

Enhancing the Literacy Abilities of Students: A Home-School Complementary Role

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ABSTRACT The literacy development of children is not the sole responsibility of the school alone. Although there is the growing awareness among the Nigerian public of the need for parents to be involved in the educational development of their children, the potential of Nigerian parents as an agent of literacy promotion has not been fully tapped. The present study was designed to find out the extent to which some parents in Ekpoma metropolis were involved in the literacy development of their children. A total of 50 parents made up of both sexes participated in the study. A five-item parent literacy involvement Questionnaire was used for data collection. Using frequency counts and percentages for data analysis, the results indicated that the percentage of parents who read aloud to their children on a regular basis was very low. It was also found that a good number of the parents did not provide a good literate model. However, the vast majority of the parents engaged in the activity of talking and listening to their children on a regular basis. The findings were interpreted in terms of the need to guide parents on how they could be purposefully and meaningfully involved in their children's literacy development on a consistent basis.

INTRODUCTION

It is increasingly being recognized that a strengthening of parental involvement in their children's education may enhance better performance in school. That is, a closer link between home and school is considered one of the essentials for educational improvement. In particular, there is mounting evidence that parents play an important role in the literacy development of their children. Adams (2008) observed that, "Parents play roles of inestimable importance in laying the foundation for learning to read and write. It would appear that the potentials of Nigerian parents, as an agent of literacy promotion has not been fully tapped. This is not to deny the growing awareness among the Nigerian public of the need for parents to be meaningfully involved in their children's literacy development. What is being emphasized is that in order to check the incidence of widespread reading failure in schools, the home must play its part (Lawson 2005). It is common knowledge that one big challenge facing Nigeria as a multilingual society is that of helping children acquire literacy in English. There is overwhelming evidence that the school is failing in its important responsibility of helping children learn to read and read to learn. One reason for this is the mismatch between the

language and literacy experiences of the home and those of the school. Research has shown that many Nigerian children's language experiences are most often unrelated, or, at best, minimally related to the language of instruction at school (Unoh 2006).

It is against this background that the study reported here was designed to find out the extent to which some parents in Ekpoma Metropolis were involved in the literacy development of their children. It was expected that the study would also provide some insight into the subjects' awareness of what they should do to foster their children's literacy development.

METHOD

A total of 50 parents made up of both sexes participated in the study. They were drawn from those whose children attended two private schools in Ekpoma. The parents were randomly selected from among those who participated in the Parents -Teachers Association (PTA) meeting of the two schools.

For the purpose of data collection, a five-item Parent Literacy Enhancement Questionnaire (PLEQ) was designed. The questionnaire was an adaptation of Blackson's (2002). Copies of the questionnaire were randomly given to the parents

during the PTA meeting of the two schools. The parents were asked to complete the questionnaire on the spot. They were asked to rate as honestly as they could the frequency with which they did the things listed in the questionnaire using a scale from daily, frequently, sometimes to not at all. The data were analyzed using frequency counts and percentages.

RESULTS

From table 1, it can be seen that about 30% of the parents claimed that they read to their children daily, 20% of them performed this literacy activity frequently, about 40% did it sometimes, and 10% said they do not read to their children at all. This finding suggests that the vast majority of the parents recognized the need to read to their children. However, the percentage of parents who read to their children always or frequently was only 50%.

Regarding the extent to which parents were a good literate model, about 26% said they themselves read daily, 24% said they frequently read, and as large as 44% claimed they sometimes read, while 6% admitted they do not read at all. On the issue of literacy-rich home, 34% said they daily fostered a literacy-rich home, about 26% said they frequently made the home rich with literacy materials, 34% sometimes did, and about 6% do not. And with regard to promoting contact with literacy materials, 56% claimed they did this daily, 26% frequently, about 16% sometimes, and 2% do not provided contact with literacy materials. And finally with regard to promotion of oral language development, as high as 62% of the parents said that they did it always, 34% did it frequently, and only 4% claimed they did it sometimes.

Emerging from these results are the following deductions:

1. The vast majority of the parents involved in the study recognized the activities in the

questionnaire as necessary for children's literacy development.

2. Reading aloud to children was not being practiced enough by parents.
3. Parents would appear to be actively involved in the promotion of their children oral language development.
4. The percentage of parents who provided a good literate model was low.

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to find out the extent of parents' involvement in their children's literacy development. The main findings of the study were that

1. Parents were involved to some extent in their children's literacy development.
2. The activities included in the questionnaire were generally recognized as essential to literacy development.
3. Reading aloud to children by parents would appear not to receive sufficient attention.
4. Most parents on a regular basis engaged in the activity of talking and listening to children.

The findings will be discussed in relation to their implications under the following headings:

- (a) The need to guide parents as to how to purposefully and meaningfully get involved in their children's literacy development
- (b) The need to encourage parents to read more to their children
- (c) The need to guide parents on purposeful listening to their children.

1. Purposeful Involvement in Children's Literacy Development

The parents would appear to generally appreciate the need to be involved in their children's literacy development. This suggests that what is needed by parents is information on how to do this more purposefully and meaning-

Table 1: Parents' involvement in their children's literacy development.

S. No.	Item	Daily	Frequently	Sometimes	Not at all
1.	I read to my child	15(30%)	10(20%)	20(40%)	5(10%)
2.	I am a good literate model.	13(26%)	12(24%)	22(44%)	3(6%)
3.	I read books, magazines and newspapers for information				
	I foster a literacy-rich home by providing books, magazines, newspapers etc. for my child to read	17(34%)	13(26%)	17(34%)	3(6%)
4.	I provide contact with literacy materials, such as paper, pencils, and crayons.	28(56%)	13(26%)	8(16%)	1(2%)
5.	I talk and listen to my child	31(62%)	17(34%)	2(4%)	0(0%)

fully. In other words, they need to have some principles, which should guide literacy activities with their children. It is not enough to know that they should be involved or to do something casually or randomly, it is important that parents know why they do what they do and to be consistent in doing it.

The following principles of parent involvement suggested need to be brought to the attention of Nigerian parents:

Regular Daily Time. One precious gift parents can give their children is time. It is to be borne in mind, however, that time is most effectively used when it is provided regularly. A little as 10 minutes of child-parents reading interaction each evening can help children begin a life-long reading habit.

Purpose and Motive. Reading or literacy activities for children and parents must be purposeful, the recall for an activity should relate directly to the child's immediate life and interests

Reading Literacy Activities. Association with real purpose is the notion of real reading and writing. Tasks that children are asked to participate in, should reflect real literacy in form and function.

Tolerance and Patience. Growth in reading and writing is not always as fast as one may wish. The best parent-child interactions require patience on the part of parents. Parents need to allow their children to move at their own pace. Patience and tolerance are vital components of effective parenthood. It is important to realize that parents should be prepared to allow their children to consolidate the gains made in literacy before moving on.

Support and Encouragement. Regardless of how easy an activity may appear to an adult, it may overwhelm a child. The very best parents-child activities are those that allow parents to support their children's endeavors. Parents need to make reading easy. Parents can offer support by providing sufficient background for activities, giving elaborated explanations, answering questions, and sharing examples. In a sense, they act as a scaffold to support their children's language literacy growth. Support also means providing enough help so that children feel successful in the activity-in other words, offering encouragement. This means that children understand that risking an answer, even if wrong, is better than not attempting any response. Children need to realize that they are in a safe

environment, free from ridicule and constant evaluation. Love of literacy is promoted when children are encouraged and helped to overcome seemingly formidable obstacles.

2. Reading Aloud to Children

One finding of this study indicated that enough attention was not given to reading aloud by parents. Parents need to be encouraged to take this activity more seriously. This is because reading aloud, according to Stanley (2002), "is the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading.

3. Purposeful Listening to Children

One activity that most parents readily engaged in, as revealed by the present study, was talking and listening to their children. It is important that parents know how to use this activity to foster their children's literacy development. For example, listening to children, which may appear a simple activity, has been shown to strongly relate to their reading achievement.

This finding should be of particular interest in a second language situation such as the case is in Nigeria where many parents are not literate. This is one activity that all parents can engage in with their children. Research further indicates that listening to children read promoted reading achievement even among children whose parents had little education, were illiterate, or non- English speaking.

CONCLUSION

The present study must be regarded as a pilot study because of its limited sample and the fact that only parents of children in private schools were involved. However, its findings suggest that parents would like to be involved in their children's literacy development and improvement if they know what to do and how to do it. This means that the school has an important role to play to encourage parents in this direction. Teachers should guide parents on what to do. In other words, the school should go to the home and not wait for it to come to the school. The school should be family friendly. Parents should always be welcome in school and children should see their parents and teachers in a friendly relationship of equals.

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