

Enhancing the Culture of Reading in Rwanda: Reflections by Students in Tertiary Institutions

by

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Abstract

Following a growing concern about the lack of a reading culture among Rwandans in general and university students in particular, this study investigates students' reflections on their previous reading experiences and discusses ways to develop literacy and a reading culture in Rwanda. It is widely known that the cultivation of a reading culture among the youth in tertiary institutions not only boosts their academic excellence, but it also contributes to their country's growth prospects. This study based on students from one university answers the following research question: What do students claim are the reasons for a poor reading culture in Rwanda? The data was collected via an open questionnaire. Major findings indicate that the lack of a reading culture is attributed to the colonial and post-colonial education system, reliance on verbal communication, limited access to reading materials, and ultimately the mother tongue status of Kinyarwanda, within the sociolinguistic configuration of Rwanda.

Keywords: Reading culture; oral tradition; language of instruction; adult literacy; functional literacy.

Introduction

“If you want to hide something to Rwandans, you will only put it in a book. But if you want something to be known, just whisper it to one person”, an adage in Rwanda goes.

Voices from various media, academic and political authorities in Rwanda unanimously speak out about the lack of a reading culture among Rwandans in general, and students in tertiary education in particular, which impacts not only on the educational standards, but also the entire nation’s welfare. Yet the possession of this culture is a *sine qua non* for a successful educational system. This rhymes with Keechi’s statement (2010) that a poor reading culture stunts a country’s national growth. He notes that the cultivation of a reading culture especially among the youth in tertiary institutions will boost their academic excellence and ultimately their countries’ growth prospects. This concern about the lack of a reading culture in Rwanda is felt by many other scholars in many African countries, viz. eastern, southern and western Africa (Rosenberg, 2003; Magara & Batambuze, 2005; Commeyras & Mazile, 2011). Hence, the main motivation for conducting the present research sprang from my own reading experience, my observations of reading habits and environments in Rwanda, students’ performance on in-class written or oral presentations, and home assignments that demonstrate little reading experience. Also, as Weller (2010) notes, a reading culture is at the heart of learning at higher education level and allows students to capably interpret and draw conclusions from their reading. This implies that a reading culture within tertiary education would enable students to read, write, and think more critically.

Data from the general census (Ministry of Finance, 2007), indicate that almost half of the population above 15 years of age (47.6%) is illiterate, i.e. they cannot write and read. There is another category made of tens of thousands of Rwandans who are aliterate, i.e., they are able to read but they are uninterested in doing so or can barely do it. In its effort to curb the spread of illiteracy, the Government of Rwanda (Ministry of Finance, 2007), through its Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy (EDPRS) is convinced that the economic, social, intellectual and cultural health of Rwandans will depend on building a literate nation, able and willing to read widely for practical purposes, and for pleasure. Hence, the Government eyes the functional literacy of the population as a way for people to acquire knowledge, information, skills, values and attitudes necessary for personal, family, community and national awareness and development. They suggest that functional literacy also enables the population to learn how to survive, develop their full capacities, live and work in dignity, participate fully in development, improve the quality of life, make informed decisions, develop critical and autonomous thinking, and to continue learning (Ministry of Finance, 2007, p. 77). This assessment agrees with Street (2011) when he claims that deficiencies in this functional literacy results in social inequalities.

Moreover, the government (Official Gazette, 2010) intends to strengthen adult literacy education structures, i.e., increase the adult literacy rates. Adult literacy education in Rwanda has been informally conducted since the 1980s (Torres, Okech, Mukandekezi, & Njoroge, 2005). It has mostly been in the hands of churches and missionaries within the framework of evangelization. Since 2003 (Official Gazette, 2010), there are ministerial instructions regulating adult literacy education in Rwanda. However, up to now, its structures are not well organised because most literacy centres are in the hands of church initiatives, while very few are government owned. Thus, the implementation of this education is marred with problems related to human and material resources. There are unqualified teachers who work on a voluntary basis, classrooms are in poor conditions (sometimes under trees), equipment like chairs, benches, books, and complementary reading materials are under the responsibility of learners (Torres et al., 2005). And as the situation stands today, adult education is far from developing literacy and a culture of reading.

In this context, the purpose of this study is to investigate university students' previous reading experiences and their reflections on strategies that could be employed to develop literacy, and a reading culture in Rwanda. The following research questions will guide the study: What do students claim are the reasons for the existing poor reading culture in Rwanda, and what could be done to promote it?

Creating a Reading Culture

A reading culture was unknown in Rwanda till the dawn of the colonisation of Africa; hence the culture was built on oral negotiations and traditions which Rwandans in general still have strong affinity with today. The traditional practices of literacy like storytelling, poems, proverbs, riddles were learned by the young generation through close observation of what the elders were doing and saying. These oral traditions were a granary of ancestral wisdom that served as a cultural guide and therefore, the people's school. In this school, educational, social, and cultural norms and values were passed on from generation to generation, through oral traditions and practices by the word of mouth (Kagame, 1978).

In his study on the Rwandan oral culture, Kagame claims that oral traditions which have been used by Rwandans as a powerful tool and methodology of imparting knowledge since time immemorial can also be used as leverage for building and strengthening both the reading and writing cultures among the population. He also maintains that the oral tradition should be collected and compiled in written form to be read by the young generation in schools. The reading of oral-based literature such as folktales, fairy tales, poetry and proverbs helps the youth not only to appreciate, but also to identify themselves with their own culture.

This is echoed in the Ministry of Education's document on national policy and strategy that stipulates that in order to promote functional literacy programmes for both the youth and adults, Rwanda's traditional oral culture must be enhanced and translated into booklets and books ... reading aloud and storytelling are essential for literacy acquisition for both children, youth and adults, at home, in school, at community meetings, etc. (Torres, Okech, Mukandekazi & Njoroge, 2005, p. 10). Torres et al. (2005) commend that in Rwanda where reading is not part of its culture, it is necessary to help children acquire the habit of reading by enhancing reading and storytelling in nurseries and primary schools. This can foster a reading culture at a tender age in a way that equips pupils to excel in their studies, thereby improving the standards of education and gradually reducing illiteracy among the population.

In the same line of reasoning about ways to develop a reading culture among the rural masses in Malawi, Kachala (2007) shows that the development of a reading culture should start in early childhood and be nurtured up to adulthood and, in the process, it can build a literate nation that can transform itself into an informed and knowledgeable society capable of playing a rightful role in the global village. The same position is held in studies on ways of promoting a reading culture built on oral traditions and practices in other parts of Africa (Dike, 1995; Kwikiriza, 2000; Rosenberg, 2003; Magara & Batambuze, 2005). However, Magara and Batambuze (2005, p.35) in their study on a reading culture for Uganda caution that for a reading culture to be possible, reading must be a part of all aspects of life, and not only certain parts, such as school or work.

The development of adult literacy is necessary to create a culture of reading as adults act as role models for the youth. A specific way to enhance the ideals of adult literacy in parts of the world where resources are scarce is described by Freire (1978) and Macedo (1987). They developed a programme where they wanted to make illiterate workers in Brazil realize the relationship between their world and the words they used to describe their specific context. Hence, the workers' discussions were linked to written words in their local language and the formulation of a text. In this way, Freire invited the workers to produce their own culture and started a process of critical literacy whereby the learners not only read the word, but also the world. Freire and Macedo's ultimate goal was to invite the workers to problematize their reality by interrogating what is taken for granted, and search for new ways to change their situation. Freire (1994) thus claims that literacy empowers the citizens through "conscientisation" which leads to freedom and ultimately to development. Hence, Freire's method of cooperative construction of a text would enhance meaning making, which is crucial for literacy development (Freire & Macedo, 1987), even so to develop a love for reading.

Obstacles to the Creation of a Reading Culture Among Students

There are several obstacles that impede the creation of a reading culture among students. Studies show that many students dislike reading because they did not find pleasure in this practice either at their home or in school environments during their literacy journey (Nolan-Woods & Foll, 1986; Bakka, 2000; Baleeta, 2005; Chika, 2009; Commeyras & Mazile, 2011). Baleeta (2005) for example, discussing barriers to reading in Uganda, notes that too many students reading is not a pleasant experience to be savoured and seized at free moments. The root cause for this should be traced back in children's literacy acquisition, and reading habit development. He therefore argues that it is incumbent upon parents and early school educators to cultivate a lifetime reading habit into children. Indeed, research shows that parents who like to read will also want their children to love reading. However, this ideal in many African societies is marred with home and school challenges such as parents' illiteracy aliteracy, poverty, lack of school libraries, the high cost of books, and so on (Nolan-Woods & Foll, 1986; Parry, 2000, 2005).

Additionally, as Rosenberg (2003) notes, there are millions of people, mainly in Africa and other developing regions, who are functionally literate but, do not read anything simply because they have no access to books in their native languages relevant to their lives and aspirations, and thus there are no books and journals of interest to them. This is supported by Ambatchew (2011) who notes that the situation of literacy and aliteracy in the developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America is exacerbated by weak publishing sectors and a poor purchasing power of the population which 'contribute to a severe shortage of quality indigenous reading materials, making the acquisition of reading and sustaining of reading nigh impossible for all but the elite'.

Other factors responsible for inhibiting the reading culture in Africa include an education system with a narrow perception of reading. The school system approach towards reading has made students conceive it as a once and for all activity associated with passing examinations, getting a certificate, winning a job and attaining promotion (Dike, 1995; Bakka, 2000; Rosenberg, 2003; Sarjant, 2005; Magara & Batambuze, 2005). Hence, once the above targets are achieved, students cease to have interest in reading books. This result is present because teachers basically teach and request students to only read their course notes or what is examinable (Mugisha, 2010) and thus, they forget that reading is a life-long skill that should transcend not only the exam, but also the classroom. As a consequence, Izizinga (2000) notes that students imbued with such reading perception lack motivation and interest in reading in their everyday life to the extent that they even develop a habit of considering reading tasks assigned to them in schools as a burden.

Last but not least, the language of instruction in Africa has played an important role in this circular character of problems that make it hard to embrace a culture of reading. Indeed, in most African, Latin American and Asian countries, the languages of instruction after the first three years in school are normally not used in the immediate environment of the population; however, they enjoy a privileged status over the indigenous languages (Brock-Utne, 2001). In addition, almost all important literacy productions are produced in foreign languages, often referred to as languages of wider communication in which only the elite, by far the minority, enjoy the benefits of being literate, and the rest are marginalised with their mother tongues (Yates, 1995).

Methods

This study was performed in 2009. It subscribes to a qualitative design relying on worded responses to a questionnaire from university students. The questionnaire was designed with open questions to collect exploratory information, i.e. qualitative information for the purposes of understanding the problem under investigation. In addition, the open format questions require more thought on the part of the participant (Bryman, 2008). Questions focused on the participants' reflections on their reading experiences (when, where, with whom their interest in books started), their home and early school reading environment, and the culture of reading in Rwanda in general and within students in particular. The selection of participants was done using convenience sampling techniques. Students from different faculties were determined by their availability and willingness to take part in the research. We discussed the possibility of interview as the mode of data collection, but the students preferred open questionnaires.

A total of 40 undergraduate students from 9 faculties (Agriculture (AG), Arts and Humanities (AH), Applied Science (AS), Economics and Management (EM), Journalism and Communication (JC), Law (LW), Medicine (MD), Science (SC), Social, Political and Administrative Sciences (SPAS) were approached. Faculty affiliation and F for female and M for male are used to refer to the answers of the different participants. 35 respondents (response rate of 87.5%) of whom 20 males and 15 females from different departments and options returned the questionnaires. After a thorough reading of all responses, a thematic analysis was done by searching for significant themes in the participants' thoughts and reflections. My selection of quotations is based on variation and the richness of the information provided.

Ethical considerations were taken into account. All along the data collection, principles of informed consent and respect for invasion of privacy were adhered to. The participants received information regarding the researcher's name and affiliation, the aims of the research, and they were told that the results were only to be used for the purpose of this research. They were also reminded that participation was entirely voluntary and that they were free to respond in the language of their choice. The questionnaire was written in both Kinyarwanda (the national language and mother tongue of the participants) and English (the official language in Rwanda).

Findings

In this section, I focus on the students' reflections on what constitute the reasons for the lack of a reading culture in Rwanda and the way forward to create an environment that fosters one. These reasons include among others, the lack of early reading experiences and an education system that did not inculcate reading habits throughout students' schooling. The prevalence of low levels of literacy in most families also makes it hard to encourage a culture of reading. Finally, insufficient reading materials and resources to acquire them constitute another obstacle to developing a culture of reading.

Reading Experiences

In this theme, many participants acknowledged that they lacked early reading experience with their parents and siblings at home and during their first years of schooling. Only 2 students replied that they were lead to enjoy reading before they started school and later continued with teachers.

When I was a child, I can remember I was playing with books, [such as] KOUAKOU, TINTIN, and small books with pictures from Bakame Editions, together with my parents, elder brother and sisters. When I started school, I enjoyed reading with my teachers, and I even subscribed to the children's newspaper, Hobe (FAH).

The two participants who enjoyed sibling and parental support in their early reading experience and literacy learning also attended nursery schools, which were only available in urban areas. They also had access to story and picture books in French, and newspapers in Kinyarwanda (Hobe, Kinyamateka) in their families, thus the habit of reading was spearheaded either by their parents or siblings.

Eight students acknowledged that they developed a habit of reading by themselves or with siblings as well as with the help of their teachers at a later stage in primary school.

When I started developing love for reading, I was in primary school, I loved stories and tales I read in school books and [listened to] those read by teachers (FJC).

After I knew to read well and write, I started loving books of short stories in Kinyarwanda and French (Matin d'Afrique) which we read in the classroom with our teachers (MAG).

The participants highlighted the usual way of reading in most primary classroom settings, that is, the teachers read the stories first, and the children would take turns to read aloud for the whole class when the story was known. This was done due to the limited number of books. Moreover, the children had only access to books while at school.

Eleven students replied that they developed interest in reading while in secondary education upon request of their teachers to complement their course notes.

I developed love for reading in secondary school thanks to our director of studies [préfet des études] in the 2nd form who used to tell us “If you don’t read, shut up. Whatever you say should have a reference” (MMD).

I used to read books when I had to learn about something in my study recommended by our teachers in the class. [I read] often in the evenings or to complement the teachers’ notes (FMD).

Indeed, in many rural areas of the country, most children met books and reading materials once they started primary school. Some schools were well equipped with children storybooks and textbooks while others were poorly equipped, with many children sharing one book. As the books belonged to the school, children could not borrow them for individual reading. As far as reading in secondary school is concerned, apart from textbook reading, there were recommended readings to accompany the major themes in different courses from the first to the sixth form. Even so, many state-run schools were poorly equipped with books, and the reading was essentially done in French, the medium of instruction.

Finally, 14 students felt they did not have any interest in books at all. They pointed out that nobody told them about the importance of book reading or motivated them to love reading.

When I started to go to primary school in Mugonero, I learnt to read and write in class and that was all. At home I did not read anything and as I was the first born, nobody helped me. My parents were not so much literate (FAS).

The participants testify to the low literacy rate in Rwandan families, which leads nearly all to assert that they did not have role models and encouragement on their routes to reading. They missed parental guidance and confessed that they were not provided with reading materials and facilities at home. Research has shown that children’s reading habits improve if they have access to books with parents reading to them and they are allowed to read books that are of their level independently (Martello, 2002; Spreadbury, 2002; Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

Hence, the participants lacked motivation to develop their reading skills and acquire a reading culture. However, all the participants agreed that their parents, siblings and grand-parents had told tales, riddles, and puns and taught poems (heroic and pastoral), and singing games to them ever since they were kids. This confirms the prevalence of storytelling traditions among Rwandan households.

Access to Reading Materials

In the theme of access to reading materials, 19 participants said lack of appropriate reading materials and a lack of libraries throughout the country as generally the most important obstacle to the culture of reading in Rwanda. Other participants also stressed that the rampant poverty and illiteracy exacerbate the reading situation.

It is true that Rwandans do not read much because it is rare to see passengers for example on a bus reading a book or newspapers. But I think the problem is that the general public do not have easy access to books, newspapers, magazines, etc. Let alone [shops for] newspapers, where can people borrow books to read? (MAH)

How can we really have a reading culture since many people are not literate? Besides we do not have libraries where we can borrow materials to read. But also, we do not have to forget that the purchasing power of the population is not good enough to allow them to buy books, newspapers or magazines. There are many prerequisites missing in the daily life of Rwandans (MSPAS).

In the participants' discourse, there is a feeling that it is somewhat unfair to say that Rwandans do not have a reading culture. First of all, there is little chance or no possibility at all for developing a reading culture where there is nothing to be read. Secondly, there is a clear absence of school, public, and community libraries across the country while the latter are hailed for improving the reading culture. Thirdly, as earlier said, problems related to illiteracy constitute another impediment to the reading culture.

The participants also stressed that the reading materials should be appropriate and relevant in order for a true reading culture to be possible in Rwanda.

While in secondary schools, we read but everything was foreign, and in foreign languages. I am sure that once Rwandan authors write novels and other various kinds of writing in Kinyarwanda– say detective stories, short stories, novels – even those who cannot read in English or French will be interested in reading stories and events set in their local environment (FAH).

I think a good reading culture can be based on reading materials from one's culture. The fact that many available books do not relate to contents of our daily routine can be a handicap to many readers who can only read in Kinyarwanda. Additionally, many of those books are about realities rooted in foreign contexts often different from ours (MEM).

The participants argued that books with contents related to one's culture, history, and lifestyles constitute relevant and appropriate literature likely to stir a thirst for reading. They also see a correlation between the language in which this literature is written and the promotion of a reading culture. This indeed makes sense if we look at the sociolinguistic situation of the country where only few people are conversant with either English or French or both, in which many of the written materials to be read are produced. In this regard, 31 respondents think that reading fairy tales in Kinyarwanda for example may be one of the means to encourage the culture of reading in children.

I think that the use of fairy tales in Kinyarwanda to impart a culture of reading in children can be successful. Because they are important for children's literary experience, entertainment, recreation, education and socialization, they are interesting and pleasurable to read. So, the seed of a culture of reading is sown (MSC).

Reading fairy tales reinforces one's love and understanding of stories rooted in oral tradition. Because Rwandans still rely much on oral culture, fairy tales written in Kinyarwanda can stir curiosity of children and lead them into a culture of reading (MSPAS).

Indeed, given the power that the storytelling tradition still enjoys in Rwanda, obviously once this genre is fully documented in writing; it may spearhead a reading culture. Additionally, research shows that reading in one's mother tongue about a familiar context are key elements in teaching children to love reading (Teale, 1986; Freire & Macedo, 1987). In this respect, the need to develop Kinyarwanda in high status so that it functions on equal footing as English or French is important in order to encourage the culture of reading. The foreign languages, after all, are very rarely used outside the classroom neither by students nor by Rwandans in general (Rosendal, 2010).

Poverty has also been mentioned by most participants as being among the hindering factors when it comes to promoting a reading culture. Indeed, reading has to do with means and resources to acquire reading material, books, newspapers, magazines, and so on.

Many people are in search for satisfying their basic needs. They would rather buy food, clothing and housing. Very few people go to bookshops to buy books compared to people frequenting supermarkets and shops for other commodities (FMD).

When you look at the price tags on shelves in bookshops, many parents can hardly think of buying a book for only reading instead of buying beans or rice for their children, for example. Prices are really high and most people's revenues are meagre. Unfortunately, those well to do people do not read (MAH).

According to the participants, the limited purchasing power among the population is another hindrance to the culture of reading since only a few people can afford to pay for books and other materials for reading such as newspapers. For example, most weekly newspapers (there are only two dailies) are sold at 500 Rwandan francs (~\$0.90 US), and yet, almost 60% of the population are living under the poverty line, which is \$1 US a day (Ministry of Finance, 2007). People in general strive to satisfy their basic needs, and it is not easy to make ends meet. Thus, in the daily struggle to survive, books are very far down on the list of their priorities.

Academic Tradition

In this theme, the participants pointed to the academic tradition (teaching, learning and evaluation) that emphasized reliance on course note reading and evaluation mechanisms that require students to write exams using only their notes.

Ever since we were in secondary school, we were asked to memorize our notes and reproduce them as they were written in our notebooks in exams. There was no need to read for further knowledge. At the university, not much has really changed; most often we rely on our notes to succeed our exams. Where can we learn that culture of reading if it is not encouraged? (MAG).

Many students in the university community still read and rely on their course notes, and don't use library books. Partly because they have to pass their exams by using their notes, but also the desired books to complement our courses are not always available in the library (MAH).

In both quotations, the participants maintain that the Rwandan education system from primary to higher education did not encourage reading practices susceptible of developing a reading culture in school and beyond. It has rather been characterised by sitting exams based on reading course notes which played a crucial role in deciding the students' future. The student's success was determined in accordance with the extent to which they had memorized the lessons taught (Mugisha, 2010). More often, students who had read extensively were labelled "show-offs" and were told that they had not produced answers in line with the way they were written in the notebooks.

Inadequate Infrastructure

The participants finally pointed out that the infrastructure conducive to a good reading atmosphere within the university community also leaves a lot to be desired.

The library itself is small and all the books are not on the shelves. You find a book in the catalogue, but it is not on the shelf. It is discouraging for students who want to read. Books are few compared to students in need of them (FSC).

The university infrastructure cannot support the actual student population. The library reading space is very small, [with students] always packed like sardines, and it is the same for lecture halls. There is no quiet room for enjoyment reading (FLW).

In both quotations, students decry that the university library is ill equipped and poorly furnished. They mention both inadequate reading rooms and insufficient numbers of books. This concern is also echoed by the report of an ad hoc committee commissioned by the Rwandan Parliament (March 2010) to scrutinize the setbacks reported in several institutions of higher learning in Rwanda. Problems related to infrastructure with regard to library equipment, bookshelves, journals, reading room and lecture halls were identified as major obstacles to a viable studying and reading atmosphere. At one university for example, the library was found to possess fewer book titles compared to its users, with a reading space with the capacity of 200 seating places while there are more than 10,000 students! Due to lack of enough accommodation, 4 students share one bedroom, and therefore cannot read comfortably in their rooms. Moreover, lecture halls are most often busy with day and evening lectures. As a result, students lose motivation and interest in frequenting and using the library to read for various purposes.

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to investigate tertiary students' reflections on their own reading trajectories and on the prevalent reading culture among Rwandans in general. Built on what is embedded in their answers and on my interpretations, a strategy to develop reading habits and deal with literacy related problems need to be discussed. Generally, the participants attributed the lack of a reading culture to the whole education system that drives students only to read for passing examinations without critical reading, and lack of a viable infrastructure notably libraries and books and related facilities to foster a reading culture. However, I argue that the issue of language use in Rwanda from the colonial time up to now has affected and still affects in many ways the development of a reading culture and literacy on the whole. This results from the low status that has been accorded to Kinyarwanda, the only mother tongue to all Rwandans, to the detriment of French and English. This situation has concurred to have little and neglected literary production available in Kinyarwanda because even the few educated people who started writing since the 1950's and the ensuing years were interested in writing in languages of wider communication, i.e. French and recently in English, and yet, many people were and are still only conversant with Kinyarwanda. This observation is also shared with other African countries such as Botswana, Ethiopia, Ghana, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe (Yates, 1995; Brock-Utne, 2001; Rosenberg, 2003; Ambatchew, 2011; Commeyras & Mazile, 2011).

Due to globalisation, many African parents are reluctant to use African languages and therefore, want their children to learn in languages of wider communication, mainly English, to be able to access prestigious education in the future and be competitive at the world market. Both politicians and parents in Rwanda seem to agree to favour international languages for education as it is believed that their early acquisition will promote future learning. However, this stands in contrast to research which has found that using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction leads to increased cognitive development, and that learning to read in a foreign language means a slower progress (Brock-Utne, Zubeida and Qorro, 2004; and others). In any case, the reality is that many African languages, including Kinyarwanda, are not developed enough to access teaching and learning materials in these languages. Hence, there is a need to rethink what we assume different languages can do for us and whether we want to take everybody on board to create a reading culture. In fact, while in many countries all over the world people fight to get access to education in their mother tongue – how come people in many countries in Africa devalue their own languages?

Additionally, in many African societies, there is still a predominance of an oral tradition, conveyed in mother tongues, which was the initial form of literacy before modern education. The aim of the oral tradition was to educate and entertain members of the community through stories, moral lessons, advice, and warnings instilling good behaviour in the young generation in a bid to help them grow up as wise and useful members of the society (Kagame, 1978; Freire, 1978). I would like to argue that the oral tradition is a rich foundation for literacy and a reading culture development that is not handled and used properly.

Hence, in order to facilitate the transition from an oral culture to a literate enhanced environment, it is important to avail reading material from oral tradition based on local knowledge (Kagame, 1978; Torres et al., 2005). This material is likely to support literacy as it is attractive and helps readers to identify themselves with their tradition. In the present study, this view is shared by most participants who suggest the collection and transcription of oral forms of expression, and eventually their translation from Kinyarwanda into the two official languages used in Rwanda, i.e., English and French.

Education System

When modern education was introduced in Rwanda (and all former colonized countries and by far developing countries) during the colonial time, it was meant for a few indigenous cadres to be at the service of the colonial administration, missionaries and the local population (Erny, 1978, 2002; Kagame, 1978). Both the colonial and post-independence education systems have been blamed for not having promoted a reading culture from an early stage of children's education. They have rather tailored students into reading only for examination. Learners at all levels have not been sensitized to reading for fun (Verhoeven & Snow, 2001; Rosenberg, 2003; Magara & Batambuze, 2005; Sarjant, 2005). Studies conducted in seven African countries, namely Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia concluded that the promotion of a reading culture in these countries and other African countries go hand in hand with the promotion of reading as a pleasurable activity from an early age (Rosenberg, 2003). The approach to reading for examinations as opposed to critical reading has induced people to have a short term perception of literacy which results in only reproducing taught knowledge. Indeed, many people stop reading when they finish school as a result of not having picked up the habit for pleasure and for knowledge to improve their lives (Bakka, 2000; Magara & Batambuze, 2005; Dike, 1995).

In line with the findings in this study, I argue that for an education system to be successful, the functionality and practicability of reading has to be obvious to all stakeholders. A person who embraces a reading culture does not only read just for the purpose of passing their examinations, but also for improving their knowledge, helping themselves and others in improving their situation and thus solve their day to day problems through critical reading and independent search for knowledge and information. Indeed, this approach will then turn students into lifelong readers, imbued with a reading culture.

Access to Reading Materials

The scarcity and accessibility of reading materials in Rwanda is another big handicap to the reading culture. The only available libraries – though ill equipped and poorly furnished – are mostly located in secondary schools, higher learning institutions and universities. So, it is not easy for the general public to access books.

This limitation slows the development of a strong reading culture. Research has verified that the "opportunity to read" or the availability of books plays an important role in awakening reading interests, and thus, the number and type of books read are determined to a great extent by the reader's "book environment" (Andersson, 1997; Rosenberg, 2003; Parry, 2005). In addition, Rosenberg (2003, p. vii) adds that the availability and accessibility of relevant and appropriate books and reading materials are the precondition and base of all reader development activities. Hence, she also argues that it is impossible to inspire interest, involvement and confidence in reading without the availability of the right kind of materials. Books must first be written and published, distributed widely and then made accessible through libraries or other outlets. Only then can a reading culture begin to be fostered. Additionally, although I agree with the importance of access to books, I argue that instead of waiting for publishing houses to produce books, children as well as adults could create their own texts in line with how Freire promoted literacy in Brazil.

Lack of suitable reading material for every reading type, need, and interest for all age groups of Rwandan readership, together with shortage of libraries has been identified by most participants as the most important impediment to foster a reading culture in Rwanda. Additionally, as most participants in the study revealed, given the limited family incomes, most household expenses are mainly focused on the minimum needs of survival like food, transport and shelter. Books or any other reading materials like newspapers, magazines, are likely to appear at the bottom of the item checklist which is unlikely to be picked.

Finally, for a reading culture to emerge and be visible in Rwanda, reading should be more emphasized and instructional methods must be more interesting at all educational levels. Similarly, adult literacy education programmes meant for adults who dropped out, or have had little or no schooling at all should be reinforced, as reading will eventually be a part of all aspects of life and concern for the whole population. Therefore, it is urged that fostering a love for reading from an early age is essential. Indeed, with a positive attitude towards reading, chances are that children will grow up reading for fun and entertainment, which in turn will lead to reading for gaining knowledge and information to solve everyday problems that directly affect their livelihoods. This will hopefully result in enhancing a reading culture, which is seen as an effective icebreaker against ignorance and pave the way for a new level of literacy skills required in modern society, since an ignorant society is vulnerable. It is therefore imperative to instil a thirst for reading into the current generation, and raise their awareness of the pleasure and importance of reading in their daily life.

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