

Promoting a Culture of Reading and Research: Challenges for Efficiency and Effectiveness in Schools as Learning and Teaching Institutions

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Abstract: This study is theoretical and aims at exploring the possible strategies to use in promoting a culture of reading and research in order to strive towards efficiency and effectiveness in school institutions. The study starts off by defining reading and research. It goes on to explain the role of reading and research in the improvement of both the management of schools and the learning and teaching processes. It also suggests examples of strategies which can be adopted by schools in order to improve the culture of Reading and Research in the school management teams, teachers and students. Overall the study can be viewed as food for thought because Reading and Research, though affords one the opportunity to discover new things, in most cases it simply makes one aware of obvious things or facts around oneself that are often taken for granted. This awareness of what could be regarded as the obvious is important because once one is aware of what is around them, one can apply for improvement of the quality of same and hence improve efficiency and effectiveness.

Key words: Culture, reading and research, efficiency and learning and teaching

INTRODUCTION

According to the Longman Active Study Dictionary of English, 'reading is to learn particular information from print or writing'. The gist of reading is the ability to learn from print or writing. Reading therefore helps us to get informed. The more we get informed about what happens around us, or even far from us, the more we will be able to put the world in a better perspective and therefore respond to challenges in a more meaningful way.

Functions of reading: Reading has therefore an important role to play in our lives. As pointed out by Harris and Sipay (1984):

Reading has economic, societal, political and personal values and it increases in importance as society becomes more complex and industrialised.

The quotation above is indeed loaded in terms of the role of reading in our everyday life and in particular, in our role as educators and learners. The world we live in is characterised by economic transformations and technological advancements. It is characterised by changes in the way human beings view things and themselves, hence interact with each other and the environment around them. Unless we come to realise and learn about what happens around us and else where, we may find it very difficult to keep pace with the changes

that affect us. The concept of the global village indeed forces us to keep up to date with what happens elsewhere as we no longer can afford to be an island. We currently send our children to study abroad, so we need to understand the conditions they are likely to face, the economic conditions, the social conditions, the political and value conditions of those contexts we send them to.

As we search for information through reading, we gain new knowledge which gives us insights on how to approach our lives, our jobs and our challenges in general. Reading can improve our language expressions and hence our ability to communicate in a more meaningful and acceptable manner. Communication can have a lot of impact on how we interact with our colleagues, our juniors and super-ordinates. A well read person is more likely to communicate professionally and able to select words more carefully in order not to offend other people but still able to put a point across.

As reading is information sourcing, it can empower the leader, the teacher and even the student. As we know the slogan knowledge is power indeed being informed gives confidence as it can help one draw from other people's experiences, various alternative ways of handling issues. Through comparisons of ways of doing things, the school manager, the teacher or the student can reach both objective and subjective ways of looking at issues. In a way, reading can also be seen as a cost effective measure as it can help the school manager to avoid re-inventing the wheel. As we get updates of doing

things, the quality of our product increases. In so doing, the marketability of our services and products improves and able to fit in the new world economies.

In our case as teachers or educators, it is highly imperative for us to produce a highly competitive student product, the product which can meet the demands of the economy of Botswana. We are a human resource producer and we need to compare with the SADCC region, the continent and the world at large. Jobs are quickly shrinking and it is of utmost importance to read wide and see what we can learn from others in order to produce a being who can be able to fend for itself in this world of uncertainty.

We therefore, must carefully scrutinise our curricula and this we can do if we compare it with what others else where do, what job demands are current locally, regionally, continentally and worldwide. We can achieve this if we search for information. Whilst we need to acknowledge the advent of modern technology such as internet, we have to know very well that it is still a drop in the ocean and the most available source of information is books or print.

Reading also has a role to play in improving you as an individual and a professional. It can be taken as some kind of in-service development. It can help us to be critical of the things we would have long taken for granted as given. This introspection can help us identify our shortcomings, because otherwise, how can we improve if we do not know where we are lacking. Reading can indeed help us appreciate ourselves thus boosting our self image, our self esteem as we measure ourselves against others and against educational objectives. An informed teacher, manager and even a student always commands respect of others.

The effect of commanding respect of others can send very important ripple effects into the whole school. It can be a motivator for others who may also want to emulate the well informed by also reading more and getting more informed. This could also lead to drawing of informed implications, making it easy for one to supervise, guide, advise and also gain a lot of respect and trust. These are the gists of good management.

It is not a good idea to be content with what we are, independent of what other people are. It is not healthy to always remind others that we have done things this way before you were born so you cant tell me anything or the books cant tell me anything. The world has to be viewed in relative contextual and temporal terms. It must be noted very seriously that a poor reader normally always feels inadequate and incompetent and ends up being petty, unable to take risks and instead, preferring to maintain the status quo, while a knowledgeable manager or teacher is

not fearful of other people who are also knowledgeable and always welcomes their contributions without getting threatened.

We have to note that what we read should not be taken as a prescription of what we need to do, it must be taken as a source of insights and knowledge base.

Reading is an important component of research as both are used to search for information.

FUNCTIONS OF RESEARCH

Research can be described as trying to get information in order to find out something completely new. Reading is one of the tools used to collect information in research. Its main function is to advance knowledge, the knowledge which is in turn should be used to inform practice. Research is for most of the time, however, associated with people of high echelons of the education strata. This process of information seeking has been mystified to be an activity for the highly educated. I must hasten to say, while this has always been the believe, research is nothing but an organised way of investigating issues for a purpose. It is simply a way of trying to answer questions and to seek for solutions to our problems in a logical manner and not haphazardly. This is an activities which I believe many of us have done one way or the other even though it may not have been too systematic or we may not have been aware that we are doing research.

When we talk of the Project Approach to teaching for instance, we refer to a popular method of teaching used at primary schools. We find in this project, children being assigned tasks to seek for information. The teacher sets objectives, together with the children, they brainstorm on how to find information, whether to use questionnaires or interviews or to go and observe. They identify the target informants, do the gathering of data, analyse such data, write a report and then come to class to share information with the rest of the class. This process is research.

At secondary level, for example, we conduct research through topics such as the Local Study. Students and the teacher decide on a topic of interest in their local area, they identify the objectives as stated in the syllabus and what they actually want to achieve. Instruments of data gathering are developed, the target informants is identified and data is collected through either observations, interviewing, use of a checklist or even reading documents. In the process, students are also asked to read more about the topic, to find out what else would have been said about it. This is what is termed literature review in the language of research. The whole process of Local Study is research.

While, we may not be aware, this process is research, at a micro level. It was only when I started being a research student that I realised I had been doing research for a long time without knowing that it was in fact research. I am sure a lot of you are also feeling the same. Research is defined as a systematic process of collecting and logically analysing information for a purpose. Research is a tool that is used to satisfy specific questions and/or provide guidance in a particular direction of development. It therefore informs, empowers, provides confidence and therefore a necessary tool for educators.

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES OF PROMOTING A CULTURE OF READING AND RESEARCH

It is important to appreciate that at least each and everyone of us has been involved in some research one way or the other. That should be a starting point and that what we have to continue doing is to polish ourselves for even more research skills to be able to do it more professionally addressing real life problems.

In a home where parents are in the habit of reading, this culture of reading normally diffuses into the children as children learn what they live. This is emphasised by Burns *et al.* (1982) who asserts that,

Positive attitudes are nurtured in homes where the parents read for themselves and to their children and where reading materials are provided for children's use.

So in the same manner, if the school management teams can get into a habit of reading and sharing what they know with the rest of the staff, it might motivate such a staff into reading beings. It has to be noted however, that it is not so easy for adults to change in their habits. If they are non-readers and non researchers, it might be very difficult for them to all of a sudden change.

Rather than despair, however, ways should be devised to indirectly induce staff to develop a culture of reading and research.

One such example is to assign staff to do some needs assessment in the school. At the beginning of the year or term, the school could brainstorm the issues which they feel are a bother to them and a hindrance to both learning and teaching. Issues such as truancy, poor performance in respective subjects, non-support by the parents or the community, etc.

Staff could either as individuals or groups decide on which topics to investigate so as to attempt to find solutions. The investigations or assignments could then be presented as mini-school based workshops for the rest of the staff. These investigations will definitely serve multipurpose:

- They will help address school issues that are sometimes just taken as given and yet affect the school performance.
- They will definitely act as in-service and/or staff development practices. The practices will fulfil a need as expressed by the Director Teacher Training and Development who points out that

Teachers need to keep abreast of new developments in education and in-service education provides them with a service to enable them to cope with new knowledge and skills (Rathedi, 1998).

- As we know if we discover knowledge ourselves, we turn to have ownership of decisions emanating from such knowledge-hence we get committed.
- When doing investigations of issues we have to find out what is already known about those particular issues. We find this information from reading related literature. For example, what do people elsewhere say about a similar problem, what can we learn from them? Therefore, this investigation/research forces us to read-killing two birds with one stone.
- Working in groups and also sharing information after the investigation or even during the investigation can help develop our social skills-our ability to interact with others, listen, share, cooperate, consult, etc.
- Sharing knowledge is indeed self-fulfilling as one feels they have contributed to the educational development one way or the other.
- The school-based presentations can indeed serve as a motivator for those who may not have had an interest. Sometimes/many a time we say, if so and so has been able to do it, why can't we. This then becomes an important starting point of further professional development.

I am challenging heads of schools to try this and see how it comes out. It is a challenge and isn't that we want to face challenges in order to improve efficiency and effectiveness.

Whilst this suggestion would help develop a culture of reading and research, it also develops other professional skills which can lead to effectiveness and efficiency in the profession.

Reading and research go hand in glove indeed. As we all know, *lore lo ojwa lo sale metsi*. This culture of poor reading and poor research does not just start at this late age of being adults. It is something that we would have developed from our childhood.

We have an obligation to promote a culture of reading and research at student or even pupil level. One such way is encouraging our students to look for

information for themselves rather than us spoon-feeding them all the time. This should be premised on the fact that,

to read is rewarding in many ways-that is it increases success in school, helps in coping with everyday situations outside school boundaries, boosts status and provides recreation (Burn *et al.*, 1982).

Making students independent readers and researchers doesn't have to wait until when students are at tertiary level. Students can be asked to look for information and share it with the rest of the class right from the primary education level while the teacher supplements or complements what the students have to provide. This will be to teach the students to be self-reliant from the word go. Besides, child-centred approaches to teaching are a current trend in the teaching field. As pointed out by Marope (1997).

In the quest for the much espoused learner-centred teaching, a strong case has continuously been made for teachers to afford learners the chance to exercise their potential to construct meaningful knowledge out of classroom experiences. In line with pragmatic and existentialist epistemologies, learners are presented as integral and active participants in the continuous construction of classroom knowledge.

My experience as a secondary schoolteacher is such that when I came to teach Rice Growing in Japan, Pulp and Study Making Industries, etc. I would go to the library, identify from encyclopaedia sections that my students would read and look for information from regarding the above topics. Indeed the students did a good job. I realised that at the end they learnt and retained information better because they were the ones who sourced it. There was an element of researching and reading which was promoted. Over and above this, students developed confidence and a further liking for reading and researching. They also provided more information than I would otherwise do as an individual. Teachers and school heads are advised to implement national principles of development and self-reliance through these efforts.

The efforts mentioned above would also serve as manifestation of the Long Term Vision for Botswana; Vision 2016 which aims at producing an informed and educated nation by the year 2016.

Let me once more suggest yet another strategy which should be food for thought in our quest to try and promote a culture of reading and research.

Mogobjwa (1984) citing Rigg and Taylor talks of a technique of promoting a culture of reading which has so far been used by Lesedi Primary School in promoting a culture of reading. It has been observed that this method had at the time of Mrs. Mmono, as the principal, made a lot of impact that pupils flocked to the national library in large numbers to read. The school, Lesedi, therefore had to organise to build its own library to accommodate its motivated children.

In the classroom, teachers who enjoy reading, who seize every opportunity to provide pleasurable reading experiences for the children in their classes and who allow time for recreational reading during school hours are encouraging positive attitudes towards reading.

This technique of reading is referred to as Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (USSR). The aim of this technique is to develop a love for reading, to make the reader view reading as relatively easy, interesting and therefore intrinsically rewarding. Burn *et al.* (1982) further note that,

The technique is indeed a challenge, as it needs commitment, perseverance and persistence. We have to sweat in order to get the best out of anything. The technique:

- Everyone in the school must get involved in reading without any interruption during a given period determined by the school.
- Early in the morning preferably after assembly, the whole school is given 10-30 min of completely uninterrupted reading session.
- Everyone-teacher, cook, child, parent, secretary, bursar, head teacher-is asked to read anything that interest them.
- During this period, there are no questions asked, no discussions, but individual reading. A literally free reading time.
- Everyone is allowed to read in whatever posture.
- Parents/community is notified about this period so that they do not visit the school and if they do, they must know they will also be expected to sit somewhere quietly and read something.
- Commitment of everyone especially staff is very important.
- The exercise to be at least a year and obligation for its impact to be felt.

Perseverance, persistence and commitment can change things. Effectiveness and efficiency can only be achieved through the development of a love for reading as reading is the gateway for all other subjects.

Another suggestion to Improve Reading And Research is to utilise your local research association, Botswana Educational Research Association popularly known as (BERA). BERA has long opened itself up to schools and individual educators. This association is here to serve you and is for you to support it by giving it work to do. One of its objectives is Research Capacity Building. This means helping you and me to acquire research skills. Schools have provision for in-service workshops and we are made to understand that TT and D has now started embarking on organising schools for these-school based, school focused and regional and national workshops. While we mount in-service workshops on CRT, Conflict Resolution, Guidance, etc. We should also think of mounting school-based workshops on research topics such as the following: Writing a research proposal, conducting a needs assessment, writing a problem statement, research methods, data analysis and research results dissemination. These topics are equally important in schools because we need to be equipped with skills of diagnosing our own problems in order to function efficiently and effectively and hence to achieve goals with the minimum of our limited resources. As rightly pointed out by Rathedi (1998), the responsibility of identifying individual [and institutional] is shared between the teacher and the school.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, I would like to invite schools to use BERA in running school based in-service workshops or research in particular. Many of our schools are members of BERA. I know that money is always one of the limiting factors so far as we need to improve our schools. When we talk of research, it has lots of financial implications. The MoE

indeed has provision for research and has indeed sponsored teachers who have shown interest in doing research. Some teachers have been sponsored to go and present studys in Lesotho, Swaziland South Africa and in Botswana during the Biennial Conferences. I implore school heads and teachers to be vigilant in doing research. The MoE is interested in teacher resources who are also resourceful teachers. Therefore reading and research can go a long way to improve teaching and learning and the teaching profession as a whole. This is a challenge which must be faced.

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