

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: A VERITABLE TOOL FOR SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION

Bolajoko Margaret TUNDE-AWE, *Ph.D.*

Department of Arts Education,
Adekunle Ajasin University,
Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria.

Email:bolajokotundeawe@gmail.com/bolajoko.tundeawe@aaua.edu.ng

Phone number: (whatsApp+2348111788788) +2348038082052.

Abstract

It is believed that children's literature is a veritable literary genre that can be used by adults, parents, educators, and caregivers to teach children sustainable education so that they are empowered from cradle to take ownership of societal challenges and join the leagues of global problem solvers. To achieve the objective of this study, the researcher adopted Bronfenbrenner's 1979 ecological system theory which states the dynamic relationship between the child's general environment and their overall development. The study highlighted the implications of children's literature on sustainable development goals that are children-bound and made a case for the selection of appropriate literary genres which will inculcate in young children, who will eventually take over the reins of power from the adults, the desired societal values that will ultimately lead to the realization of the much-desired sustainable education.

Key words: Children's literature, Ecological system, Sustainable education.

Introduction.

Children play a significant role in the development of any nation. Khumayah., *et al.*, (2023) submit that children assume strategic positions in building and developing the nation by participating in different critical roles that lead to improvement in people's quality of life and that they can act as agents of change in society by fighting for their rights and change the unjust system in society. Thus, it is crucial that every nation must of a necessity invest in children's social, emotional, intellectual, and all-round development as their early childhood experiences can have profound impact on their development and ultimately impact a nation's future (Khumayah., *et al.*, 2023). As such, parents and elders need to pay attention to what the child is exposed to. In African traditional society, there is intergenerational transfer of social and cultural values such as truth, respect for elders, hard work, good character, chastity before marriage, and hospitality through parents, non-

parental members such as caregivers and teachers. Before the advent of technology and print media, African cultural heritage such as folktales, myths, and legends, epic songs, lullaby, proverbs riddles are passed down from one generation to another in spoken form (Owosho, 2020). The author states that ‘transmitting cultural and moral values from one generation to another engenders national development’ (p. 127) and that ‘culture gives order and meaning to the linguistic, social, political, economic, aesthetic, religious and philosophical modes and organisation of a people, nation or ethnic group’ (p.127). These sets of experiences which have been passed down from generations to generations are traditional literature which used be oral but are now in written forms.

Literature of whatever genres, serves various functions for different audiences. Children literature, one of the major genres of literature, is considered to be effective in fostering language acquisition and development, enhancement of critical thinking skills, and more importantly, all round development of the children. According to Ngwuchukwu, *et al.*, (2020) children literature are books written about children, for children and are usually written for the interest of children in Africa. They are literary texts that encompass wide range of works including acknowledged classics of world literature, picture books and easy-to-read stories, fairy tales, lullabies, fables, folk songs, and other primarily orally transmitted materials. This genre of literature is produced in order to entertain, instruct, and persuade young children. The preoccupation of this study therefore, is to examine the different functions of children’s literature, with a focus on how this literary genre can be used to achieve sustainable development. To achieve this objective, the study adopted a theoretical framework anchored on Bronfenbrenner’s 1979 ecological system theory.

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner’s 1979 Ecological System Theory.

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is the ecological system theory proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, a developmental psychologist, in 1979.

As he observes, the microsystem (which is a part of the ecological systems theory), is defined as a system of people, groups, and institutions (e.g. the family, neighbourhood, religious community, school, and peers), all of which play significant roles in the life of a child. The scholar maintains that since the child's microsystem (that is, their immediate surroundings) have profound and direct influence on their overall development, efforts must be made to make the child know the influences of their environment on their development.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (the child's general environment) states that the child's general environment is made of concentric circles where they (the children) are at the center. The closer the layers are to the child, the more influence that system has on children's experiences. The five environmental systems are microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem, which is closest to the child and have profound influences on him, includes the family, neighbourhood, and school; the mesosystem which establishes connections between the child's different microsystems include relationships between parents and teachers or connections between community groups and the child's family; the exosystem includes the environmental context which the child does not directly experience but which still influences their life and development (example is how parents' work schedule or career could affect their children's daily activities); the macrosystem which includes the cultural values and some societal norms that impact children's lives (examples include children's access to education and the government's laws on children's enrollment in school); and chronosystem which states that the changes that naturally occur through time— personal growth and maturity and other crucial events in life such as parental divorce, relocation, pandemic, and death, all of which have long lasting effects on the child.

The model is represented cyclically and as Bronfenbrenner states, these microsystems do not function in isolation; they influence each other, therefore, when a problem or a change occurs in any of the systems, it will have a ripple effect on all the other systems. The implication is that the laws operating in a society can have

effects on the members of the communities and neighborhoods, and the effects could in turn influence the children's experiences either positively or negatively. The theory assumes that the microsystem (the family setting) has the most noticeable influence on child development since it encompasses the settings in which they have all of their day-to-day experiences. In sum, Bronfenbrenner's model shows that a child's development is influenced by some variables in his immediate environments and these include their ecological system and so, the adults need to take cognizance of these factors so as to help children develop well.

We believe that Bronfenbrenner's microsystem theory, a part of ecological systems theory, is relevant to this study. One of his major submissions is that the child's environment, the ecological systems inclusive, have profound influence on their development. Therefore, the child must be exposed to issues related to the ecology of their environment and indeed the current ecological issues and the global environmental status in general.

The Concept of Sustainable Development.

Sustainable development is defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (UNESCO, 2018). It involves improving the quality of life for all, while preserving the planets natural resources and ecosystems, and promoting social cohesion and equity.

According to Mohieldin cited in Mensah (2019) sustainable development is 'an approach to development which uses resources in a way that allows them (the resources) to continue to exist for others' (p.5). Also, Evers (cited in Mensah 2019), explains the concept as 'organizing principle for meeting human development goals while at the same time sustaining the ability of natural systems to provide the natural resources and ecosystem services upon which the economy and society depend' (p.6).

Oripeloye cited in Ogunyemi (2013) states that sustainable development is a conscious, deliberate and systematic policy that ensures the survival of a state such

that conditions of the social, economic and political necessities that are imperative for the enjoyment of the good life in the utilitarian sense are immediately available. Ogunyemi further explains sustainable development as an enduring, remarkable, non-terminal improvement in the quality of life, standard of living and life chances of the people.

Essentially, sustainability is broadly used to indicate programmes, initiatives, and actions that are geared toward the preservation of a particular resource. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a global approach for international development. It is however used to refer to the 4 pillars of sustainability which are: human, social, economic, and environment. Mensah (2019) argues that sustainable development become more significant because of the daily increase in population without a corresponding increase in the availability of natural resources which can satisfy human needs and wants. It is believed that humanity must be conscious of this phenomenon (or reality) (e.g. Hák et. al. cited in Mensah, 2019) and therefore judiciously use ‘the available resources so that it will always be possible to satisfy the needs of the present generation without undermining the ability of future generations’ (p.7).

It must be noted that SDGs are inextricably linked to human rights generally and the rights of the children specifically. Going through the SDGs which are 17 in number, we can see that children are practically affected by almost all the goals. The goals that are specifically linked to children are: Goal 1: poverty; Goal 2: zero hunger; Goal 3: good health and well-being; Goal 4: quality education; Goal 5: gender equality; Goal 6 clean water and sanitation; goal 7; affordable and clean energy¹³: climate action in the early childhood. Goal 16.2 protection of children from abuse, exploitation, trafficking and violence. For example, Goal 13 is aimed at combating climate change and its impact by taking urgent action. Climate change and environmental degradation are equity issues that undermine the rights of every child, especially the most disadvantaged. Thus, SDGs are indeed relevant in all aspects of early childhood education. Therefore, sustainability education is crucial

and must be introduced to the child from cradle as catching them young is critical to greater and fast development. As spelt out in Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2011), ‘sustainability education is futures-oriented, focusing on protecting environments and creating a more ecologically and socially just world through informed action. Actions that support more sustainable patterns of living require consideration of environmental, social, cultural and economic systems and their interdependence’ (p. 6).

Also, Christensen & Kraftl (2013) cited in Bradbery, 2023) maintain that childhood is a critical period for the development of some fundamental habits, norms, dispositions, values, lifestyles, and identities all of which can have profound impact on the children’s environment. Catching them young is critical to fast development and awareness of their environment. Undoubtedly, children’s books play an essential role in raising their awareness and enhancing their knowledge about nature and their fair dealing with natural resources. Thus, they should be taught early that their well-being is connected to the community and the planet. Therefore, sustainability education is crucial and must be introduced to the child from cradle. Story books with sustainability themes are veritable tools for disseminating ecological awareness to young children and teachers are to leverage on such materials in their instruction, and thereby expose children to the environmental education right from their young age so as to enable them to know how nature works, how to preserve it, and how to empower them early to be defender of their environment. Indeed, there is a literary discipline that focuses on ecologically related issues—ecocentrism, which is the study of literature and ecology from an interdisciplinary point of view, where literature scholars analyse texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subjects of nature. In all, teaching them sustainability in general will create a generation of environmentally conscious individuals who are committed to making a positive impact on the world.

It must be stated that one of the problems plaguing the global space today is ecological challenges. It is believed that the ecosystem is gradually collapsing and if this happens then, it will likely have unprecedented effects on social and economic systems which will invariably results in instability and even global conflict. As Bradbery (2013) observes, greater life expectancy, gender and racial equality, respect for human rights, and good economy and political freedoms may be a mirage when there is ecological degradation. This implies that ecological degradation could birth series of social, political, and economic challenges in the world and this could have a ripple effect on a sustainable future. Therefore, Bradbery suggests that young children who are leaders of tomorrow must of a necessity, be groomed/trained to take up the responsibility of caring for the earth and its inhabitants and teachers are the sole agents of educating the young leaders to ensure sustainability. The onus is on the adults and other agents of education to explain to the children what ecosystem means and their importance to children. The next section discusses the implications of children's literature on sustainable development.

Implications of Children's Literature on Sustainable Development and the Environment.

There is a pertinent question that begs for answer (s) in this study: Does the teaching of children's literature have any implication (s) for sustainable development? As revealed in the preceding section, almost all the sustainable development goals are in one way or the other, relevant to child development. Therefore, we can use children's literary text to espouse the causes for a sustainable development from early childhood. That is, this literary genre is unarguably, a veritable tool for educating and inspiring young minds to understand, appreciate, and actively engage in sustainable development goals, fostering a sense of responsibility, empathy, and stewardship towards the planet and future generation (UNESCO, 2018). Through stories, characters, and themes, children's books can raise awareness about environmental conservation, social justice, cultural diversity, and community empowerment. In sum, by incorporating sustainability principles

into storytelling, children lit not only educates but also inspires children to become agents of positive change in their communities and ultimately at the global level.

Moreover, Bliss (2013) stresses the need for children's engagement when she observes that many decisions in the global space—World Trade Organization agreements, terrorism in New York, deforestation in the Amazon rainforest, genetic engineering innovations, or a simple sneeze in China that evolves into a global influenza epidemic' always have significant effect on children no matter their different locations in the world. Therefore, children must be involved in global development plans since they will eventually take over the reins of power from the adults. The following are some of the implications of children's literature on sustainable development.

1. Cultural Preservation.

Included in the SDGs is the preservation of culture. As spelt out in SDG 11, countries of the world have pledged to make 'cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable' (UNESCO, 2018). Target 11.4 calls for strengthening efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage. All of these values or goals can be promoted through children literature—preservation of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices, maintenance of cultural diversity and heritage, all of which contribute to sustainable development. For example, books like 'Nze and Ogbuefi' by Ifeoma Okoye celebrate Nigerian culture and traditions, instilling pride in children's cultural identities.

2. Community Empowerment.

As children of school age start school, they can be taught the values of communal love and tolerance. Children's literature authored by Nigerians often emphasizes community values and collective action, which are essential for sustainable development. 'Strange Friends' by Isaac Chinweze is an example promote selflessness and communality which aid environmental conservation and social progress.

3. Environmental Stewardship:

Environmental sustainability is one of the core pillars of SD. Environmental sustainability is about the natural environment and how it remains productive and resilient to support human life (Mensah, 2019). It means that humanity must judiciously harness for economic gains all the natural capital at their disposal while curtaining waste. The world is witnessing an increasing series of ecological crises (Baratz and Hazeira, 2011) and surmounting this problem seems to be a herculean task for the government and concerned individuals. This no doubt calls for the need to educate the younger generation on the need for protection of the environment. Exposing children to worthy literature books can raise awareness about environmental issues specific to their region, such as deforestation, pollution, and wildlife conservation.

4. Education for Sustainable Development:

Children's books authored by Nigerians play a crucial role in educating young readers about sustainable development goals and principles. Texts like 'Aisha's Earrings' by Umm Zakiyyah incorporate themes of social justice, gender equality, and poverty alleviation, fostering a deeper understanding of sustainable development concepts.

5. Empowerment Through Representation.

Nigerian children's literature featuring diverse characters and settings empowers children from marginalized communities, promoting inclusivity and social equity, which are integral to sustainable development. Books such as 'Ifeoma Learns to Dance' by Ifeoma Onyefulu celebrate diversity and challenge stereotypes, empowering children to embrace their identities and contribute positively to society.

Criteria for Selecting Children's literary Texts.

As culled from Weih (2015) the following are some of the criteria for selection of literary texts (especially narrative) for children:

1. The Events of the Story.

Whatever the book type, the events in it must be exciting, surprising, and full of suspense, clearly showing the climax and anti-climax, and so on. Teachers must be cognizant of the dumbed down plots or over simplification of words, action, and problems. Interesting vocabulary should be included in the selected texts.

2. The Setting.

This includes the location and the time of the story which should be clearly identified using words and illustrations at the early pages of the book.

3. The Problem or Conflict.

The problem or conflict in the story should be described early in the first few pages of the book and it must be something that will be arouse the interest to the learners and as well be significant and relevant to the children's lives experiences and of course the teacher too so the children too will be interested (the truism is, you can't teach what doesn't interest you!).

4. The Characters.

The characters in the selected texts should be of interest to the children and they should be presented and clearly described in words or illustrations at the first few pages of the text. Among other qualities, the characters should be different types of personalities who display emotions especially humor which is paramount since children can be humorous and do enjoy humor and appreciate it. As for informational books, the criteria include creativity in terms of captivating illustrations, use of bright colours on every page of the book and the book covers, large prints, use of imaginative words, terms, and of course the topics of informational books should be of interesting to the young learners, while there should be a table of contents that are eye-catching. And the font size must be bold enough so as to aid text readability.

Conclusion.

On a daily basis children are exposed to different types of experiences either at home or in school or among their peers, all of which impact them either positively or negatively. Since children are affected by virtually all the sustainable development goals, they can be taught from cradle, all the goals that are connected to the experiences they are more likely to have or have had. We believe that all of these experiences can be illustrated in the children's literary texts that are recommended for instructions. Using children's literary texts to teach them the relevant SDGs will empower them early to take action—take ownership of societal challenges and join the leagues of global problem-solvers and the society will be better off for it.

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