanding of written words, adverts, and images.

Critical literacy at the elementary level requires specific processing for effective implementation. The curriculum needs to be taken into consideration and the learning activities designed. Critical literacy activities at this level should be gradual and integrated into the teaching and learning process (Vasquez, 2017; Rini, 2018). To this end, Rini (2018) suggests that critical literacy at elementary schools be integrated with or separated from school educational programmes. She highlights the advantage of integrating critical literacy into the learning process; she opines that it would give pupils the opportunity to have direct interaction with different types of sources which would develop their critical thinking skills.

According to Rini (2018), some essential stages to develop critical literacy at the elementary school include but are not limited to:

1. *Critical Reading*: A major requirement in critical literacy is the ability to read. Reading is a process that requires an interaction between the reader, the author/text and the use of the reader's cognitive and metacognitive ability to decode and make meaning from the text read. Reading can be product-oriented (i.e. the text has meaning, as well as factors that determine meaning, in it) or process-oriented (i.e. meaning is derived as a result of interaction between the reader and the text) (Odeleye, 2018). Rini (2018) affirms that reading is a receptive language skill in the written language, and students would have to learn to use their schemata to build up a solid background in creating critical literacy by being dynamically involved in reading activities. The reading activity gives students new insight and knowledge. In line with reading, critical literacy implies that one is able to think about an author's intentions, decisions, and literary choices (Green, 2021).

The process of critical reading activity focuses on understanding explicit and implicit information with the ability to analyse, compare, and assess the content of the text. The process requires pupils to think critically, actively give responses to information received and avoid being passive with such information. These are the basic requirements for developing pupils' critical literacy skills (Rini, 2018).

2. *Critical Thinking*: Critical thinking is an ability to use complex thinking and reasoning skills. It is the process of thinking about ideas, issues and situations in order to fully comprehend them,

identify their implications, make a judgement, and guide decision making. Critical thinking includes skills such as questioning, predicting, analysing, synthesizing, examining opinions, identifying values and issues, detecting bias, and distinguishing between alternatives. Students are required to be active in analyzing and evaluating the facts of information to obtain or make some conclusion.

Critical thinking can be developed from the elementary ages in accordance with cognitive development of each child. According to Rini (2018), simple and sustainable critical thinking activities are based on the stages and portion of students' cognitive development. At primary school age, pupils think concretely and begin to develop their ability to associate events that occur in their lives. This ability is the main tool that supports the development of thinking skills in the cultivation of critical literacy (Rini, 2018).

Vasquez (2017) highlights some key aspects of critical literacy which may act as a guide to its implementation at the elementary school:

- i) Critical literacy should be a framework for teaching across the curriculum and not a topic to be covered or a unit to be studied.
- ii) Diverse pupils' cultural knowledge should be used to build the curriculum.
- iii) Critical literacy views the world as a socially constructed text that can be read. Pupils should therefore be introduced to this perspective early so that they are able to understand what it means to be researchers of language, images, spaces, and objects.
- iv) Critical literacy involves making sense of the sociopolitical systems through which we live our lives and questioning these systems. Critical literacy work at the elementary level should focus on social issues, such as race, class, gender, or disability, and the ways in which language is used to shape our understanding of these issues.
- v) Because texts are socially constructed and designed from particular perspectives, pupils should be taught to analyse their own readings of text and unpack the position(s) from which they engage in literacy work.

Introducing critical literacy at the elementary school will be beneficial to pupils as it enhances children's critical thinking and understanding of different perspectives. It allows children to be aware of problems within their community and around the world, exposing them to different cultures and difficult issues (Norris *et al.*, 2012). Straková and Cimermanová (2018) posit that critical reflection,

(which is a functional part of critical literacy), as a skill needs to be developed from the early years of schooling, as it appears to be an irreplaceable tool for understanding how people are conditioned and confined by the socio-cultural structures they operate in. It is important that the education given at the elementary level enables young people to read both the word and the world critically. Hopefully, this would help them grow into adults (administrators, politicians, teachers, etc.) that would critically read and write policies that would promote sustainable development within their communities and beyond.

Critical Literacy and Sustainable Development

The ability to read and write are core competencies that are central to lifelong learning and sustainable development. One of the major highlights of the 2006 Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2006), dedicated to the topic of literacy, is that literacy is crucial for economic, social, and political participation and development, and key to enhancing human capabilities, with wide-ranging benefits including critical thinking, improved health and family planning, HIV/AIDS prevention, children's education, poverty reduction, and active citizenship. Trudell et al (2012) affirm that there are multiple links between literacy and citizenship, cultural identity, socio-economic development, human rights, and equity. They further posit that wherever the goal of development is transformation among the population, literacy enables that population to understand, assess, and ultimately act on the new information and ideas given to them. There is therefore, no gainsaying the fact that literacy links closely to sustainable development as well.

Literacy is fundamental for meaningful development in a nation because it is an interconnection of several fields education, health, agriculture, and more (Literacy promotes people's ability and potential to take care of their needs and also contribute to development. Further, the ability to read, write and comprehend a text gives individuals the ability to understand their responsibilities and obligations in society as good citizens. The exercise of one's rights and duties in society as ingredients of sustainable development is implicit in their ability to read, write and have basic knowledge of the realities in their society. Literacy is a tool for sustainable development, and it is critical to the attainment of the 17-point Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). According to UNESCO (2022), literacy creates an enabling environment for sustainable development, enables greater participation in the labour market, improves child and family health and nutrition, reduces poverty, and expands life opportunities.

On the 25th of September, 2015, the United Nations launched a 17-point Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which is expected to yield results by the year 2030. Oghenekohwo and Frank-Oputu (2017) speculate that the SDGs were put in place due to the failure of most countries to achieve their set millennium development goals (MDGs) targets by 2015. Three main areas have been identified as needing sustainable development within a community or a nation. They are the economic, the social, and the environmental. Wagner (2016) identifies these areas as social sustainability, economic sustainability and environmental sustainability. He describes social sustainability, as maintaining the local and regional communities that could be torn asunder by the effects of environmental change. He referred to economic sustainability as the need to maintain a balance between natural resources and human consumption that can generate goods and services without degradation of the balance between the two, and without increasing global economic inequities. The third area, environmental sustainability, focuses on the limitations within the environment we live and how we can protect our planet (Wagner, 2016).

Critical literacy is crucial for sustainability solutions to the three areas identified as needing sustainability, and across all development sectors. There is an absolute need to comprehend the problems existing and needing solutions in the economic, social and environment of a community/nation. Solutions to be propounded and precisely executed must be thoroughly thought through. There is therefore need to make innovative advances to use critical literacy in elementary education as a means for the formidable transformations in sustainability in Nigeria and in Africa as a whole.

Conclusion

Developing critical literacy skills at the elementary level of education is a major step in the direction of attaining sustainable development in Africa. Critical literacy skills are not just connected to an individual's personal needs, they affect the needs and development of the whole society. This is because critical literacy possesses the potency required by society to maintain the quality of the environment that would result in the quality of life of the people, preservation of cultural identity and economic sustainability necessary to maintain the natural, social and human capital required for the living standards. Critical literacy should therefore not be a topic to be covered but a perspective for teaching embedded in the elementary curriculum of study.

Recommendations

The following suggestions are made to aid the promotion and implementation of critical literacy at the elementary level of education in Africa, especially in Nigeria:

- i) Government and all stakeholders should support enriched teaching and learning experiences to advance the progress of critical literacy.
- ii) There should be differentiated instruction and interactive pedagogical methods to improve student learning outcomes. Variation should be used on creating critical literacy in accordance with the characteristics of the elementary school pupils.
- iii) Teachers should regularly update their knowledge and imbibe 21st century teaching and learning skills. Teachers should be trained and retrained on effective pedagogy so they can effectively teach the children cutting-edge proficiencies.
- iv) Critical literacy learning should be systematic so that critical reading, critical thinking and writing are seen as part of an ongoing process.
- v) There should be a curricula reform of elementary education that would delineate the purpose and function of critical literacy for sustainable development.

References

- Blixen, T. & Pannell, J. (2020). Teachers' understanding and enactment of critical literacy – A lack of unified teaching method, *Cogent Education*, 7 (1), DOI: 10.1080/2331186X.2020.1826073
- Comber, B. (2013). Critical literacy in the early years: Emergence and sustenance in an age of accountability. In J. Larson & J. Marsh (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Early Childhood Literacy* (pp. 587–601). London: SAGE.
- Ezekwesili, O. (2022). Africa: Access alone has not guaranteed that children are learning in schools. <https://www.theafricareport.com/180027/africa-access-alone-has-not-guaranteed-that-children-are-learning-in-schools-says-ezekwesili/>
- Future Learn (2021). Explore education in Nigeria. <https://www.futurelearn.com/info/futurelearn-international/explore-education-in-nigeria>. Retrieved 25th November, 2022.
- Green, A. (2021). Critical literacy: What it means for teachers and teacher aides. <https://www.itac.edu.au/blog/teaching-strategies/critical-literacy>
- Habou, R. (2017). Improving literacy in Africa. <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/improving-literacy-africa>.
- Janks, H. (2010). *Literacy and power*. New York: Routledge.

- Norris, K., Lucas, L. & Prudhoe, C. (2012). Examining critical literacy: Preparing preservice teachers to use critical literacy in the early childhood classroom. *Multicultural Education*, Winter, 59-62.
- O'Brien, J. (2001). Children reading critically: A local history. In B. Comber & A. Simpson (Eds.), *Negotiating critical literacies in classrooms* (pp. 37–54). Mahway, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Odeleye, O.A. (2018). Optimising reading culture in rural girls for qualitative basic education. *Journal of ECPAE* 1, 46-54.
- Odeleye, O.A. & Adetuyi, C.A. (2016). Reading and rural literacy education: Sine qua non for national development. *International Journal of Management Sciences* 9(1) 239- 245.
- Odeleye, O.A. (2015). Appraisal of reading instructional practices in rural elementary schools. Paper presented at Twentieth National Congress on Rural Education, Canada.
- Odeleye, O.A. (2010) Universal basic education program in south-western Nigeria: An appraisal. *African Journal of Technology Policy*. 6 (1) 282-295.
- Oghenekohwo, J. & Frank-Oputu, E. (2017). Literacy education and sustainable development in developing societies. *International Journal of Education & Literacy Studies* 5 (2), 126-131.
- Peterson, H. (2018). What is critical literacy and why the need? <https://medium.com/literate-schools/what-is-critical-literacy-and-why-the-need-9d2c07591f98>.
- Rini, T. (2018). Creating critical literacy skills for young learners at primary school. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research (ASSEHR)*, 244, 230-235.
- Straková, Z., & Cimernanová, I. (2018). Critical thinking development—A necessary step in higher education transformation towards sustainability. *Sustainability*, 10(10), 3366. MDPI AG. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/su10103366>.
- Tomislav, K. (2018). The concept of sustainable development: From its beginning to the contemporary issues. *Zagreb International Review of Economics & Business*, 21 (1), 67-94.
- Tophat.com (Online) Critical literacy. <https://tophat.com/glossary/c/critical-literacy/>
- Trudell, B., Jo Dowd, A., Piper, B. & Bloch, C. (2012). Early grade literacy in African classrooms: Lessons learned and future directions. Triennale on Education and Training in Africa (Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, February 12-17, 2012).
- UNESCO (2006) Education for all: literacy for life; EFA global monitoring report, 2006. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000141639>.
- UNESCO Institute for statistics (2015). *List of Countries by Literacy Rate*. Retrieved July 4th, 2019 from [www.unesco.literacy/rate/...](http://www.unesco.literacy/rate/)

- UNESCO (2022). What you need to know about literacy. <https://www.unesco.org/en/education/literacy/need-know>.
- Vasquez, V. (2017). Critical literacy. The Oxford research encyclopedia of Education, Oxford University Press, USA.
- Wagner, D. (2016). Learning, literacy and sustainable development: Inclusion, vulnerability and the SDGs. In Lena and Battro (Eds.) Children and sustainable development: A challenge for education. Pontifical Academy of Sciences, Vatican, Rome.
- Winthrop, R. (2022). Improving access to quality public education in Africa. <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/improving-access-to-quality-public-education-in-africa/>. Retrieved 25th November, 2022.