

Myths, mysteries and measured progress: readers becoming meaning makers

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As you can imagine it is vexing to be in Africa talking about Africa to Africans. When I was preparing my paper, I felt at times as if I was having to do backward somersaults as I found myself grappling with understanding the issues facing Africa. In my effort to discern what Africa was facing, I reviewed a number of the reports emanating from global and other authorities –UNESCO, World Bank, the African Union (e.g., UNESCO, African Union, UNICEF, 2025; African Union, 2025) To be more grounded, I pursued novels about Africa by Africans (e.g. *The Wizard of the Crow* (2006) by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o; *Nervous Conditions* (1988; 2004) by Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangaremba) as well as recent accounts of the history of Africa along with reports or strategy statements by the governments within some of the African countries. As I tried to digest some of these reports, I did different forms of cross-checking with some of my African colleagues and delving into research reports and commentaries published in selected journals --matching the findings with some of the data along with my experiences in literacy projects involving countries such as Botswana, Nigeria, Malawi and Sierra Leone.

At the same time, I found myself somewhat overwhelmed by Africa's diversity or what might be termed super-diversity given the crossing over with mobility and migration that occurs. (Vertovec, 2007; Rizvi, 2009). For example, there are differences across countries and regions. Plus, cities such as Lagos are both cultural centres to their First Peoples as well as nowadays are home for over 250 ethnic groups.

Let me offer my first myth: ***pronouncements by outsiders are critical to engaging in ongoing educational developments***. The problem is that outsiders (such as me) are apt to be critically illiterate—lacking the knowledge of local circumstances and the needed nuanced understandings to contribute to productive changes.

I do apologize, but as you might expect, my contemplations extended to comparisons with some of the thorny diversity issues with which I have been involved in North America, Australia, New Zealand and Asia. For example, in Australia, Canada and the US, I have been involved in national as well as state discussions and school-based initiatives tied to meeting various challenges of the diverse circumstances in these countries. These projects have involved working side by side teachers and their students as they pursued changes in their curriculum and teaching practices across urban and remote communities with schools with predominately Indigenous students or with a rich ethnic mix due to migration and other developments. The

changes range from efforts to challenge education tied to long term colonial influences; engagements intended to build bridges to communities as well as attempts in schools to move to organic locally based curriculum as well as from what I would label student-centered learning to learner decision-making. In terms of reading, initiatives have included navigating shifts from monolingualism to transliteracies, pursuing reading comprehension development, multiple literacies, various forms of assessment and teacher development. They have involved court cases, government commission and research and development that builds upon the epistemic possibilities.

The science of literacy

My approach to life involves an embrace of discovery and forms of investigations of our lives I view myself as a global educator who embraces diversity and the opportunity to learn with and from others. In terms of cross-cultural engagements, I try to be an ally that is trustworthy and respectful rather than presumptuous and arrogant. I am quite conscious that one is on “tricky ground” when you engage with, study, draw conclusions or make recommendations about others (Smith, 2005, 20012).

I oppose the view or assumption that what is best for one individual or group will be for another. Therefore, I cringe when I encounter the view that the colonizer’s form or education should be applied uncritically and stringently across communities. Likewise, I veer away from the notion that we should standardize or approach education with “one size fits all” in an effort “to level the playing field”. I am more in favor of enlisting a variety of perspectives and respecting local self-determination and sovereignty. This could entail an ongoing conglomerate approach that is constantly seeking synergies or the flow befitting the vision of rivers having multiple tributaries. Certainly, I am wary of simple-minded solutions or the notion of a “panacea” or “silver bullet” in education. I consider it precarious to overgeneralize “best practices” or what might be touted as “evidence based” mandates—to prescribe rather than customize to meet the needs of different groups and individuals. At least, in so far as literacy education is concerned, I would argue that the science is never settled and the notion of identified “best practices” should shift to ongoing best practicing (Tierney & Pearson, 2023)

Again, I have come to reject the notion of a panacea, a single best practice for all, one size fits all approach—in other words, the widescale generalization of approaches as if the findings in one case can be applied to another situation is a myth. **It is a myth for educators to think that *the science is settled*.** As educators we are constantly involved in a process of discovery as we refine, adapt and customize our practices to meet the different needs that are manifested across diverse learners and situation. Essentially science and teaching involve ongoing discovery... continuous experimentation as synergies are enlisted to support learning.

Teaching involves engaging in solving mysteries that are ever changing. It requires a case-based approach not unlike what occurs in medicine. I apologize but let me get a little personal. I was recently diagnosed as having a form of blood cancer. Understandably I wanted answers from my doctor. Rather than giving definite answers, my doctor pushed back on my questions indicating

that I am an “n of 1”. He assured me of his vigilance, and he is in constant watch of my condition. As a result, I have experienced adjustments to my treatment as I have progressed.

I believe that educators should approach findings in a fashion similar to the medical field...use findings from different studies but with a very watchful eye recognizing each learner is an “n of 1” requiring occasional checks and forms of ongoing monitoring and customized care.

I am not alone in these views; I would speculate that most educational scholars would offer a refrained response to attempts to generalize from their research. Our leading scholars would emphasize that research should not be generalized from one study to various sites except in a fashion that is very discerning. As Kadriye Ercikan and Wolf-Michael Roth stated.

The teacher, to design appropriate instruction for individual students, is interested precisely in the variation from the trend, that is, she is interested in the variation that in statistical approaches constitutes error variance...with forms of knowledge that are sufficiently specific to allow her to design instruction to the specific needs expressed in the variation from the trend. (Ercikan & Roth, 2009, p. 5).

Such refrained sentiments reflect an orientation to educational endeavors that recognizes the need to move beyond mandating the same practices for all students to recognizing the situatedness of learners and the culturally laden nature of any of individual and collective worlds. Essentially the key variable emanating from most research on learning are teachers—their discernments and customize learning experiences in accordance with the needs of students.

My concern about mandating uniformity extends to what I would suggest are the colonizing tendencies that still persist. I am committed to challenging top-down mandates especially those inherited from colonialism and empire building that has existed in our world. I view myself as a globalist with commitments to pluralism—not a utopia but a multitopia. Certainly, I question the “doctrine of discovery” that gave nations permission from the Catholic church to colonize and override local culture throughout Africa, other countries including Australia. I question the genocide and enslavement that occurred with impunity across many countries including Australia, the America’s and Africa. In Australia I am disgusted at the population’s failure to recognize and respect Australian Aboriginal rights as the First People. In Canada I am saddened by the ramifications of the creation of residential schools where children were taken from their parents and placed in schools where they were indoctrinated, and many lost their connection to their families and culture. **The myth perpetuated was that western countries (French, British, Portuguese, Spanish and Italian) had the right and should be given the authority to engage in cultural genocide and displacement or creating systems that aligned privilege and advantages to colonial loyalists.** The myth was that the *First Nations children should be taken away for their own good...* the truth was that were enslaved to be assimilated and scarred for ever. Local ways of knowing were silenced.

Given the ongoing dominance of colonial ways. the mystery remains how to remove the shackles, remedy the problem and ensure that such never occurs again. Naming it, apologizes may not be enough ...in Australia a low proportion of Aboriginals are afforded opportunities to be engaged in tertiary education. If they enter the University, they will often encounter Indigenous knowledges being treated as an object for study rather than fully integrated as

primary in the curriculum. They are confronted with a positioning of Aboriginals as being deficient.

What remains a mystery is what will it take to divest education initiatives of the colonial forces still in play as evidence by the curriculum—content, teaching practices (including mode of Instruction revering English or other languages) and assessment practices that govern educational access. *In my view there is a huge myth perpetuated by the colonizers that assimilation and importing or imposing colonial ways (especially exclusively) are positive.*

I recall when I was invited to participate in a review of Botswana schools for UNESCO and ILA. My immediate reaction was I was not in any position to do so. Then I was sent the curriculum and information on the school structure testing programs etc. It was almost identical to what I experienced in Australia—learning about British heroes and mimicking the structure of British academically inclined schools. And as is still common, the language imposed upon schools has been and still is tied to making English the language of instruction. By the way, behind the scenes, we found that many teachers resorted to what might be termed nowadays as transliteracy practices--enlisted the home language to engage learners, Unfortunately, oftentimes the colonial style of academic curriculum and testing programs may not serve to embrace learners or provide ongoing support for what might be considered their life pathways.

I cringe when education policies are tethered to colonial traditions ahead of and preferred over Indigenous or local knowledge, cultural practices and sociolinguistic tools—tethering education content and practices that seem severed from the experiences of people and their needs. My concern is that schools should be places that connect with the learners' worlds—enabling them to bring to bear their knowledge, modes of knowing and modes of interacting to their learning. If you ask the question, do the systems in place lead to a displacement of its graduates? The answer appears to be “yes”. For example, in the case of students in remote areas many move to urban areas in hopes of finding some form of employment.

African educational research in a western world

My views of colonialism extend to research and my angst regarding what has been the western monopoly of what counts...In my view, the kind of research and development traditions that becomes visible at PALFA is a must. It informs African initiatives and should inform western researchers. On the positive side, African organizations and institutions seem to be taking things on for themselves—pursuing African outlets for African research. On the negative side, ***it is a myth that our key “global” research journals informing our educational practices take heed of studies of African learners and their circumstances.***

If you are a researcher in Africa, I suspect that you know what I mean. Occasionally, the journals publish African research enlisting African epistemic consideration. However, mostly, it is rare to have African research by Africans published in the western outlets. Also, it is rare to find African research cited in western journals despite the thousands of references across articles in journals that claim to be world leaders—such as the American Educational Research Journal,

the Review of Educational Research, Educational Researcher, the Reading Research Quarterly, the Journal of Literacy Research or any British, Canadian, Australian or European outlet.¹

There are exceptions but they are rare. For example, the Reading Research Quarterly recently published a sociolinguistic study by a Kenyan (David Wandera) that examined forms of transliteracy occurring among Kenyan students in classrooms. The article was exceptional providing a rich description of how the students and teacher criss-cross their pursuits enlisting a range of languages not just English. Despite the acceptance and release of the article in a top-notch western journal, Wandera was conscious that his article was the exception not the rule. He concluded his article with the comment.

The current blackout of non-Western(ized) know-how in scholarly conversations on language use and literacy practices is incompatible with the diversity and connectivity of our globalizing world. (Wandera, 2021)

Likewise in a paper published by the Mena Fem movement entitled “Exclusion by design: How Africans are kept out of African Development”, Bemnet Agata and Gugu Resha (2024) noted:

Despite making up 14% of the global population and its exponential economic growth, Africa only contributes 1.1% of the world’s scientific knowledge. The consequences are profound. This means that the theory and evidence that these economic and social development interventions are based on are not formulated by Africans or African contexts. More importantly, how can they proclaim to be responsive to the historical and contemporary challenges of African countries?

This reinforces the supremacy of Western knowledge as unquestionable truth while marginalizing localized knowledge systems as subjective or inconsequential. Thus, we

¹ .. in journals such as the Reading Research Quarterly (RRQ) and the Journal of Literacy Research (JLR). Both RRQ and JLR have a limited number of publications by non-Westerners, with few citations of non-Western scholars. Despite the RRQ making claims of a 15% percent acceptance rate from non-Western sources. JLR reflects a similar form of Western exclusivity. Across four years of JLR articles from the past decade, there is a disproportionately low number of contributors from outside of the United States. The proportion of international articles that appeared in JLR, approximately 15%, include a very low percentage exclusively by Eastern, Southern, or Indigenous authors. On the rare occasions when global perspectives have been published, they are referenced in Western terms, aligned with Western norms, and positioned as instantiations of Western theorists., the proportion of international articles is around 10%—with very few of these articles. P. 3) (Tierney, R. J., Smith G. H. & Kan, W. (2021). Global Literacies research diversity: A manifesto for change. *Journal of literacy Research*. 53, 3, 1-19. <https://journals.sagepub.com/eprint/KCFIVKFTNICN7PRXDWH8/full> p.3)

the circumstances reflect a form of Western empire building as studies are judged predominately by Westerners using Western theorists, Western circumstances and Western norms of empiricism to judge their legitimacy, frame their rationale and couch their findings. The current circumstances for education research reflect a global knowledge economy that secures Western interests by imposing multi-leveled regularity systems favoring Western empiricism almost exclusively. The approach represents a form of protectionism and more. It perpetuates a coercive form of empiricism by the West as it amalgamates Western preferences via review systems that are likely to portray studies as deficient or un-acceptable unless aligned with Western rhetorical styles tied to Western theorists and scholarship, and related to Western circumstances p. 181-182 Tierney, R. J. (2018) Global educational research in western times: the rise and plight of China. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 13: 2,163-192.

African practitioners must relentlessly question who produces knowledge, what is deemed as knowledge, and whose experiences are valued as valid sources of insight.

Placing Africans at the forefront of development is crucial for realizing a prosperous continent and advancing a Pan-African vision that protects against external control and profit-driven interests. In the face of escalating ecological, fiscal, gendered, and militarised crises, our responses must match the scale and urgency of these challenges to envision a resilient Africa where we have control over our own strategic vision for the continent. <https://menafemmovement.org/exclusion-by-design-how-africans-are-kept-out-of-african-development>.

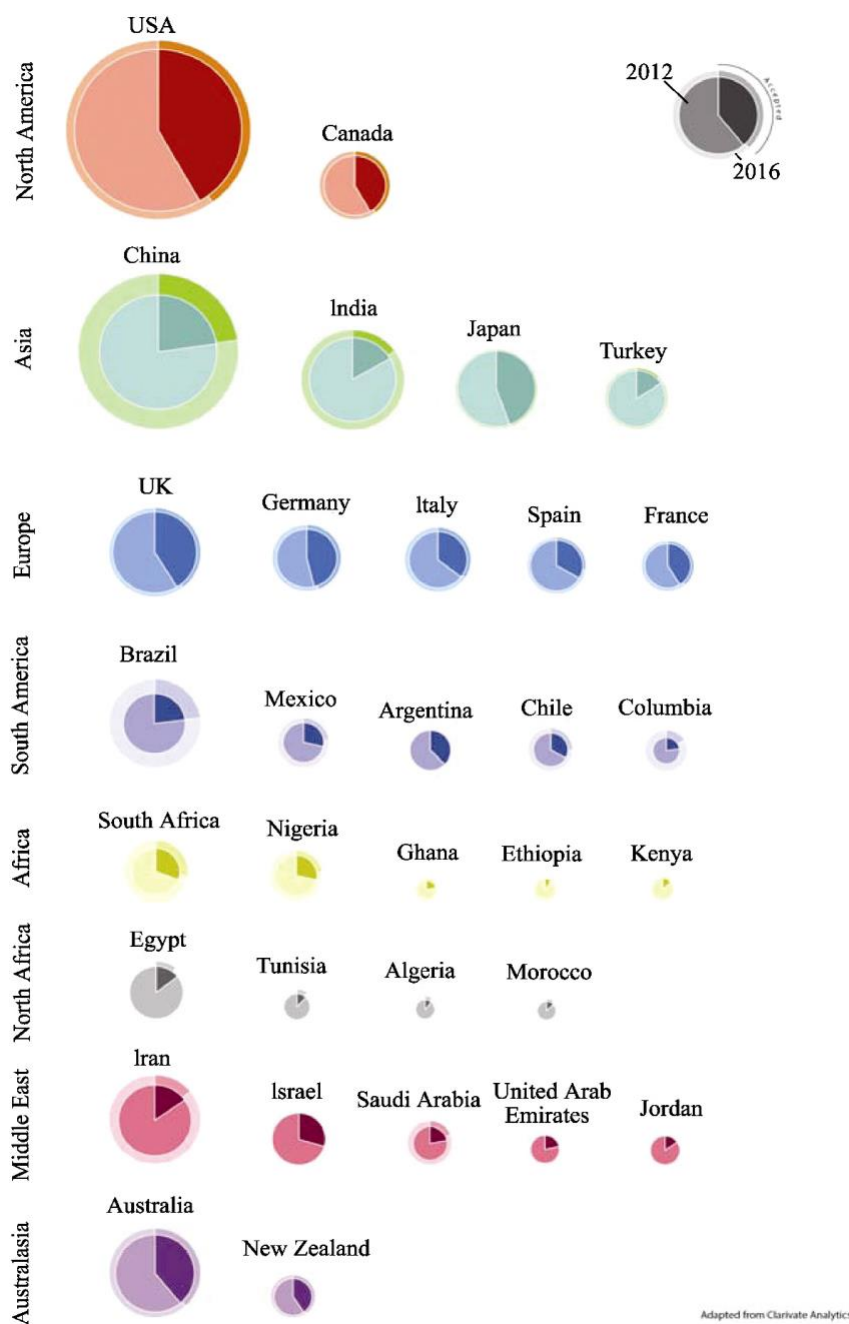
Perhaps we are on the verge of some changes as there does appear to be growing interest in an Indigenous and global agenda as evidenced by recent volumes focused on global literacy research. I believe there is a growing recognition that context matters. Befittingly Africans recognize the need to support research across Africa to inform African decision making. Initiatives are being launched that are intent of advancing African research to reduce its dependency upon western platforms that have provided only a limited African presence, relevance and voice (Manyukwe, 2025; Teferra, 2025). Still, I would suggest the mystery remains as to how to change this situation and build an ever-expanding African research presence including research that builds upon African epistemology including possible synergies between various African, Eastern and Western epistemologies ².

² As Wandera (2021) suggests an

It is necessary to directly name and address existing epistemic imbalance in research on literacy practices. Etic/emic approaches allow researchers to incorporate the participant's point of view (Geertz, 1974). Although laudable, these approaches (alone) do not hold up for scrutiny the positionality of the metalanguage and analytic apparatus that researchers employ in data analysis. As Wandera (2021) suggests:

Taking up an interepistemic synergy approach that is cognizant of epistemic power relations and the multiple centers and peripheries of sociospatial language use sets the stage for using local knowledge and cultural systems to enrich literacy analysis. ...An interepistemic synergy approach .. diversifies the canon of thought and counteracts the colonial epistemic agenda."

Figure 1: The relative proportion of submissions and acceptances for selected countries (2012-2016)



If infiltrating western outlets is a goal, there is a need to reckon with submissions of African research studies and their review. The number of submissions from Africa is lower than other regions of the world as well as the acceptance rates. As Agata and Resha (2024) suggested the exclusion may reflect forms of ethnocentrism, racial and gender biases as well as the protection of privilege and power of western norms by westerners.

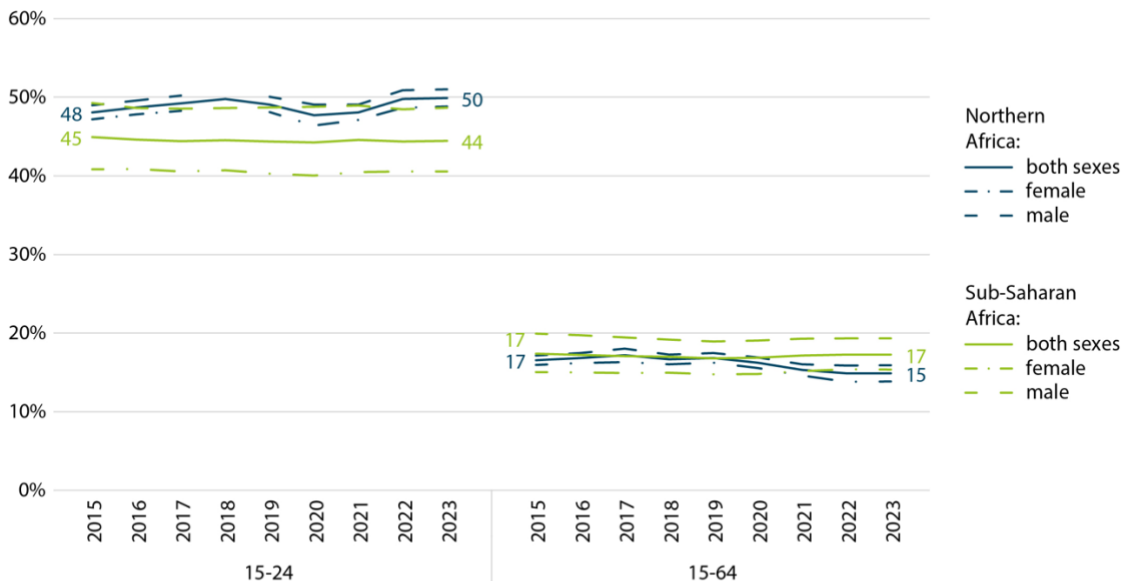
What about the educational context? Are there key areas of concern?

If you examine national reports and goals of education as well as international analyses focussed upon African issues, access to education and issues of attendance as well as attrition receive a great deal of attention.

As I delved into discussion of educational goals for Africa and specifically Nigeria, I found myself encountering a number of commentaries about access. From my perspective they were similar to what I have found in Australia—issues of access along with discussions of the pursuit of equity. In my experience in Australia access is a major problem especially for economically challenged groups or certain diverse groups plus the model of education remains tied to colonial models and university department viewing themselves as guardians of traditional learning...For example, the proportion of Australian Aborigines finishing high school and accessing universities is disproportionately low. In Australia such results in universities being community located rather than involved and a larger proportion of children from economically privileged household get access. In various African countries similar issues appear to be a focus and being wrestled with.

In Africa, while there are differences across countries and regions, it appears to be relatively widespread that a large proportion of the population is not attending and completing schooling and the number appears to grow as students move from primary schools to secondary schools.

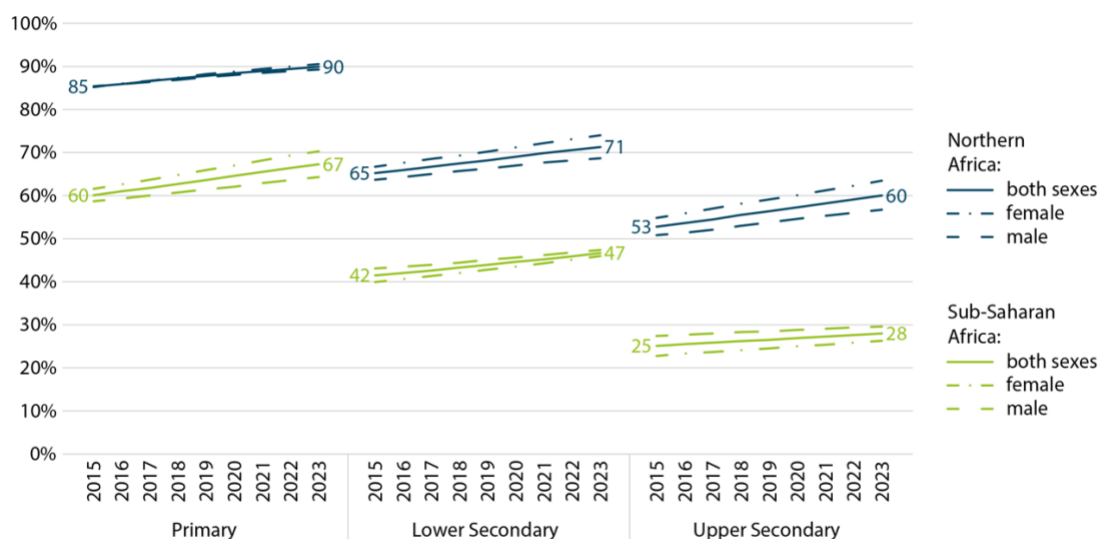
Figure 2: Participation rate of youth and adults in formal and non-formal education and training in the previous 12 months, by region, sex and age group (%), 2015-2023



Data source: UIS September 2024 data release. Note: Data labels refer to both sexes. Annual data by sex is provided in the Annex 2.

UNESCO, African Union, & UNICEF (2025). Transforming learning and skills development in Africa: 2nd continental report.
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000393250>

Figure 3: Completion rate (%), by region, education level and sex, 2015-2023

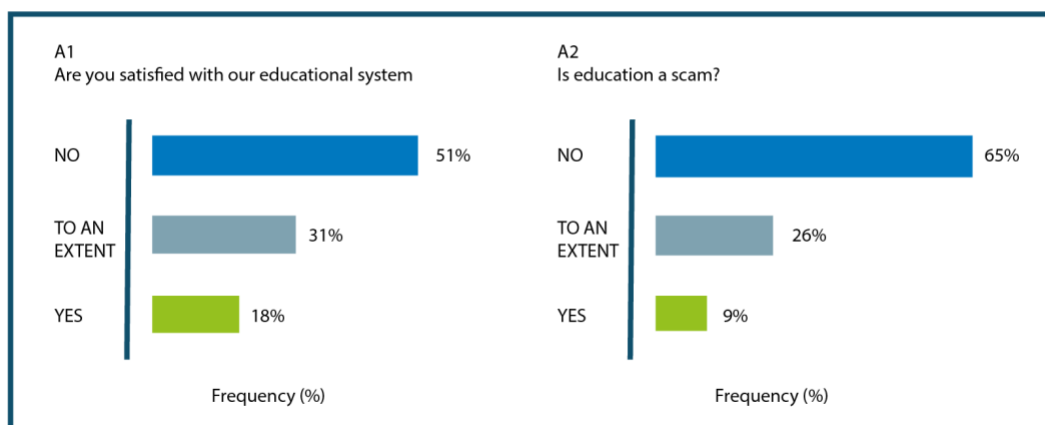


Data source: UIS September 2024 data release. Note: Data labels refer to both sexes. Annual data by sex is provided in the Annex 2.

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In Nigeria, the data on attendance would suggest that a significant proportion of young Africans choose not to attend schools and this number increases as you move from primary to secondary schools. Indeed, the issue of access is coupled with a degree of cynicism toward schooling—including a notion that some hold that schools are not relevant and that schools involve a scam. A recent study examined this view and pursued interviews of youth from the Delta region. These interviews confirmed that a large percentage of youth held the view that schools were a scam largely because they were irrelevant (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 Is Nigerian education a scam?



Comments from some of the interviewees provide some clarity on some of the views held.

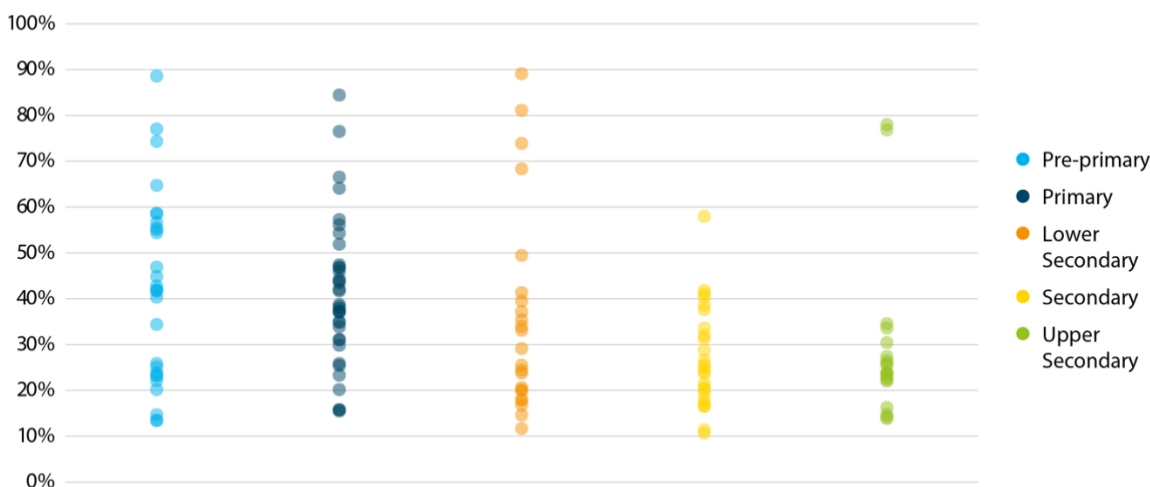
School is a scam' means that someone who did not attend school will have a good job and make more money than those who attend. There will be no job for them after spending so many years in school. This is so unfair (Female, University student)

In Nigeria, 99% of youths and graduates are unemployed. First-class holders are shoemakers, tailors etc., so this slogan came out because of the crisis graduates are facing because... after four years of schooling, working hard and suffering in school, you come out with nothing to help put food on the table, no means of survival... Most graduates are surviving with the handwork they learnt from those that did not get a secondary education, so why won't people say school is a scam (Male, University student)? "Well, in my understanding... 'education is a scam' means that the education system has failed in the sense that once a person graduates from school, there is no job. Graduates now become apprentices to an illiterate man or woman who doesn't know the worth of education" (Female, Secondary school student).

Are there remedies to the problems of access, attrition and attendance?

The challenge is complex as educators might lack the support to implement solutions. It may be that teachers lack the preparation or tools or infrastructure to ensure that the educational experiences of the learners are relevant to their needs and possible life pathways. The challenge is whether the schools can engage with the learners in meaningful ways preparing them to be able to engage in a range of projects and the kinds of problem-solving they will need to be successful. Teachers may need to be akin to cultural workers with an orientation to education that builds bridges to the learners' worlds past, present and future. Based upon the variable nature of teacher qualifications, such may necessitate investments in teacher preparation, teacher development and coaching.

Figure 4: Pupil-Qualified Teacher Ratio, by country and education level, most recent year available (2021-2023)



Data source: UIS September 2024 data release. Note: Data values by country are provided in the Annex 2.

UNESCO, African Union, & UNICEF (2025). Transforming learning and skills development in Africa: 2nd continental report. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000393250>

Perhaps teachers will need to be more akin to designers of learning support in a partnership with the learners and their communities. I would expect that it would entail *schools* that can engage with learner centered and culturally responsive approaches that connect with the learners' lives. From my perspective this includes some of the culturally responsive alternatives that have emerged in Italy such as the project oriented approach developed by Reggio Emilia (Gandini & Forman, 1995) or the Rich Literacy Tasks developed for Education Queensland Australia with the leadership of Allan Luke and Peter Freebody (Education Queensland, 2000) and Productive literacies approach also out of Australia (Lingard et al, 2003) or initiatives such as the afterschool Funds of Knowledge project in the US (Gonzales et al., 2006). In terms of Africa, projects *such as* the Literacy Enhancement and Achievement Paradigm (LEAP) developed via the leadership of Chukwuemeka Eze Onukaogu, Ifeanyi Arua, Mrs. Margaret Ekwutosi Onuora and Grace Onyedikachi Abiodun-Ekus and at the hands of Nigerian teachers. These paradigms build upon learner-centered approaches across the disciplines in ways that support the strategic meaning making including self-assessment by and of students. Such initiatives represent a project-based orientation that includes seeking ways to connect learning with the learners' communities. Unfortunately, at times such pursuits are more exceptional than commonplace as they may be antithetical with the governments or other regime who are wanting to standardize what is taught and tested. Instead, I would suggest replacing the implementation of best practices with best practicing and a shift from one size fits all standardized pursuits to programs that reflect organic, situation based and customized initiatives.

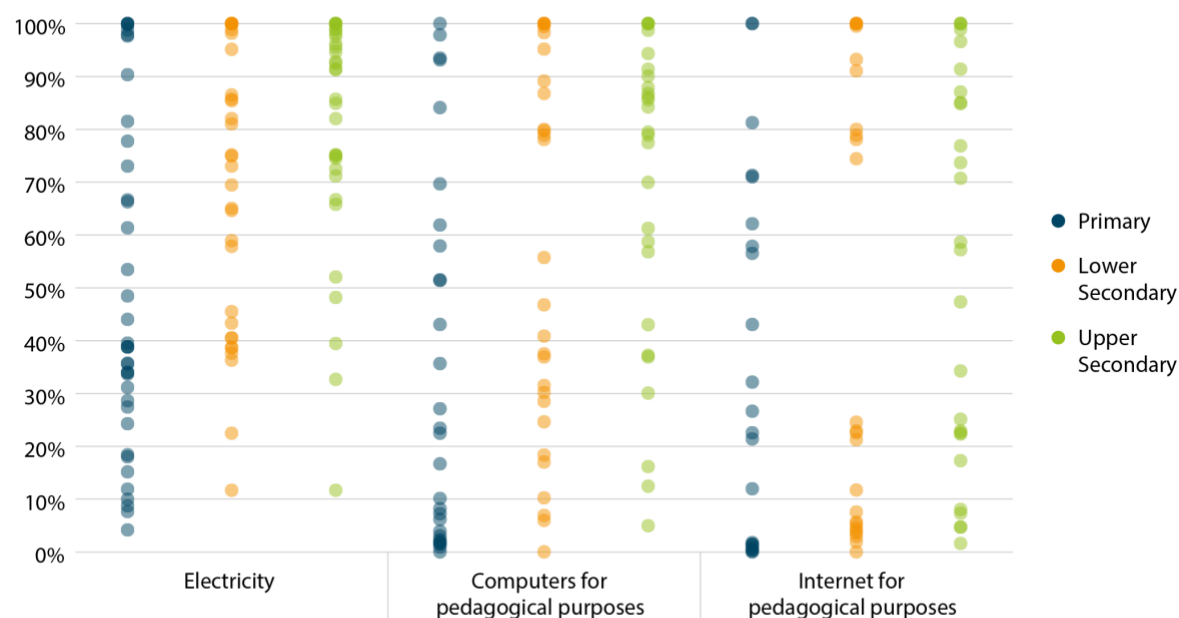
One of the major challenges may be infrastructure. At the elementary and secondary levels, the spaces available for learning may not be tenable. For example, in a number of the classrooms engaged in initiatives in Malawi and Sierra Leone supported by a Canadian Non-Profit CODE), some of the spaces are overflowing with students such that any form of project-based or learner centered initiative would be difficult. Many classrooms did not have spaces for students to work

independently or engage in projects. In many rooms the chalkboard is under the exclusive command of the teacher and the basis for students copying only.

Likewise in many African there are funding shortfalls as demand for spaces, infrastructure and personnel costs exceed government allocations. For example, in South African universities there is great concern about the shortfall in access and student support resulting in efforts to pull together more virtual learning possibilities and programs to meet specific skill or occupational needs. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20250930085339728>

As I am suggesting it seems as if a number of African countries or regions within countries are seen as needing major development including essential support to address matters as basic as schools having access to running water and electricity or simply learning space. You can see the variation in the data included in the recent report compiled by UNESCO, UNICEF and African Union. The report offers data that suggests that a large percentage of schools in certain countries lack the infrastructure to support classrooms Again, too often schools have a dearth of workspace, a lack of display areas for learners' exploration. Oftentimes schools entail overly crowded conditions that lead to forms of compressed learning and a preponderance of teacher directed chalkboard-based activities. From a literacy educator's perspective, the presence of texts –especially students' texts—may be minimal as some classrooms are operating without walls and sometimes only a single chalkboard.

Figure 5: Percentage of schools with access to electricity and to computers and internet for pedagogical purposes (%), by country and education level, most recent year available (2021-2024)



Data source: UIS September 2024 data release. Note: Data values by country are provided in the Annex 2.

UNESCO, African Union, & UNICEF (2025). Transforming learning and skills development in Africa: 2nd continental report. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000393250>

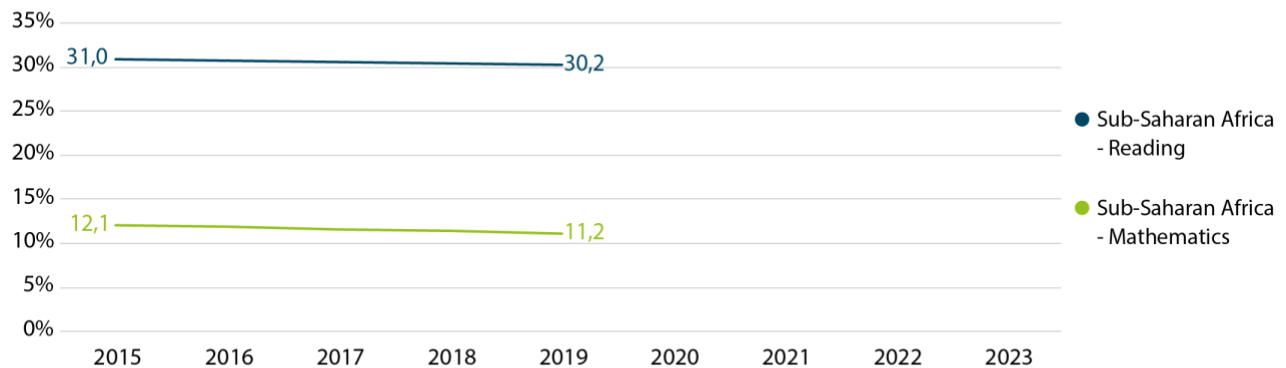
Are Africans progressing in literacy?

If one looks at the journey from the perspective of literacy I also reminded of Goethe—one of the most famous German writers for his famous comment about reading when he was 80 years old “The good people,” he continued, “don’t know how much time and effort it cost to learn to read. It took me eighty years to do it and I still can’t say that I’ve reached my goal.”

Developing the reading abilities of a continent’s people is a major undertaking with increasing challenges as the population’s needs shift and the nature of literacy does as well.

While I do not want to put a huge amount of weight on the current test data, it is suggesting that the African journey is still in its infancy. Based upon test data from some countries there may be some reason to be concerned especially in terms of the literacy levels across sub-Saharan African countries (see Figures 6 & 7). The two major concerns are that improvement in terms of literacy have somewhat stagnated in the last few years and performance on key measures such as reading for understanding are very poor. In making such pronouncements I would state again that results for some countries do not exist and that the results for literacy are based upon some quite limited measures especially in the areas of reading for understanding.³

Figure 6: Proportion of students at the end of primary education achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in mathematics and reading, by region, 2015-2023

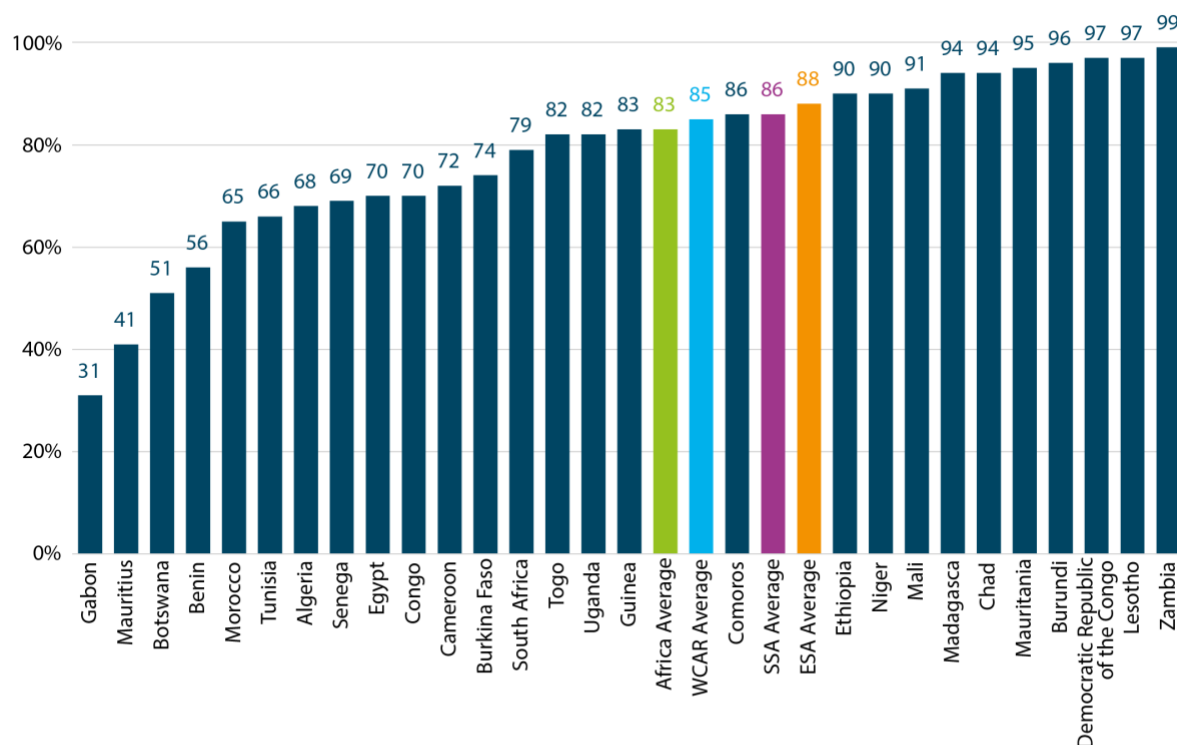


Data source: UIS September 2024 data release. Note: No data available for Northern Africa.

UNESCO, African Union, & UNICEF (2025). Transforming learning and skills development in Africa: 2nd continental report.
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000393250>

³ These data do match recent baseline data collected in Malawi and Sierra Leone in conjunction with CODE initiatives and include more substantial measures of reading comprehension. At these sites there are major gaps between the students’ foundational reading skills and comprehension

Figure 7: Proportion of children aged 10 who cannot read for understanding, 2019



Data source: World Bank

Notes:(i) Data is from African countries that have implemented standardised learning assessments at foundational level, (ii) the continental average is weighted by the population of 10-year-olds from the countries.

UNESCO, African Union, & UNICEF (2025). Transforming learning and skills development in Africa: 2nd continental report.
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Nonetheless based upon these data, I do not find the results to be unusual given the leanings in Africa to foundational skills that somewhat divorce learning to read from reading for understanding. I would suggest that it is unfortunate that reading has been approached first and foremost upon foundation skills devoid of comprehension.

In education there is a truism that your return in terms of any educational investment is prescribed by the nature of that investment or treatment. Teach students about A they learn about A. If you teach foundation skills it is highly likely that students will learn those skills at least to some extent. But the shortfall is that you are unlikely to see a carryover to reading for meaning or understanding. And, as students progress through schools you will likely not see gains in comprehension even if you saw gains in foundation skills.

The problem may be tied to a misplaced emphasis or lack of emphasis. In particular, a focus of foundational skills often sidelines comprehension. From my perspective the problem might be tied to a growing tendency to embrace a definition of what counts as literacy that is not focused upon meaning making or comprehension as a foundation skill. According to this view, comprehension is seen as the product of word naming tied to the notion that comprehension

proceeds from learning to decode rather than occurs simultaneously and is integral to such. For example, the current dominant model of reading (in the US, the UK, Australia, Canada, on the rise in Canada and apparent in UNESCO documents including recommendations for Africa) is tied to a major narrowing of what counts as reading and a narrowing of the pathway for learning to read to phonics as essential and prerequisite.

David Pearson and I recently produced and published an on-line open access monograph “Fact checking the Science of Reading” examining some of the claims touted by folks advocating among other emphases that phonics is essential and a prerequisite to comprehension. As David Pearson and I noted:

Advocates of an emphasis of foundations skills as the starting point for beginning reading approach reading in a fashion that befits an approach to reading that assumes the recognition of words is paramount to learning to read and that comprehension will follow from translating words into meaning that are in one’s spoken language repertoire. That is, if reading is best defined as identifying and understanding words that are a part of one’s spoken language and the explicit teaching of the code is deemed essential, then it follows that there should be a focus on decoding instruction. However, if reading is defined more broadly (along with other skills) in ways that develop their strategic orchestrated uses. The key issue is the breadth of the definition—specifically, are we defining reading in a rich, robust and relevant fashion?

Take, if you will, the definition serving as foundational such as what Rayner et al, 2000 suggested in “How psychological science informs the teaching of reading” is quite stark. As they stated:

In focusing on reading’s distinguishing features, we define learning to read as the acquisition of knowledge that results in the child being able to identify and understand printed words that he or she knows on the basis of spoken language. Put in other terms, learning to read is learning how to use the conventional forms of printed language to obtain meaning from words.

Missing from the Rayner et al definition is a consideration of the textual elements as well as various factors such as language, knowledge, motivation and others that entail a broad range of skills embedded in cultural and technological contexts. What should not be underestimated ... is that Rayner and his colleagues are limiting what counts as reading to word naming and understanding of the meanings of words—not phrases, not sentences, not discourse conventions. The understanding of units larger than words, then, will be done by the motivations and knowledge that allow us to understand our oral language and also allow us to learn the things we do as we encounter new experiences in the worlds—the contexts—in which we do our reading. It is this focus that serves as the basis for the focus on word naming and the exclusion or other considerations that befits a fuller consideration of reading informed by more interactive, socio-cognitive, meaning-centered and text-based approaches to reading.⁴

⁴ In the book, David and I also suggest:

Now, contrast that definition with this one by Pat Alexander in the 2020 RRQ volume.

The reality is that reading does not begin or end with phonics or whole-word instruction... It is far broader and more complex. Reading, broadly conceived, is any interaction between a person—be it a child, adolescent, or adult—and written language. That interaction can involve written language at many levels, from words and sentences, to paragraphs, to

If you contrast this definition with constructivist view of reading you will notice some major departures. For example, “A History of Literacy Education, Waves of research and practice” David and I discussed reading from a constructivist perspective.

A constructivist reader is not engaged in an effort to read by translating the words into meaning. At the outset of reading, constructivist readers are asking their own questions, making predictions, and scoping possible ideas. As they move forward, they formulate hypotheses shaped by their own experiences and the ideas presented with their reading of the text, the plot suggested, and the discoveries that they have discerned—all while enlisting and adjusting their pre-existing schema or knowledge structures. They do not proceed one brick at a time, but holistically fit the pieces into what they deem to be the most reasonable whole. This process involves repeated cycles of forward inferencing and predicting, combining prior knowledge with prompts and clues suggested by the text. Meaning making thus entails shuttling back and forth between the whole and the parts as plausible and coherent understandings are sort. ... the pathway to reading for understanding is not a direct route from literal to inferential to evaluative; it can just as easily begin with the inferential and evaluative. Likewise, the reader is immediately critical, contemplating and judging the feasibility and integrity of ideas in ongoing ways. (Tierney & Pearson, 2012, Pp. 38-39.)

In the history of literacy education, the cognitive revolution propelled constructivism and a shift from the view that reading is derived solely from the text to a view that readers essentially create or compose meanings. To read with understanding, readers are engaged in a mix of strategies, predicting, connecting ideas to see if they make sense, questioning and perhaps imaging. The research on reading clearly demonstrates that the ways that readers enlist a repertoire of strategies—a combination of engaging their meaning making processes including background knowledge, understanding of the world via making predictions, inferencing, connecting ideas, visualizing, asking questions. Reading involves orchestration of skills and strategies and not the application of a simple set of reading skills tied to decoding word by word. Perhaps I can illustrate with a passage about soccer that I read recently.

Soccer images etc.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/289671100098529/posts/806918285040472/>

entire volumes. Also, reading can be performed for many reasons, from purely personal to largely academic, and in many contexts, both in and out of school, as well as online or in print

Or take, the definition of reading in the framework for the 2026 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAGB, 2023):

Reading comprehension is making meaning with text, a complex process shaped by many factors, including readers’ abilities to:

- Engage with text in print and multimodal forms.
- Employ personal resources that include foundational reading skills, language, knowledge, and motivations; and
- Extract, construct, integrate, critique, and apply meaning in activities across a range of social and cultural contexts



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FULL-TIME

🇳🇮 Nigeria 3-2 Saudi Arabia 🇸🇦

DANIEL BAMEYI PENALTY SEALS HEARTSTOPPING 3-2 WIN FOR FLYING EAGLES

Nigeria's Flying Eagles secured their first victory of the 2025 U20 World Cup in dramatic fashion, defeating Saudi Arabia 3-2 in a pulsating encounter that had fans on the edge of their seats until the very last minute.

The match started explosively for the Flying Eagles. In the 11th minute, Nasiru Salihu met a perfectly weighted cross from Sani Suleiman and powered a header past the Saudi goalkeeper to give Nigeria an early lead.

The Flying Eagles looked confident, pressing high and creating several dangerous chances but failed to convert their chances.

However, Saudi Arabia responded in the 21st minute. Amar Al Yuhaybi reacted quickest to a long ball, pouncing on the loose opportunity to level the score at 1-1.

The equalizer briefly shifted momentum, and the Falcons began to assert themselves in midfield.

Nigeria regained control before halftime. In the 38th minute, a well-executed set-piece routine paid dividends, with Amos Ochoche finishing clinically to put the Flying Eagles back in front, 2-1.

The goal lifted Nigerian spirits and sent the team into the break with renewed confidence.

The second half saw more back-and-forth action. Saudi Arabia struck again in the 50th minute, as Talal Haji capitalized on a defensive lapse to equalize once more, making it 2-2 and setting up a tense final 40 minutes.

Both sides had chances to take the lead, but the woodwork and missed goal chances kept the scoreline level.

Then came the drama in stoppage time. In the 90+4 minute, Nigeria were awarded a penalty.

As reading this passage would suggest your ability to understand, evaluate or critique goes far beyond the words. The words do not tell the full story as your meaning making (inferencing, making predictions, connecting ideas) enables you to read for understanding.

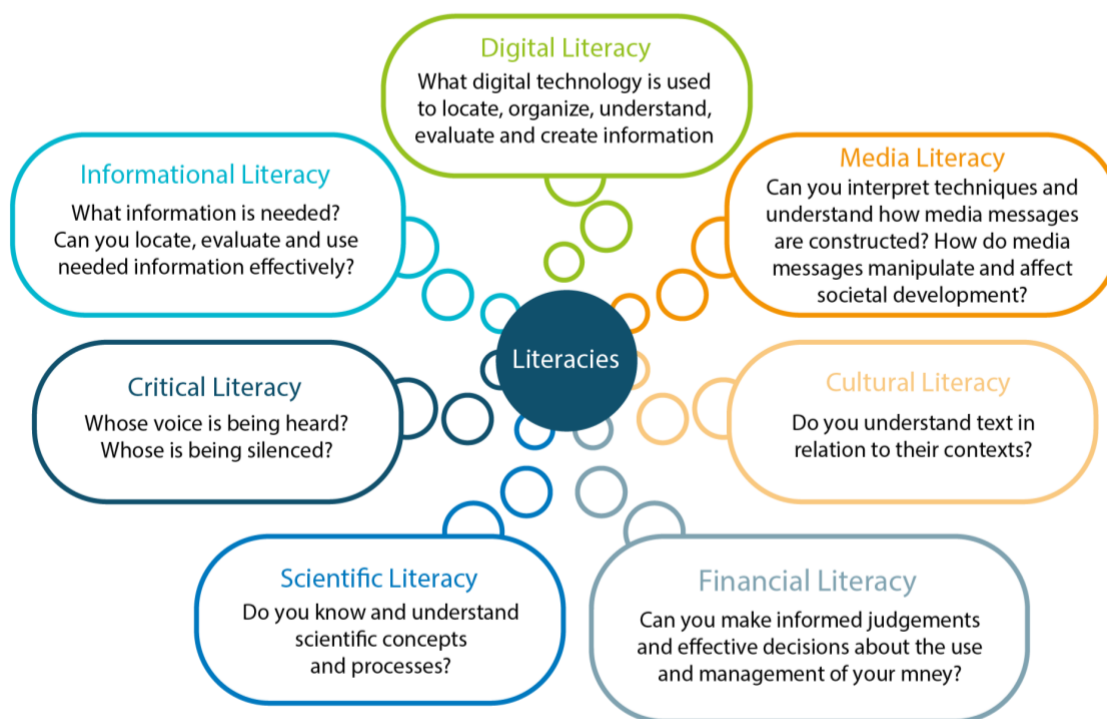
There are apt to be problems when programs such as “Jolly Phonics” are being widely marketed in various regions of Africa despite its origins in the United States and rather sole focus on learning phonics as an end unto itself or precursor to reading for understanding. Unfortunately, the notion that sole emphasis upon phonics and word mastery are necessary prerequisite for reading represents a misplaced leaning as studies have shown from the outset of learning to read there needs to be a simultaneous engagement in comprehension.

There is need for a shift not unlike the explorations of the nature of literacy discussed at the 2023 PALFA conference where there was an embrace of multiple literacy and critical literacy. Such is evident in a paper at the 2023 conference when Ayo Ayodele in a paper entitled “Critical Text Processing: A tool for Sustainable Governance” focused upon conjoining of critical reading with multiple literacies and critical pedagogy (see Figures 8 & 9).

Figure 8: Five Important Critical Thinking Skills



Figure 9: Types of Literacies



Again, I would posit as a myth the claim that *phonics is essential and a prerequisite to comprehension*. I would suggest that this represents misinformation about what counts as reading and disregards the integral role that comprehension or students' reading for meaning should play during what seem view as the learning to read phase. Unfortunately, this myth has also propelled other myths—including that *reading is a receptive act involving a form of translation*. The research on reading is clear reading involves the construction of meaning. The act of reading from the outset it entails readers accessing their background knowledge and making hosts of inferences and evaluations as they try to make sense of what might be suggested but is never fully explicit in the text. The constructive nature of reading suggests readers create meaning and do so making predictions, filling in gaps, make images and connect ideas as they endeavor to develop coherent understandings. In reading for understanding, it is wrong-headed to assume that comprehension proceeds from the literal to inferential to evaluative. More commonly these processes are engaged either simultaneously or in the reverse.

What are the ramifications of these views to solving the mystery about Africa's lagging reading for understanding scores? If Africa is to improve reading for understanding they need to view comprehension as foundational and cease and resist the temptation to teach phonics without regard for how reading words is complemented by comprehension. Some might suggest phonics is essential and sufficient, I would suggest it is a myth. Rather I would argue that activating meaning making is essential for learners at all ages and key to advancing reading with understanding.

Social dimensions

Unfortunately, often reading is approached as a mental process without regard to its social dimensions. I would posit that it is a myth to view reading as occurring just in the head. Reading involves forms of participation—readers interacting with themselves, indirectly with authors or directly with peers and also with the community. In the real-world reading has always been social whether you're indulging in a romance novel or political writing or are involved in social media. I would argue that reading is not a solitary individual experience. Reading occurs in the company of others and involves engagements with the world in multiple ways.⁵

As my grandson was beginning to read and write, I often engaged with him about developing our own books based upon his interests. We might do a drama take some photos and then pull together a book. We did it together with him deciding on the story and the pictures. Usually, we extracted pictures from the internet or photos that we took. We might write a story drawing upon photos of him sledding or own version of a scary story where we dressed up as monsters. He would create a narrative that I might write or he would write some portions with me. We would staple the pages together and share it with others. Some examples are provided in Figure 10. For example, he would share it with his young sister or mother. Within a few months we had developed almost a dozen stories for his library.

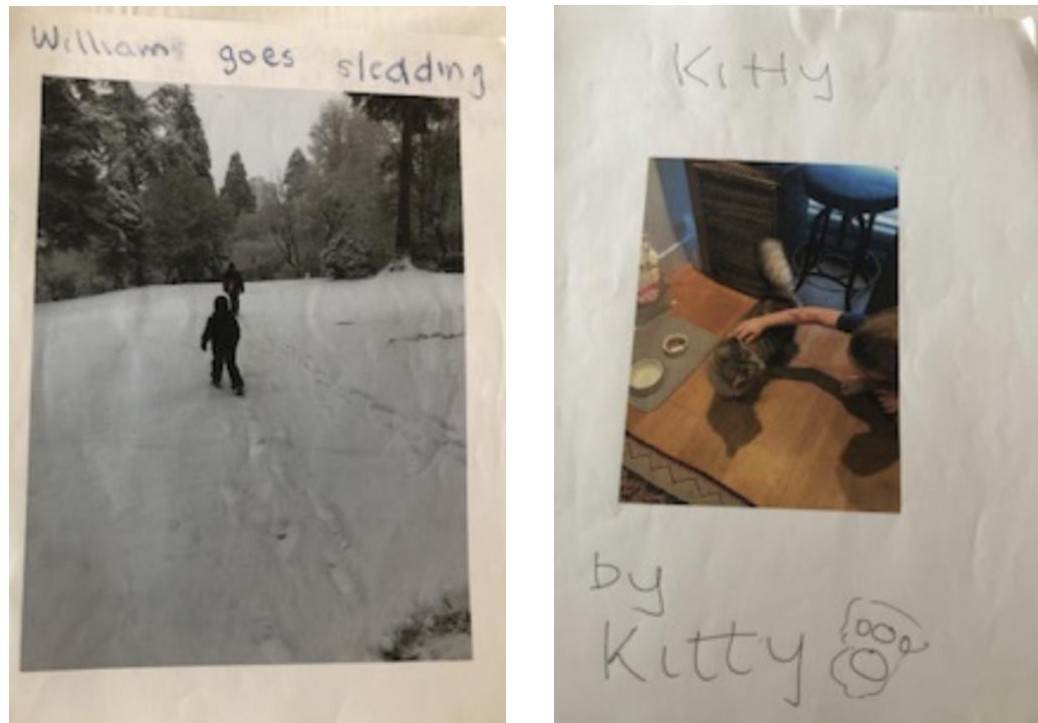


Figure 10

⁵ In an article "Toward a model of global meaning making, I discuss the notion as follows:

The term global meaning maker is enlisted in hopes of replacing passive, receptive, asocial, acultural, apolitical, restrictive, and repressive forms of reading with more active, collective, critical, cross-border, line stepping, interrogative, widely intertextual, and adaptive engagements. Tierney, 2018, -p.399

In my view reading involves an approach to reading that builds on classrooms being learner entered and participatory. Let me offer two examples. The first involves a remote school with largely Aboriginal students in Australia; the second is one I shared at a previous PALFA conference and involves a school in China.

Menindee is a remote school in what many suggest is Australia's outback. It serves largely an Aboriginal population. A major focus of the school involves connections with the community. Often this is most apparent in the projects undertaken in the school and especially some of the connections to art and music. For example, the Art teacher explores with the students' different forms of art enlisted by their culture and encourages the students to explore the techniques as they connect with their culture and the surroundings. The art that is produced is quite stunning and in conjunction with celebrating these works, the art students and teacher engage the community including families of the student artists in the display of the art. Together the community and the art students elect which locations in the community where they will place the art. So, along the streets off this small town, you will encounter these extraordinary works. Some examples are provided in Figure 11.

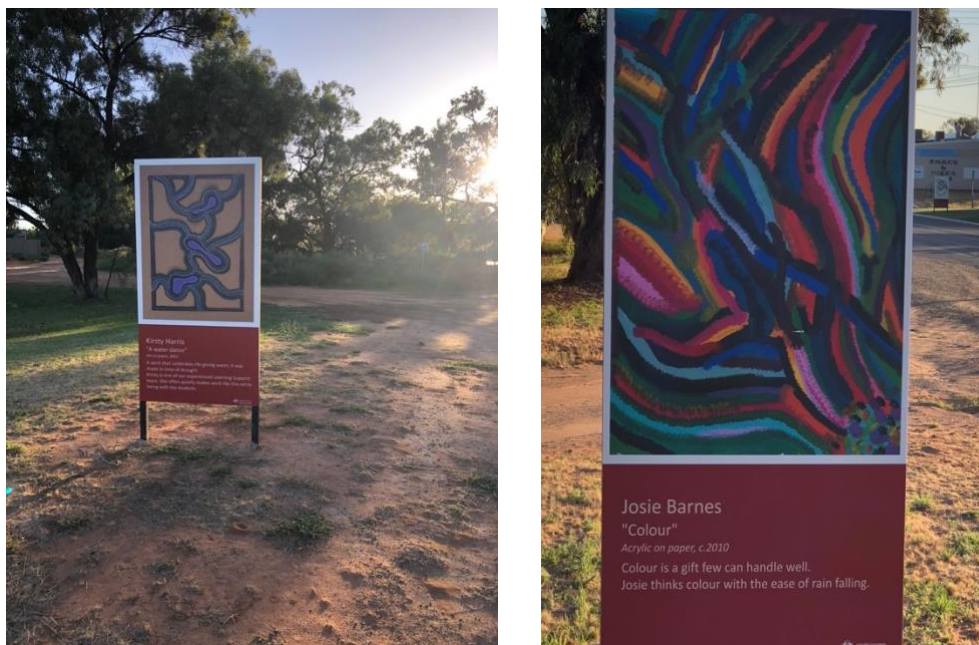


Figure 11

In China I was working with some teachers who seemed flawless and keen to engage in what they deemed to be child-centered learning. Ironically, the lessons engaged the students in very active engagements with ideas, but they were ideas guided by the teachers who set the objectives of the lessons and guided and told the students what they learned. For example, in a language classroom they adopted the theme of the park and directed the students to learn a set of pre-set words about the park...at the end of the

lesson the teacher reminded the students of what words that they had learned... I asked if they could open their lesson up to the world of the students—their visits to parks and words connected to the students' interests.

Interestingly the science teacher was most inquisitive and suggested he would as a good scientist experiment with what I suggested. A week later I was in his classroom and nervously watched as he did things differently. He was doing a lesson on mirrors and instead of telling the students what they were to learn and do began the lesson with the suggestion that they ask their own questions. For about 3 seconds I took pause and was nervous that I and the teacher had gone too far. What the teacher encountered was stunning the fourth graders had heaps of questions. The teacher then placed the kids in groups and distributed mirrors to his students with the task of seeking answers to their questions. The energy in the class was amazing as the students tested out the mirrors and argued with one another about what they were learning. The lesson ran out of time but closed with some children sharing their pursuits and findings. See Figure 12. After the lesson a local school government observer questioned the teacher as to whether his objective for learning would be achieved. The teacher's response was powerful. He stated, "in science asking questions and pursuing answers are perhaps the most important objectives."

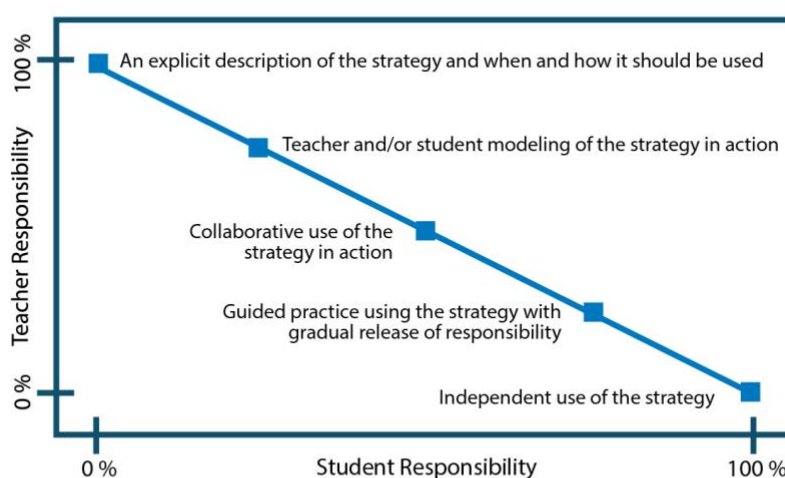


Figure 12

From my perspective a related issue involves the myth that explicit and systematic teaching of skills will guarantee that students acquire reading skills and strategies that they can apply independently across different texts. Systematic explicit teaching grew out of 1. the recognition that reading comprehension should move from being simply tested with a teacher's questions to

being taught; 2. growing interest in helping readers learn to learn—in particular, enlist arrays of strategies (e.g. self-questioning, visualizing, connecting ideas, enlisting background knowledge) to help them read for and with understanding; and 3. recognition of the need for students to have strategies and skills modelled via reflecting upon their own processes in tandem with teachers engaging in thinking out loud and making explicit the possible ways to read strategically ⁶ In the interest of providing scaffolded support for doing so, a framework (see Figure 13) was developed involving what was labelled the gradual release of responsibility (Duke and Pearson, 2002; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Salehomoum, et al. 2022). As the proponents and developers have suggested it should not be imposed simply as systematic explicit teaching that ignores or supplants the importance of the learner involvement in the modelling (supported by or in collaboration with the teacher or other learners. They stress the need for the ongoing monitoring to support successful strategy use independently across a range of tasks over time.

Figure 13: An adapted version of the Gradual Release of Responsibility model



Note: Adapted from "The instruction of reading comprehension," by P. D. Pearson & M. C. Gallagher, 1983, *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 8(3), 317-344

⁶ In Africa, some educators in Africa are strong advocated (E.g., Abdazi: 2024; Elston et al., 2022)

<https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/importance-structured-pedagogy-improve-learning-sub-saharan-africa>

Elston, A., Tiba, C. & Condy, J., 2022, 'The role of explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies to an English as a second language learner', *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 12(1), a1097. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v12i1.1097>

In Australia, the NSW Department of Education is arguing Explicit teaching consists of a set of principles that inform a range of dynamic and responsive teaching strategies. It involves teachers clearly explaining, demonstrating and modelling to students: They claim it is the best way to teach students new or complex concepts and skills and provides the necessary building blocks for guided and independent practice.

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/documents/teaching-and-learning/curriculum/explicit-teaching/explicit-teaching-in-nsw-public-schools.pdf>

The myth is that sustained and transferable strategy development will be forthcoming from explicit teaching alone or by practice and more practice. The mystery is what else is needed to ensure long term sustained strategy development. A key component is the learner's role if skills and strategies are enlisted mechanically rather than flexibly and discerningly. The issue is how to achieve learner ownership of strategies—flexible applications that are sustained and transferable. To these ends the shift from teacher modelling to learner decision-making may be imperative. As I have mentioned, at a paper at this conference, Chukwuemeka Onukaogu and his colleagues describe initiatives with the multifaceted LEAP project in Anambra where teachers support learner centered decision making as a vehicle for acquiring possible strategies for reading. One of the most noteworthy elements is the extension from teacher modelling to engaging students in learning to learn in a fashion that is learner centered

Testing

Along similar lines let me discuss testing. I would suggest that *the myth is that tests of literacy effectively measure progress in reading --especially reading for understanding.*

Too often I have experienced situations where “continuous assessment” is emphasized but what is taking place is repeated testing. Added to the limitations of such an orientation is tied to the reverence test results are given despite the flaws of many measures. In other words, the tests may involve poor measures of different learners' abilities or capabilities. In general, they focus on outcomes rather than process. In the early grades they focus on mediating subskills tied to phonics.

In terms of dealing with diversity, the test publishers may tout that they are “culturally free” when such would seem antithetical to measuring a learner's full capabilities. In addition, some common measures just don't fit with what I know should be a measure of reading for understanding. For example, EGRA enlists the Maze and Cloze (i.e., finding the right words in the context of the passage) that do not match what we know about the nature of comprehension as it has been perceived cognitively, socially and critically.⁷

A key breakthrough for me was to turn the tables on testing and ask questions about what was measured and how the information from tests might be used. When I asked the question if I was

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https://auth.scribd.com/u/signup?state=hKFo2SA4cTlza05NVHZSN0RHVDB6VTd2N1RxakZITkE0OW9veqFur3VuaXZlcnNhbc1sb2dpbqN0aWTZIHpXSnF3cFlfcHawQ2I3SjdGZl1WLWFjOEg0Q1RCTm8wo2NpZNkgZ3ljN3lyZnpzdkpmaXd5bHNIYXU4Y3g5dVZhb2FOU1A&ui_locales=en

https://212790489318400854.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/1/3/12132544/core-reading-maze-comprehension-test_2.pdf

to assess assessment, I realized that tests should help teachers teach and students learn. As I contemplated testing in schools, I recognized that the testing practices tended to be removed from the day-to-day decision making with which teachers needed to be engaged. As an alternative I began to explore engaging students in assessing themselves. The key question or mystery was how could we approach assessment to support teacher and student decision making especially realistically including without overwhelming the teacher.

One of my colleagues who had similar interests in these issues had a daughter enrolled in art school and he extended an invitation to me to come by and see his daughter's portfolio. I love art so this was a treat. However, I did not expect the revelation that occurred as his daughter shared her art and what had been her goals and sometimes successes over time along with her plans for the future. This was like an epiphany for me. It involved a form of assessment done with the students not to the students

Fortunately, I had some teacher colleagues who were engrossed in the idea, so they indicated the willingness to try it out in their reading and writing and other classes. What occurred was stunning. Students were enamored with the idea as some suggested that they had written and read different materials and would love to look at what they had done and were doing. In some classes the students enlisted portfolios to amass the material for a project. In one class the teacher got the project started with sharing a portfolio she had pulled together. Plus, it was doable in almost any classroom. It was not taxing for the teacher as the students did the assessment and not only did teachers herald what they learned so did the students. Indeed, students who might be deterred by assessments were positive. Students and their teachers were able to keep track of their learning and as they did so they developed criteria by which to judge their progress and set further goals.

Closing

In this paper I have suggested that there are several myths that should be challenged. Here is my list along with some of the challenges that pertain. Here is my list along with some of the challenges that pertain.

The MYTHS and challenges

1. **Pronouncements by outsiders are critical to engaging in ongoing educational developments.** The problem is that outsiders are apt to be critically illiterate—lacking the knowledge of local circumstances and the needed nuanced understandings to contribute to productive changes.
2. **Educational science is settled, and we know what works best for all learners.** The challenge is to recognize that science is ongoing and that

educational pursuits should be customized and case-based rather than imposed uniformly.

3. **Assimilation and colonial ways are positives and should remain a priority and the authority that shapes African curriculum, teaching practices and testing regimens.** The shackles of colonial influences should be disentangled and removed from schooling in Africa.
4. **Global research outlets are important vehicles for African educational research and provide relevant information for educational decision-making in Africa.** African scholarly science is excluded by western outlets and the development of African science by, for and in Africa is in its infancy. The challenge will be to advance the presence of African research in the top journals and to support the development of a presence in Africa for African research.
5. **Access to and attendance in schools is no longer a problem. Africans embrace schooling as key to life's pathways.** Many learners view schools as not contributing to their well-being and the proportion increases at the secondary and tertiary levels.
6. **The teachers across Africa receive adequate preparation to meet the needs of their students.** There are significant teacher shortages and a reliance on unprepared teachers.
7. **The infrastructure for schools meets the educational needs of learners.** The problem is that the quality of the infrastructure is quite variable and, in some sites, deficient in terms of basics (e.g., connectivity, sanitation, spaces for students to learn).
8. **Across Africa learners are progressing in literacy and foundational skills ensures improvements. Phonics is essential for comprehension/reading with understanding to advance.** The problem is that key advances (e.g., reading for understanding) are not occurring. Rather than phonics, reading for understanding requires strategies such as accessing background knowledge, making predictions, inferencing, connecting ideas, evaluating ongoing understandings.
9. **Reading comprehension involves reception and needs to proceed from the literal to inferential to evaluative.** In contrast, cognitive views of reading

clearly indicate that reading involves inferential and evaluative processes from the outset of reading text.

10. **Reading is a mental process that occurs in the head.** The reality is that reading involves forms of social engagement contributing to what is read and how.
 11. **Explicit and systematic skills and strategy instruction ensure learners ability to enlist the necessary repertoire and to do so on their own including in novel circumstances.** The problem is that sustained and independent use of skills and strategies will likely require ongoing support beyond teacher modelling—at least for some time.
 12. **Standardized test results ensure accountability and serve to inform government agencies and educators on outcomes.** The quality of standardized tests is lacking and, therefore, provides questionable measures of reading for understanding for diverse learners. The problem is that they override formative assessments by teachers and students.
-

It is my view that the myths are sometimes tied to misinformation, limited or slanted views that need to be questioned. As I have indicated some have their roots in what I would suggest are colonializing tendencies. Instead, we should remove the shackles and build from local, organic and customized considerations.

In conjunction with some of the views related to teaching reading there are myths that represent a limited definition of what counts as reading. According to a number of advocates of a phonics-based approach to beginning reading, sounding out and translation letters into words is essential and will eventually lead to comprehension. I have suggested that such a view is counter to what we know about the role and nature of meaning making and comprehension that indicates at a minimum meaning making or comprehension should serve as complements to phonics not separated or delayed. In other words, I would recommend that there be less emphasis upon foundational skills—at least their exclusive use as the basis for learning to read. I would suggest there should be a rebalancing that integrates comprehension and reading for understanding from the outset of schooling.

I am also questioning the nature and role of testing. We need better forms of assessment that are more clearly linked to teaching and learning. Specifically, I am suggesting that educators focus upon formative assessment that are learner entered. I am suggesting that we should not acquiesce to the current forms of testing. Instead of revering test scores, I am suggesting a move that more closely aligns with practices that empower teachers and students in an ongoing fashion.

I realize that there is so much I have not dealt with that deserves discussion. More comments should have been offered about teacher preparation and the need for extending the preparation for teaching reading to all subject areas—science and social studies are important seeds from which literacy development can and should stem and flower. I have barely touched upon connections to the local community and how to scaffold engagements with parents and siblings in support of each other's literacy development. Also, I have been negligent not to discuss the new literacies including social media where many of the print based and images are exchange in the everyday banter of communities.

In closing, in my opinion Africa is a post-colonial work in progress. On the positive side great strides have been made. Despite the challenges, Africa has succeeded but, in some countries and regions, better than others.

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