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Role of Parents in a Child's Reading and Literacy Development

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Abstract

Unless the home is made a literacy immersion centre where the child begins its literacy acquisition and unless the home is connected with the society and the school in enhancing the child's literacy acquisition; the home could neutralize the child's efforts and impede the child's literacy acquisition' (Onukaogu 2007). It is widely acknowledged that homes could provide powerful influence on a child's early literacy development. Research has shown that parental involvement is crucial to a child's reading success. So every parent has a unique role in early Child's literacy. Since parents teach their children at home to talk, sit, stand, eat and walk without undergoing any form of training, I am of the opinion that they could play a pivotal role in their children's early literacy with little or no training. This study examines roles of parents in their children's early reading and literacy development. This paper further examines the impact of parental training and involvement in home reading on the child's early reading level and recommends ways of providing parents with adequate skills necessary to promote their confidence and know-how in supporting their children's literacy development.

Keywords: Literacy, Early Child Reading, Parental involvement

1. Introduction

One of the theoretical developments in literacy research has been the recognition of literacy as a social communication. Readers have to think of authors and authors have to think of readers, and in this social milieu issues of ethics arise. According to Pennac (2007) in Reading Today' if we want our son/ daughter / young people to read, we must grant them the rights we grant our selves". Within the teaching of reading, we need to find ways of helping children both to exercise their reading rights and to meet their reading responsibilities. Literacy is a foundational skill upon which other skills are built. I believe that teachers and other school practitioners need to seriously consider the home and family as constructors of literacy development. Consideration of the family as an educational setting has gained attention over the past decades. According to Mctavish (2007) in the Reading Teacher educators and researchers however continue to grapple with the notion that the environment of families and the activities that occur there can be recognized and understood in terms of the richness and complexity they add to children's educational experience".

The roles of parents in early child reading and literacy development cannot be underestimated. Several researchers have affirmed that relationship between children's literacy and children's interactions with their parents has long been recognized as significant in early child literacy development.

A growing body of research-(*American Association of Children Education International)* - on how parents and children deal with literacy, language and schools generally reveals a tapestry of complex interrelationships. Dozens of research studies reveal that approaches to changing parent-child literacy interactions are generally successful (Mctavish op cit,Purcell-Gates 2000). Studies also reveal that simple interventions are of limited success and that it is very difficult to bring about change that transfers to improved literacy in the home.

This paper discusses the roles of parental support for children literacy among middle and low-income

parents. Some researchers and family literacy program designers suggest directly addressing established aspects of parent-child literacy interactions by supplementing literacy materials in the home and directly teaching parents' literacy and language strategies associated with children's literacy success. Auerbach (1995) and others term this approach a 'deficit' model because it assumes family deficit which must be re-mediated.

This study is intended to help parents support young children's literacy learning. It begins with the definition of literacy, suggestions for parents' involvement in children's early literacy development as well as resources to support young literacy learners.

1.1 Definitions of literacy

Over the years, scholars from different disciplines have struggled to define the concept of literacy, but little consensual agreement has been achieved. The definition of literacy is often subject to historical, social, economic, political, and other forces. For example, in the middle ages, literacy was generally associated with the ability to speak, read and write Latin, and only members of a few elite groups had access to formal education or to the Latin texts in which it was presented. By the 16th century, the invention and advancement of printing technology in Europe, and the growing use of languages other than Latin, resulted in an explosion in literacy levels, extending even to people of traditionally lower social classes, such as peasants and merchants (Heath, 1996). Literacy was no longer the possession of a few selected groups, but had become a means by which a broad spectrum of people could gain power and status.

In 1951, UNESCO defined literacy as the ability of a person 'who can with understanding both read and write a short, simple statement on his everyday life', and it revised this definition in 1978 as one's ability to 'engage in all…activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing, and calculation for his own and community's development'. The change in UNESCO's definition reflects a change from a narrow set of behaviors in reading and writing to a broader sense of community functioning including mathematics. Literacy is viewed from a socio-psycholinguistic perspective, one in which literacy is more than the ability to read and write, but extends also to the use of oral and written language as well as other sign systems such as mathematics and art, to make sense of the world and communicate with others (Halliday 1978).

2. The Role of Fathers/Mothers in Their Children's Literacy Development

It has been observed that parents reading with their children can lead to better school performance. Studies show that when parents participate in learning, children receive higher marks, enjoy school more, and are less likely to repeat a class. Reading time creates a bond between parents and their children. Several questions have posed by parents.

How do I start?

What if I'm not with my child every day?

What if I don't like reading?

Such parents are encouraged to select books that interest them or their children. They could read about famous athletes, historical events or how things work. They can read chapter books with older children, reading a bit each day. They should equally be patient if they have not read it with their children before. They need time to get accustomed to this activity.

Even parents who are not readers, their participation in literacy activities at home can have an impact on their children's academic performance. They must convey the message that reading is important:

Tell stories about your own life or when you were young.

Talk about the print that is in your environment. For example, read and talk about road signs or brand names on food containers etc.

Check out books of photography or art and talk about pictures.

Involve your child in everyday writing task like shopping lists, thank you notes etc.

When you are doing house hold projects, describe what you are doing. Use interesting words.

Ask your child about his/her day. Engage in conversation that extends simple sentences. Conversation with adults helps children learn new words and practice telling a story-both links to better reading skills.

Your child learns from what you do. Make sure the messages you are sending about reading tell you child that knowledge and literacy are valuable, achievable, and powerful. Young children construct many notions about reading and writing long before they begin Kindergarten. In fact, some children can actually read and write before they start school; others find learning to read and write relatively easy once they start school. Studies have shown that children who become literate at an early age or who become successful readers and writers share several common characteristics:

They have been read to regularly.

They have had many opportunities to handle books.

They have seen parents and adults read and write for real purposes and enjoyment.

They have been encouraged to express themselves through writing.

2.1 Read aloud to children

Reading aloud to children on a regular basis is an essential practice for parents. Children enjoy having picture books read to them because they are charmed by the delightful characters, warm and often humorous plots and beautiful illustrations. As they enjoy the sound of written language, children learn about starting at the front of a book, turning pages, noticing print characters and realizing that conveys meaning. There is no magic for when or how to read aloud to children, but it is wise to show enthusiasm and involve the children in the story. You might want to read a story before or after nap time, or just before children go to bed, making sure that children can see the text as you read. You might have children predict what will happen next, discuss a part of the story or give an oral response to predictable words or phrases in the story. Children often want to hear the same book read over and over. When children are small, singing to them each day from a song book in the same way you read a story makes great impact in them. Without a doubt, this practice facilitates their oral language development. Therefore, this study highly recommends that parents sing songs as well as read from books.

2.2 Make Books Readily Available

It is important to books readily available to children. Although very young children do not actually read the books, they can look at the pictures. If the same book is read over and over, however some children will be able to 'read' the book because they have memorized the story. Eventually, the child becomes familiar with written language and gains confidence in reading, which are important building blocks for literacy development. You can also make inexpensive books by simply folding ad stapling papers together. You can sometimes ask children to draw pictures or paste pictures cut from magazines on the blank pages. You then write a sentence on each page about children's favorite things. As they grow older, they can dictate their own sentences or write their own words and sentences. You can produce homemade books by copying favorite poems, nursery rhymes and songs.

2.3 Write in front of Children

Seeing others write is an important condition for learning to write, or, for learning almost anything. Just as learning to drive a car, so can parents help young children learn to write by demonstrating writing? Children need to see adults writing for purposes, such as making shopping lists, writing cards and letter and paying bills. When you write in front of young children, think aloud so they can gain insights about what you are thinking as you write. When children dictate their ideas to an adult they learn how written language works. Let children share their thoughts while you write the statement on a chart or chalk board. You can then read back the text, which helps children realize that their thoughts can be recorded and that what is written can be read aloud by someone.

2.4 Encourage Children to Write

In preschool children's writing consists of drawing and scribbling. Eventually, however, they begin making

letters or symbol-like forms, accept children's written expression and encourage them to continue to express themselves in that way. Celebrate each expression by focusing on what the child can do, rather than what he or she can do. Keep in mind that oral language develops when parents accept and encourage very young children's early speaking attempts. Adults can respond, for example, to a young child's unclear requests for a glass of water. Caregivers are not reinforcing poor speaking habits by accepting and encouraging these early attempts. On the contrary, their actions enable children to develop higher and levels of oral language. Likewise parents should accept a young child's early written expressions, children will eventually progress to higher levels, if given written language opportunities. You probably know that spelling is a developmental process consisting of several levels. Initially, children draw pictures and scribble as they try to represent what they are thinking. As they develop, they will often make a string of letters with sound-symbol correspondence. This development continues until they can spell words conventionally.

2.5 Parent-Child Interactions

Parent-child interactions are important to a child's developing literacy abilities. It is becoming increasingly clear that these interactions involve a good deal more than simply reading to children and providing them with books. A growing body of research indicates that the way in which a parent speaks with a child may have as much or more to do with later reading achievement of the child than actual time spent reading to the child. Research over the past two decades has established several aspects of parent-child interactions associated with children's later literacy success. among these are:

1. Parental reading to and with children.
2. Complexity of language and strategy used between parents and children.
3. Parental conception of the roles of education; and
4. Literacy modeling and support present in the home environment.

2.5.1 Parental Reading to and with Children

Research from the 1970s and 1980s consistently identifies and reports strong correlations between parental reading to and with children and children's later success with literacy (Chomsky, 1972). More recent research has attempted to identify the essential nature of what transpires during parent –child reading times to make them so beneficial. Lancy and Bergin(1992) found children who are more fluent and positive about reading came from parent-child pairs who viewed reading as fun, kept stories moving with a 'semantic' rather than a 'decoding ' orientation, and encouraged questions and humor while reading. Tracey and Young (1994) studied the home reading of accelerated and at- risk readers note and their college educated mothers. They found no difference in the frequency of children's oral reading in second and third grade than did accelerated readers. Tracey (1995), in a later analysis of video-taped reading sessions with accelerated and at risk readers notes striking differences in the degree to which the accelerated reader received more physical and verbal attention, support and extended oral feedback. In more in-depth study of more than 40 families, Baker, Serpell, ferdinez-fein and Scher (1994) analyzed differences between literacy activities of low and middle-income families. Low income parents reported doing more reading practice and home work (e.g. flash cards letter practice) with their kindergarten age children than did middle-income parents, and middle income parents reported only slightly more joint book reading with children than low-income parents families. This middle –income parents, however report a good deal more play with print and more independent reading by children. The nature of what transpires during reading time appears to matter a good deal-perhaps more than the mere fact parent-reading occurs.

2.5.2 Complexity of Language and Strategic Use

For more than a decade, snow and her colleagues have been examining the role of language use by parents and children during reading and in other family activities such as dinner time conversation and explanatory talk (Goodman 1998). This body of work indicates that explanatory talk during mealtimes, and to some extent during reading, plays a greater role in predicting children's later reading achievement in school and on tests than does simply reading to children. Further, the aspect of explanatory talk which seems most

relevant are non-immediate or non-literal comments such as those associated with predictions, elaborations, and linking new ideas to previous experiences. An example of such comments is the parent who encourages a child to orally compare a caterpillar's cocoon to the child's sleeping bag while reading a children's book about caterpillars and then further asking for predictions of what the child thinks will happen next. Lancy, Draper and Boyce (1989) describe the parents of good reader as using expansionist strategies which included graduated support or scaffolding as children attempted to understand stories as well as strategies for avoiding frustration. The parent might begin the story and do much of the talking in the form of modeling the making of predictions. Over time the parent speaks less and encourages the child to take a more active role in reading or telling the story. This is easier with books read multiple times. If children experience great difficulty, the parents of good readers would help with the difficulty or perhaps make a joke. Parents of poor readers are described by Lancy et al as using reductionism strategies which focus upon decoding, focused criticism and sometimes even covering pictures to avoid a child's 'cheating in figuring out a word. The tone is of one reading as a serious job which the child must work to master.

2.5.3 Parental Conception of Education and Literacy

Differences in reading behaviors and strategy suggest that there might also be differences in how parents conceive of education and literacy. It is not true that low-income parents do not value education. Several researchers have reported the high value placed upon education by many low-income parents. Delgado-Gatian (1987) Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988), in detailed studies of low-income families whose children succeed in school, report extraordinary sacrifices and efforts being made to support children's education-even when parental education levels were low. Fitzgerald, Spiegel and Cunningham (1991), in a study of low and high-income parents, report low-income parents rating the value of education higher than did high-income parents. Differing literacy behaviors, however suggest that there may be significant differences in how parents who value education conceive literacy. It has been note that when low-income parents spend time with children, they are much more likely to emphasize explicit instruction as well as an enjoyable way to entertain one's self and to understand the world. The work of Lancy and colleague tends to confirm these differences in literacy perception and practice. Baker, Serpell, and Sonnenchein (1995) note that parent-child literacy relationships are bi-directional, that is, children influence parents and are influenced by them. Similarly, a child who finds literacy learning a painful experience is likely to avoid books and make the reading experience for the parent involved. A child who learns to enjoy reading and to see it as an entertainment is likely to ask for books, seek attention while reading, and begin to read more independently.

2.5.4 Literacy Support in the Home Environment

There is some disagreement about the role of parental support for literacy in the home environment. Research from the 1970's and early 1980's reported by Anderson et al. (1985) identified more books, magazines, and educational literacy materials in the homes of higher –income families and families of children who performed well in school. When some researchers have expanded the definition of literacy materials to include more functional materials like notes, bills, grocery lists and so forth, the differences between groups are reported to shrink. Heath (1983) reported that low-income families used literacy, but in a different fashion and for different purposes than did middle-income families. She suggests that schools, rather than families, need to change to accommodate these differences and not focus merely upon middle class literacy use. Interpretations of evidence for other sorts of parental literacy support also conflict. Low-income parents model fewer books and magazine reading and tend to take children to libraries less than do higher-income parents. On the other hand, low-income parents are reported sometimes to make extended use of such literacy related behaviors as story-telling and singing as well as making sacrifices to financially and physically support children's education (Heath 1983). Again the professional debate revolves around the meaning of these differences or literacy support and the degree to which schools focus only on the sort of literacy found in middle-class homes.

3. Interventions in Parent-Child Interactions

Edwards (1995:56) indicates that her work since the late 1980's has consistently documented the desire of low-income parents to learn more about what to do when reading to their children. Typical comments from

interviews include the following:

I don't know what to do when I open the book.

I wish somebody would tell me what to do because I am fed up with teachers saying 'Read to your child'.

Tracey (1995)&Tropping 1996 in The Reading Teacher notes that studies into parental strategies to help their children with reading have been largely successful to the extent that parents have learned the strategies. Some parents have learned to increase wait time before correcting children's reading errors; others have learned to offer more praise or to use more contextual prompts. Still others have learned to read story books to children using dramatic conventions. Evidence of transfer of learning to home practice and continued use is rarer. Many of the studies can be seen as single approaches to improved family literacy.

Several more comprehensive family literacy programs began to make appearance during the late 1980's and early 1990's. These programs tend to include multiple components such as adult literacy education, parent education and support, children's literacy education, and time for parents and children to be together.

4. Suggestions for Parents Involvement in Children's Literacy Development

In a session with parents at Eminent Junior Schools, (a foundational School managed by my spouse (Mrs. M. Uduma) at Ipetu-Ijesa, Osun-State, Nigeria, I informed parents of the indispensable role nature bestowed in them for their children's early literacy development. Suggestions made to parents at this interactive session will effectively enhance parents' involvement in early literacy programs at the home and also non-involved parents to assume responsibility in children's literacy programs. These suggestions proffered will produce results in the Nigerian communities, Africa and other developing Nations of the world. I agree with Onukaogu (2003:258) that learning begins at home and that the Nigerian parent is the first teacher of the child. This assertion is based on the fact that a child learns how to walk, eat and talk with the parent as the major teacher before entering into a school. Since parents assume this role without much training, I am of the opinion that every parent-literate, semi-literate and illiterate has significant contribution to make in a child's early literacy development. The family especially parents are active players in family literacy and intergenerational learning programs. It has been observed that intergenerational learning is rooted in Africa. A UNESCO report has proved that the intergenerational transfer of language and literacy from parents to children can break the cycle of educational failure. Children who receive support from their parent do better in school.

Based on the perspective of literacy mentioned above, we offer the following guidelines to help parents create a home environment that will support the literacy of their young children:

Encourage children to visit libraries and bookstores. Reinvent family story time where parents narrate stories of their personal experiences while growing up or family history. Keep reading and writing materials, such as books, newspapers, magazines, papers, crayons and markers accessible to children. Parents can sing songs from hymn books to children or recite traditional poems and tongue twisters with children. Be a reader and writer yourself. Children observe and learn from people around.

Make available picture books and spend time with your child to watch picture in such books.

Keep a notebook, in which you as a parent write down stories which your children tell, so that the children see the connection between oral language and written one.

Asks your children what they learnt or did at the school.

Immerse your home with literacy materials, hang poster with pictures and alphabets in your sitting room, dinning, kitchen and children's room.

Always reward every efforts of your child in literacy matters so the child will know that you are happy at his/her progress and that you are proud of him/her.

5. Conclusion

It is high time parents assumed responsibilities in their children's early literacy and reading developments. Literacy matters should no longer left to the teacher and the school as a lone player, but should a team game. Parents are expected to lay the foundation on which the teacher and school build upon. Involvement in

literacy program of children does not rely on the status, experience, financial position or the educational background of such parent. Since, no school or teacher ever taught parents on how to make their children talk, walk, sit and eat, that means every parent has definite experiences that would make great impact in their children's early literacy program. We therefore encourage every parent to create time to actually assist children in early literacy and reading programs.

The traditional milieu of the Nigerian society should be the basis upon which family literacy hinges upon. The mother tongue could be used in family literacy program since it is the language a child at the early stage thinks, talks and play with. Low-income and illiterate parents should not shy away from their role as literacy teachers at home on the basis of their unfamiliarity with the English language.

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