

***Reading Literature at Junior Secondary School Level in Zimbabwe* by Rosemary Moyana, University of Zimbabwe Publications, Harare 2000, pb 193pp. ISBN 0-908307-90-X**

WHY DO PARENTS spend so much money to send their children to élite schools? A middle-class lecturer can spend one quarter of her salary on school fees on one child alone, without counting the cost of uniforms, books and other costs. It costs more than 15 times as much to send a child to an élite private urban day-school in Zimbabwe as to an élite government school in the formerly white areas, (that is, the low- and medium density suburbs). A government school in a high-density (all-black) residential area costs significantly less and a rural day school less still. The answer is simple. The kind of schools that exist in contemporary Zimbabwe reflect both our contemporary class structure and our colonial heritage: white schools and church schools produce the best school-leaving results (with boarding schools producing better results than day schools) and rural day schools (comprising around 78% of the total number of secondary schools in Zimbabwe in 1989) producing the worst. And levels of funding and access to suitably trained teachers and resources in general follow this pattern. No parent who can afford an élite school can afford not to send her children to one, as school-leaving certification provides the most important gateway to tertiary education and all other achievements.

These facts are common knowledge and Dr Moyana does not waste her time reiterating them. Instead she seeks to discover what the reading literacy levels at Form II level are in Zimbabwe, and to analysis reasons for the success or failure of different schools. This book is part of a study undertaken between 1989 and 1992 of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievements Reading Literacy Research Study. The study sampled 31 countries world-wide. Of these only three, Nigeria, Botswana and Zimbabwe, were in Africa. The ultimate aim was to compare and contrast the reading literacy achievements of participating schools within Zimbabwe and between Zimbabwe and the other countries, and to make recommendations to

teachers on the basis of this research for improving reading literacy levels.

The methodological section provides an exemplary model for social science research and is illuminating reading for its standards of exposition. For this non-statistically minded reader, tables were laid out with clarity and elegance and were easy to follow. The same is true of the analysis of research findings. This was richly detailed and full of fruitful insights that may not form the core of her general conclusions but could prove useful to many, from parents to publishers seeking to develop suitable leisure reading material for African students of this age. I have in mind the tables on pp106–107. It appears that African students aged 14 are unique in listing music magazines as their first preference, and news and politics as their second (although the latter interest is shared with some Scandinavian countries and other Third-World countries). With so little research available on reading habits and tastes in Africa, such information is priceless.

Voluntary reading habits provide clues as to the child's literacy level, as do the child's attitude towards reading (whether it is a chore or done for pleasure and intrinsic satisfaction, or whether children read only for instrumental goals and consider reading to be hard work). So do socio-economic facts about the child in the home; the language spoken at home, the education level of the child's parents, the adequacy of food as hungry children cannot do well in class, the student's aspirations and the amount of time spent watching television as well as homework habits. The report also studied the qualifications, teaching methods and length of teaching experience of teachers, together with their personal reading habits. Zimbabwe has fewer female teachers as a percentage of the total establishment than other countries. This is unfortunate for us as it appears that reading scores are generally higher in education systems where the number of female teachers is higher. Moyana recommends further research into this area.

Finally a school questionnaire was administered concerning the resources available both within the school and in the community, including parental cooperation. The highest-scoring schools in Zimbabwe provide on average the following facilities for their students; a school

library, a reading room for students, a student newspaper, a drama and debating club. In these, as in other respects, the highest scoring schools were those high fee-paying and formerly white schools in low-density suburbs. The score that these schools achieved across the range of tests and questionnaires to children, teachers and schools, matched those of the countries with the highest literacy scores for this age group, like Finland. No wonder aspiring parents start coaching their children in English at preschool level so they can pass one after another hurdle to get a place in one of these sought-after schools!

Coming back to the literacy performance, five of the 31 schools tested in Zimbabwe achieved a level of reading literacy classified as "very good". These five were the top élite schools. The lowest-ranking schools across the whole survey found Zimbabwe, together with Botswana and Nigeria, at the bottom of the table.

Given crushing poverty levels at individual and national level, together with the massive expansion of the education system in 1980 prospects for Zimbabwean literacy look grim. I am among those who deplore the way our government recklessly invested in massive, unsuitable educational expansion without sufficient preparation to ensure that our high educational standards were maintained. I am now among the many who see no way to remedy this desperate situation and achieve the equity of provision that the educational expansion was meant to provide, and so dismally failed to do so, in the first place. Moyana, however, ends with an encouraging list of positive and detailed recommendations to improving literacy standards that involve creative thinking and making use of existing resources rather than a huge increase in the educational budget. For this clear-sighted appraisal she is to be applauded. All who are interested in the relationship between development and literacy and education in sub Saharan, English-speaking Africa, should make a point of getting hold of this book.

REVIEWED BY CAROLE PEARCE, EDITOR