

## Tell or Read: Adult Role to Promote Health and Literacy in Children

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**ABSTRACT** This study explored the extent to which adults avail themselves in reading or telling stories to their children. The qualitative method of research was employed in this study. The study used a case study design. Data collected through semi structured interviews. A purposive sample of twenty (20) parents from Vhembe District participated in the study. The interviews were conducted with the mother language. Data was transcribed and translated verbatim from the mother tongue to English. The data revealed that there are many factors that hinder parents' involvement in the development of their children's literacy development and health promotion. The study recommended that motivational talks should be held during civic and club meetings to encourage parents to read or tell stories to their children. Illiterate parents should be encouraged to attend Adult Basic Education and Training classes. Books should be available around the house and parents should tell their children stories.

### INTRODUCTION

Reading stories to children at home will help children to become culturally and aesthetically sensitive across a range of social and cultural contexts, especially since South African storytelling and story book reading are some of the activities that young children enjoy (Cullhed 2006; Feldman 2011). During these activities, children can discover the importance of their culture, diseases, make predictions and form cause and effect relationships. Guiding children through a story by asking questions and providing them with a feedback and then encouraging extensions on their responses stimulate children to learn and understand diseases and how to prevent them from early stages. Reading and storytelling also helps promote language, literacy and brain development (Post et al. 2011; Gest et al. 2004).

Reading is not the only way to create a home environment that is rich in language and literacy experiences. Telling stories and singing songs also help children develop early literacy skills and have a lot of fun at the same time (Mandelsohn et al. 2011; Van Stockar 2016). Parents must set aside times to read stories to their children because it enhances children's comprehension, vocabulary, decoding of words and syllables. Regular habit of reading makes children develop the desire to read independently.

The more a skill is practised the more it is mastered, applied, and retained in memory because practice brings perfection (Mwamwenda 2004; Evans et al. 2010). Parents who read to their children would discover that the time spent together creates a special bond. Many researchers and academics stated that parents' involvement in reading or story telling enhance their children's opportunities for health, development, and social belonging (Snow et al. 2003). Majority of parents in rural areas do not assist their children in reading or have time to tell stories to their children at home. Therefore, this study is significant to investigate the extent to which parents are involved in reading or telling stories to promote health and literacy in children in Zone 4 Thohoyandou Unit E. In this paper, the researcher makes a case on the importance of reading or telling children stories to promote literary development.

### Importance of Storytelling and Reading: Parental Involvement

According to Smith (2007) and Chase-Lansdale and Takanishi (2009), parental involvement is the involvement of parents in the upbringing of their own children both at home and at school. Parental involvement in the reading of their children has positive results at schools (Fan and Chen 2001; Dearing et al. 2006) When parents are involved, they encourage and motivate their

children to work harder, by so doing it makes the child to be motivated, work hard and achieve academically (Melhuish et al. 2001; Albers 2016). It is established that parental involvement is important in children's learning, accelerate language development and strengthens children's educational achievement (Desforges and Abourchaar 2003; Senechal 2011; Friday 2014). When children experience early reading with their parents it prepares them for the benefit of formal literacy instruction. Parents' involvement in reading activities at home has a significant positive influence not only on reading achievement, language comprehension and expressive language skills (Gest et al. 2004; Supplee et al. 2004) but also on children's interest in reading and attitude towards reading.

They learn more about diseases and culture. According to Flouri and Buchanan (2004), parental involvement in the children's reading practice was a more powerful force than any other family backgrounds, while the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2002) said reading for enjoyment is more important for children's educational success than their families' socio-economic status. Research also showed that the earlier parents become involved in their children's reading, the more profound the results and the longer lasting the effect (Williams et al. 2002; Desforges 2003; Nedovic 2015). Parents who promote the view that reading is a valuable and worthwhile activity have children who are motivated to read for pleasure (Baker and Scher 2002). Reading skills are important keys for learning. In addition, anything that exposes children to the basics of language in a meaningful and understanding manner contributes immensely to their learning of the art of how to read. Furthermore, in order for the children to develop and master the art of reading, the role of parents is very critical as they are the first mentors and teachers who can initiate the actual process of developing the reading habit.

#### **The Benefit of Parental Involvement in Story Reading**

The benefits of parental involvement are clear. A growing body of research shows that successful parents' involvement improves not only children's behaviour and attendance but also positively affect children's achievement (Deearing et al. 2004; Patall 2008). The relation-

ship between schools and parents cause a significant progress in reading among children. By supporting children of every age to read in their leisure time, by reading through looking at picture or chapter books for example, parents can help to ensure that children are equipped with the necessary skills to succeed in later life. In South Africa (Department of Education 2011) independent review of the primary school curriculum argued that: A deep engagement with storytelling and great literature link directly to emotional development in primary school children. This implies that story reading and telling play an important role in the development of reading skills and health promotion. National Endowment for the Arts (2007) also showed that the number of children who read above the expected level of their age and have books of their own is higher than for those children who do not have their own books and read at their level. This correlation between an appreciation for books and reading levels demonstrate the importance of children gaining exposure to texts at a young age and health issues.

#### **Ways of Developing Reading Skills by Parents**

Children need to become proficient readers because it is important for them and determines their educational success. Parents know their children better and they are the mentors who can hone their reading skills. Reading skills are obtained by practice; the art of reading becomes a habit when parents engage their children by developing the urge to read and awareness of health issues from an early age

Reading could be boring to some children but is a mandatory activity for every human who wants to succeed in life. Teaching children how to read starts at home when children are young (Wade and Moore 2000, Desforges and Abourchaar 2003).

#### **Create a Family Reading Time or Story Telling Time**

Parents need to spare time to read with their children at home. Every member of the family should get involved and it must be a daily ritual of reading together. Children from literacy "rich" home environment; tend to ask their parents to read to them more often (Aulls and Sollars 2003). A child replicates what he/she observes at home.

Thus, in order for children to become good readers, they should witness their parents reading.

Children behave as their parents do, for better and for worse (Baker and Scher 2002; Cook-Cotte 2004). Parents should show active involvement in reading and help their children to develop reading skills.

Parents who read to their children will soon discover that the time spent together with their children creates a special bond. Researchers and academics stated that parents' involvement in their children's reading is associated with higher academic achievement, better attendance, attitudes that are more positive, better behaviour and greater willingness to do the work, (Krog and Kruger 2002: 48; Baker et al. 2001). It was, therefore, the aim of this study to explore the extent to which parents are involved in story telling or reading to their children in Zone 4 Thohoyandou Unit E.

## METHODOLOGY

This study explored the extent to which parents are involved in developing the reading skills of their children in their homes by reading to them and telling them stories. Using semi-structured interviews, the study employed a qualitative method. A qualitative approach allows for insights into the teaching of language experiences and perceptions of teachers and possible conclusions could be made about aspects of storytelling and reading practices that are difficult to measure quantitatively (Merriam 2002; Van Stockar 2016).

The study addressed the following question:

- To what extents are parents involved in reading or telling stories to their children in their homes?

### Research Design

A case study of 20 parents of Zone 4 of Unit E, Thohoyandou was employed. A qualitative design was chosen for the enquiry in order to understand the role of parents in developing reading skills of their children through storytelling and reading and health issues.

### Population and Sampling

The population for this study included parents, educators and learners from the selected zone. There were 20 parents involved in the

study. A total of twenty participants formed the sample of the study.

### Ethical Considerations

Permission to carry out the study was granted by the Department of Education, Vhembe District. Permission was also sought from the respondents through informed consent. Respondents were informed that their information was confidential and their participation was voluntary. Teachers were made aware of the fact that they were free to terminate their participation in the study without any fear of being victimized.

### Data Collection Instruments

The researchers collected data from twenty parents through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Permission to participate in the study was sought and the informants signed informed consent forms. Data was recorded by audio means. One central question that directed the interviews was: 'To what extent are parents involved in reading to their children in their homes? Paraphrasing and probing follow-up questioning was done to deepen the discussion.

### Data Analysis

Data was transcribed and translated verbatim from the mother tongue to English. The recorded information was also compared with the transcribed data to avoid omissions. Analysis was done according to Tech's 8 steps of analysis (Creswell 1998: 142). These are: getting the sense of the whole and picking one document which was interesting and reading through it. Topics were then listed and clustered and the researcher made a final decision on the abbreviation for each category. Consequently, they were assembled in one place and preliminary analysis was performed and re-coding was done (Creswell 1998: 142). Literature control was done to ensure that there was a good fit between data and relevant literature, provoking a link between previous research and the present research.

## RESULTS

The researcher asked all the respondents similar questions.

### **Data Analysis for the Structured Interviews Conducted with 20 Parents**

The analysis of this section was based on interviews conducted with 20 parents. The main question was: what role do parents play in the development of their children's literacy in their homes? These were the responses given. Some of the challenges experienced are as follows:

- The major challenge is illiteracy; some parents do not know how to read and write;
- Parents who are working fail to assist their children because of time constraints;
- Some of the parents felt that it is the responsibility of the educators to assist learners in reading because they have paid for it; and
- Parents who are working far from home are unable to assist their children because they come home once a month.

### **Strategies of Involving Parents in Improving their Children's Reading Skills**

The parents suggested the following strategies of involving parents in improving the reading skills of their children:

- Encourage parents to read to their children at home, maybe 10 minutes every day before going to bed.
- Organise a reading day for both parents and their children.
- Organise a concert wherein each and every learner comes with his or her parents and let every learner read while parents are listening.
- Organise a parent's day and give each parent time to explain how they help their children in reading.

### **The Involvement of Parents in Helping their Children in Developing Reading Skills**

There were parents who assist their children with reading. The data revealed what other parents had to say about assisting their children. Parents were divided as far as this question was concerned. Twelve parents were involved in assisting their children in reading skills whereas 8 of them were not involved. Those who were involved indicated that their children understand them better than the teachers and therefore, children would learn more if they were assisted by their parents. Parents indicated that they assist-

ed their children because it was easy for them to identify barriers to reading skills of their children; checked their children reading skills; taught their children to understand concepts of reading; and identified difficulties in reading.

- *"I read with my child every day and sometimes I take my child to the library when I have time and I read different story books with her;"*
- *"Firstly, I read a story for my child and explain what it means, then let him read after me;"*
- *"Using the little time I have I read together with my child;"*
- *"I read story books to my child every day;"*
- *"I read with my child every day;"*
- *"Every day I read words to my child and let her read also."*

The parents clearly defined their roles when assisting children in their homework. This showed that when the majority of the respondents read stories with their children and explain what they meant, it elevated the ability of their children to read on their own culture and health issues (Nedovic 2015).

### **Challenges Experienced by Parents in Developing Their Children's Reading Skills**

The majority of the respondents indicated that they come late from work and tired and therefore it becomes difficult for them to assist their children in reading skills. Illiterate parents indicated that it is impossible for them to assist their children because they do not have an educational background. "I don't know how to read and write then how am I going to assist my children in their reading skills" Lack of knowledge is one of the barriers for parental involvement in assisting children with reading. Some of the respondents felt that information to assist their children in enhancing reading skills is not well communicated by the schools and according to them that is a serious challenge.

### **Addressing those Challenges**

Parents suggested the following to address the challenges involved in enhancing the reading skills of their children:

- Effective communication between educators and parents;
- Introduction of Adult Basic Education Training centers in rural areas especially to address illiteracy;

- To assign a guardian who is educated to assist the children of parents who work in areas far from home;
- Parents should manage their time in order to assist their children;

### DISCUSSION

From the available evidence we can infer that the findings from the study confirm the notions that parental involvement is important for the development of reading skills of their children. Data from parents indicated that illiteracy was a major challenge preventing parents from assisting their children with their reading skills. Data from parents indicated that they return late from work and were always tired; therefore it becomes difficult for them to assist their children with their reading skills.

#### Strategies and Methods to be Used by Parents in Improving Reading of their Children

The majority of the respondents indicated that workshops should be conducted to teach parents about the importance of their involvement in the acquisition of reading skills of their children. To strengthen the relationship between parents and the educators, respondents suggested that educators should have meetings with parents every quarter, per year to discuss issues relevant to reading skills (Friday 2014). It was also recommended that teachers should give learners homework daily on reading as a way of creating more opportunities for parents to be involved in the reading activities of their children. Lastly, the majority of the respondents indicated that uneducated parents should attend Adult Basic Education and Training.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the researcher suggested the following recommendations to deal with challenges experienced in involving parents in helping to improve the reading skills of their children:

- Adult Basic Education for the adults should be introduced in areas affected so that parents could learn to read and write;
- Parents' awards should be held in schools to award parents who are actively involved

in assisting their children in developing reading skills;

- Parents who are working should assign guardians to assist their children in reading skills; and
- Motivational talks or presentations should be held in schools to deal with the attitude of parents who do not want to be involved in assisting their children with reading activities.

The following points were identified as the recommendations for increasing parental involvement in their children's reading skills:

- Parents should have parental meetings among themselves every quarter per year to share their experiences in helping their children in reading skills; and
- Parents should improvise or create time to assist their children in reading skills

The data revealed that there are many factors that hinder parents' involvement in the development of their children's literacy development and health promotion.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to intervene in problems and challenges experienced by parents in helping their children in developing reading skills, the following recommendations were made:

- Motivational talks or presentations should be held during civic meetings and club meetings to deal with the attitude of parents who do not want to be involved in assisting their children with reading activities;
- Introduction of ABET centres in rural areas should be emphasized especially to address illiteracy;
- To assign guardians who are educated to assist the children of parents who work in areas far from homes;
- Parents who contribute to the reading skills of their children should be recognized and celebrated on certain days;
- Parents should improvise or find time to assist their children with the development of reading skills;
- Parents need to be invited to schools and get advice on how to help children in reading during civic meetings;
- Good relationships between parents and educators should be established;

- Parents need to be encouraged to buy reading books for their children;

### ***Assistance of Parents in helping their Children in Developing Literacy and Health Promotion Skills***

The following were identified as the recommendations for increasing parental involvement in developing their children's reading skills:

- Parents should have parental meetings every quarter per year to share their experiences in helping their children in developing reading skills;
- Parents should improvise or create time to assist their children in improving their reading skills;
- Parents need to be encouraged to buy reading books, newspapers and magazines for their children.

### **LIMITATIONS**

Only four schools were selected for the purpose of this study and not all parents in zone 4 of Unit E, Thohoyandou, were included in this study. There is a possibility that a different picture could have been obtained about the extent to which parents were involved in literacy development and health promotion of their children in Zone 4 of Unit E, Sibasa, and Thohoyandou if this study had been conducted in other Zones. The study only involved one zone from one municipality and possibly different results might have been obtained if more zones were involved. Therefore, the results of the study cannot be generalized for a large population.

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