

Some Environmental Factors that Affect Reading Literacy in Southwestern Nigerian Junior Secondary Schools

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Abstract

The focus of this study is to identify the effects that some environmental factors have on reading literacy among school children, with the ultimate purpose of drawing out implications for the enhancement of the Nigerian basic education. The aim of the study is to assess the influences of the home environment and parental background as well as the school location on children's reading habits. This study was conducted by using a self-developed questionnaire to collect data on the subject of the study. The methodology for the study involves the random selection of eighty Junior Secondary three students drawn from four out of the twenty-four Secondary Schools in Akure South Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria. The research instrument was administered on the selected students to generate the required information for the study. The findings revealed that some students have better reading habits than others as a result of the different social classes to which their parents belong, and that the home environment has some positive impacts on the attitude of students to reading as an intellectual, social or academic exercise. It was found that students in urban-located schools are exposed to educational resources which boost their reading capability. Based on these findings, some short and long term remedies were suggested to parents, government, teachers, and students on how a good reading culture can be enhanced among college students.

Keywords: Reading, reading literacy, environmental factors, parental attitudes, home background.

Introduction

Reading can be defined as the ability to make meaning out of a series of written symbols. Guthrie, Benneth and McGough (2007) opine that reading is the act of getting meaning from printed or written words; this is the basis for learning and one of the most important skills in everyday life. According to Rubin (2002), reading is a total integrative process that starts with the reader, and it entails the affective, psychomotor, and cognitive domains. The cognitive aspect is illustrated by Okebukola's (2004) affirmation that through reading, individuals in the human society acquire the tools to transmit knowledge to each succeeding generation; thereby knowledge (wisdom) is passed from one generation to another.

Smith and Robinson (1980) define reading as a process of communication between the writer and the reader. Based on evidences from the vast drawings found in ancient artefacts and in caves, they propound that reading started as interpretation of symbols and pictures, and that as humans evolved, so did language. This led to the development of the alphabets, and by recognising individual alphabets, humans were able to read.

Reading is regarded as one of the most effective processes of conscious learning. According to Devarajan and Gray, as cited in Panigrahi and Panda (1996), reading influences the extent and accuracy of information as well as the attitudes, morals, beliefs, judgment and action of readers. Reading is the ability to understand words contained in a document and make use of the knowledge for personal growth and development (Dadzie, 2008). An indirect implication of this is that people read for different reasons and purposes, some of which are for pleasure, leisure, relaxation, information and for knowledge acquisition.

Reading is the identification of the symbols and the association of appropriate meaning with them. It requires identification and comprehension (Palani, 2012). Comprehension skills help learners to understand the meaning of words in

isolation and in context. Thus, reading is a process of thinking, evaluating, judging, imagining, reasoning and problems solving. Potter (2011) believes that reading arouses children's imagination and encourages quick learning; it also widens their views, expands their horizons, and helps readers learn about climes. He further argues that reading encourages resourcefulness, interest and the ability to manage complex ideas.

Issa et al. (2012) explains that reading is usually associated with books as only the written words provide a complete picture of the act of reading. It means that through reading, the individual is able to build or fix things, enjoy stories, discover what others believe and develop ideas or beliefs of their own. This idea suggests that reading provides the key to all forms of information necessary for our day to day survival and growth. Also, reading is important for everybody in order to cope with new knowledge in a changing world that has been christened the technological age. The ability to read is at the heart of self-education and lifelong learning.

Reading is an intellectual action which is possible only if a man forms a habit of reading and practices this from childhood. Reading habit, therefore plays a very crucial role in enabling a person to achieve practical efficiency. Viewed from another perspective, reading produces enlightened citizens with broadened minds who can contribute to personal and national development; it is, indeed, central to academic success.

It has been asserted that children know much about their environment only when they are exposed to reading books, newspapers and magazine. As they are exposed to reading and develop the love for books, they find it easier to explore the wealth of human experience and knowledge. Children who miss the opportunity of getting in touch with books in their early stages of life find it hard to acquire good reading skill in their later years (Deavers, 2000).

Reading has been very useful in the acquisition of a large collection of vocabulary items needed for clear and accurate oral and written expressions (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998). At the same time, it is a tool for learning other subjects, as well as a yardstick for measuring academic progress because through

reading, educational objectives can be accomplished (Bright & McGregor, 1971, p. 3). It is therefore important for students to be good and efficient readers, so they can achieve academic success (Bamigbola, 2021).

In general, reading has been found to improve other aspects of human life such as a person's spelling, writing skills, fluency, proficiency, language enrichment, cultural enrichment, critical thinking, personal involvement, sociolinguistic and pragmatic knowledge and emotional intelligence (Beauchart, Blamey & Walpole, 2009; Wolfe & Katzir-Cohen, 2001; Van, 2009; Collie & Slater, 1990; Langer, 1997; Hismanoglu, 2005; Cajdusek & van Dommelen, 1993).

To help children learn to read as well as read to learn, there is the need to "catch them young", that is, right from the homes in their early years. Anderson (2011) is of the view that reading aloud to children every day and explicitly teaching selected words help nurture strong vocabulary knowledge. This in turn makes a child able to read more fluently and with more purpose. Reading aloud to children every day should begin at home and be nurtured in the school.

The terms "reading habit", "reading culture" and "reading literacy" are synonymous; and refer to the behaviour which expresses the likeness of reading of individual, types of reading and tastes of reading (Sangkaeo, 1999; Lawal, 1989; Solangi, 2015; and Palani, 2012). It is a pattern with which an individual organizes his or her reading. Habits are dispositions to behave or do something in a particular way. They are patterns of behaviour which manifest with regularity in what one does and how it is done. Habits when formed in relation to reading manifest in how, what and when one reads. Helping children learn to read, learn to love reading and read to learn is important for personal fulfilment and societal development.

Reading culture is a tradition of people who place high premium on reading such that they become active, engaged and avid readers (UNESCO, 2009). According to Patrick (2017), reading culture implies the art of consciously and consistently making reading a part of one's life activity with the sole aim of being well grounded in general knowledge; hence reading habit

leads to reading culture. Actually, reading culture includes basic reading, reading habit and critical reading skill.

Literacy is the ability to read, write, speak and compute in a manner to communicate meaningfully. Thus, reading literacy will connote the ability to comprehend, use and attach meaning to written texts. Young children tend to acquire reading literacy through a variety of activities and experiences with different contexts. The list of factors affecting reading literacy acquisition in schools include school policy, curriculum, environment and resources.

The importance of good reading culture cannot be over-emphasized as it provides individuals welfare, social progress and international understanding. It also provides skills, knowledge and right attitude and frees one from boredom or idleness, among others. Reading is not just for schooling but for life since it enhances success at both school and beyond. The recurring incidences of mass failure have been attributed to students' reading problems (Abe, 1991).

Ogbodo (2010) further identifies three main types of reading habits. These are hobby, recreation and concentration. A hobby is an activity one does because one derives joy and satisfaction from doing it. The practice of reading as a hobby helps one to be versatile in knowledge in many areas and the person can discuss issues knowledgeably with others.

It has been observed that reading habit is waning among African children (Kazim, 2012). The cause of this has been traced to poor reading cultures of Africans generally and other notable factors like non-availability of reading materials (books). As Choudhung (1990) puts it, "reading habit is best formed at a young impressionable age in school but once formed it can last one's life".

The non-progressive nature of literacy in almost all African countries is most prevalent. The issue has been put forward to go beyond schooling. This is because parents who cannot read by themselves are unable to help their children to read and the cycle continues. The situation in Nigeria is not different from other African countries, though the literary level is now improving. There is inadequate supply of books to primary and secondary

schools in rural areas; most of them do not have a library or reading room where pupils can engage in private reading. All these factors hinder the development of good reading habits by the pupils and are considered as stumbling blocks to the advancement of quality basic education. Despite the acclaimed importance of reading however, many Nigerian students, according to Abe (1991), have reading problems. And to compound the problem, Nigerian schools do not have a time specifically set aside to teach reading. Reading is done during the forty minutes language lesson period.

Furthermore, there are very few libraries in public schools and most of which are scantily stocked. Also, public libraries are only found in urban centres. These are not encouraging for the cultivation of good reading habits. School-wide programmes which focus specifically on reading and literacy development, may directly support the acquisition of skills and attitude towards reading literacy. In addition, the context of the classroom cannot be overlooked when considering factors affecting reading literacy. Even though the curricular policies and resources of the school often set the tone for accomplishment, classroom activities are likely to have a more direct impact on reading development than school environment. The instructional approaches and materials used are clearly important to establishing teaching and learning processes, including the availability of books, technology, and other resources, as well as the strategies employed to handle the curriculum.

The teacher, of course, is another very influential determinant of the classroom environment. This can include his or her preparation and training, use of particular instructional approaches and experience in teaching reading. Finally, the behaviours, attitudes and literacy level of classmates may influence the teacher's instructional choice, thereby affecting a student's reading development (Kurtz-Costes and Schneider, 1994 cited in Ekundayo, 2005).

Experience has shown that the environmental factors which have direct influences on a child's habit and attitude to work and learning are the home, parents' educational background and socioeconomic class, the school facilities and

teaching method. Of these, the factors a child is more intimate with are expected to have far reaching influences on the habits the child imbibes. These influences have to do with the home environment, which also include the parental attributes and the school location.

For students to have cultivated the habit of voluntary reading, the skills for reading must have been acquired. These skills must have been nurtured by the child's parental background which the environment will dictate. Some factors have been identified as the cause of poor reading habit among students: these are linguistics, psychological, physical and health factors (The Hindu, 2004). Genealogical theory that the family is the first socialization agent for the child and that the foundation for his intellectual development is laid at home, settles the issue that the readiness of a child to read rest on the home environment. Therefore, the development of a child's psychomotor skills will depend on the assistance of the family to develop the language basic skills.

Considering the information above, the aim of this study is, therefore, to assess the influences of the home and parental backgrounds as well as the school location on children's reading habits. Specifically, the objectives are to identify the reading habits of school children, the amount of time they spend in reading, the sources of reading materials that are available to them, and the measures to be taken to help improve their reading habits, among others.

Methodology

The methodology for the study involves random selection of four secondary schools out of the twenty-four schools in Akure South Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria. The selected schools are: Akure Secondary Commercial School, Adegbola Memorial Grammar School, Omoluorogbo Grammar School and C.A.C. Grammar School. The subjects for the study comprise twenty Junior Secondary three students randomly selected from each school, making a total of eighty students. The random selection of the schools and students for this study is for the

purpose of giving every entity in the population the opportunity to be included in the study.

The research instrument for the study is a self-developed questionnaire composed of two sections. The first section is to collect information on parental background and home environment of the subjects, while the second section requires the students to pick the appropriate options that fit their responses to different questions on the research topic. Eighty copies of the questionnaire were distributed to the selected subjects out of which seventy-five were completed and returned.

Data Analysis

The data collected using the questionnaire were summarized into two broad categories. In the first category are the students' responses to questions on parental background and home environment, while the students' responses to questions on the research topic are included in the second category.

The responses of the students were aggregated using frequency counts of occurrences, and then analyzed using statistical measures involving calculation of percentages of the different classes the obtained data can be subdivided into. The percentage distribution thus computed are used for presentation of the data and to support the deductions and assertions made in the study.

Parental background and home environment of the students

Students' responses to the question on parents' educational qualification indicate that 48% of the respondents' fathers have First Degree / HND, 18.7% are NCE holders, 12% obtained Teacher Grade II Certificate, and 21.3% are holders of Secondary School Certificate.

Percentage distribution of occupations of the parents of the selected students shows that 13.3% of the parents are medical doctors, 48% are civil servants, 16% are artisans, 17.4% are traders, and 5.3% are engineers. The percentage distribution of the home environment of the subjects of this study reveal that 25.3% reside at Government Reserve Areas, 26.3% live at newly developed areas, 6.7% have their houses located close to the

roadside/market/mid-town, and 41.3% reside in quiet environments.

From the above responses, it can be inferred that students of secondary schools in Akure South Local Government Area, in general,

1. have parents who are mostly (66.7%) very literate as they are holders of tertiary education certificates;
2. are blessed with parents who are mostly employees in public/private organizations (66.6%) or self-employed (33.4%);
3. come mostly (93.3%) from good home locations and environments conducive to learning.

Students' responses to questions on the research topic

The percentage distribution of reading habits of respondents while in school indicates that 16% of the students never read while in school, 34.7% sometimes read while in school, and 49.3% read almost every day while in school. The percentage distribution of time spent reading by respondents after school hour shows that 12% read for less than half an hour after school hours, 14.6% read for an hour, 26.7% read for 1 and a half hours, 20% read for 2 hours, and 26.7% read for more than 2 hours. Students' responses to the question on whether or not they have paid teachers who teach them extra lessons reveal that 60% have paid teachers for home/extra lessons while 40% of the students do not have any extra lessons.

The percentage distribution of level of parents' involvement in the reading activities of the respondents shows that 52% had parental involvement in their reading activities every day, 21.3% have parental participation in their reading activities sometimes, while 26.7% of the selected students never had any parental involvement in their reading activities.

The percentage distribution of respondents who indicate whether or not there was parental incentive for reading or performing well at home indicates that 88% of the students were rewarded by their parents for reading or performing well at

home, while 12% of the respondents did not received any incentive from their parents.

In response to the question on whether or not parents have time to monitor their educational activities after school hours, 60% of the respondents indicate existence of parental monitoring while 40% of the respondents were not spared any time after school hours.

The percentage distribution of the students' responses to question on whether or not there was parental assistance when doing their school assignments at home shows that 20% of the respondents have regular parental assistance, 50.7% indicated that their parents sometimes assist them, while 29.3% of the respondents do not have parental assistance when doing their school assignments at home.

Findings

The findings of this study are as presented below. From the self-made questionnaire administered on the subjects, three environmental factors are identifiable for the study. These are the parental background, home environment and school location. The parents of most of the sampled students are very literate (about 70% of them being graduates of tertiary educational institutions), and occupy the upper and middle strata of the society (66.6% are high-ranking public officers). The home variable can be characterized by its location (in exclusive areas for people of high status) and equipment (facilities and infrastructure around the location). Incidentally, the selected schools are located in Akure, an urban centre, which accommodates the Ondo State administrative headquarters.

The influences of the above-listed three variables can be observed in the responses of the selected students as follows: Majority (about 70%) of the students have parents who belong to the upper and middle classes, while in the minority (about 30%) are those with parents in the lower echelon of the society. The parents of students in the upper and the middle tiers prioritize the education of their children. This is seen in the arrangement for paid extra lessons, provision of reading materials, as well as the supervision and facilitation of incentives to enhance the reading

culture of the students. While parents in the lower tier may be interested in the education of their children, they may not have the means to provide such supports.

It was also discovered from the students' responses that the home environment has some positive impacts on the attitude of students to reading as an intellectual, social or academic activity. From the data generated, it was observed that there are things such as the quiet atmosphere and provision of commodious accommodation that the children from conducive environments enjoy which help them to develop good reading habits but which are not available to children from the working class homes.

By sheer coincidence, the domain of the study comprises schools located in an urban setting within which the students are exposed to motivating periodicals and novels, newspapers and other print and electronic media. These facilities/infrastructure evidently will boost the reading capability of the students in such school environment.

Conclusion

The study has been able to conclude that the learner's environment has a great influence on the reading culture, and this is brought about by the differences in the parents' level of education and the type of environment they live in. Since the home is the first socializing agent the child gets in contact with when he comes into the world, the set up and status of the home will be very instrumental in enhancing his attitude to reading. The context of the school location cannot be overlooked when considering factors affecting reading literacy. This variable impacts on the infrastructural and educational facilities available for an enhanced reading culture among school children. Schools located in urban centres are expected to have access to modern facilities such as equipped library, abundance of adequately qualified teachers, not to mention other educational resources that are likely to have a more direct impact on the reading culture of the students.

This study is significant for Nigeria where a study of this kind is essential but scarce. The acquisition of good reading habit can assist in acquisition of good reading skill which is crucial to

any intellectual task. Curriculum planners will benefit from the study and be able to make provisions for individual differences of students in the planning of the curriculum. The study will also help to educate parents as well as help teachers to understand the condition of students' environment thereby treating them differently based on their background. It will also provide the materials and also serve as information to the government to enable them provide educational facilities and resources that will aid good reading culture among students. Finally, the study will provoke further intellectual argument which can lead to further research works.

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