

LITERACY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract:

The study examined literacy in early childhood and its implications on personal development as well as community development. The study was carried out in Ado Local Government area of Ekiti state and making use of 100 respondents. Questionnaire items tagged, “literacy in early childhood” was used to elicit responses from the subjects. The responses were subjected to frequency counts and percentages. The study revealed that children from high socio economic background have better opportunity of being literate earlier than children from poverty ridden homes who would not be exposed to literate friendly environment. It was also discovered that being literate early in life would lead to personal development helping them to contribute not only to their personal development but also their communities. The study recommended that children should be exposed to literacy skills early in life and those literacy activities that are effective in improving and developing literacy skills such as shared reading, recitation of rhymes, and songs should be taught to children.

Key Words: Early Childhood Education, Literacy, Communication, School Dropout, Reading Levels, Literacy Promoting Environment

Introduction

According to UNESCO, early childhood education is defined as the period from birth to eight years old. It is a time of remarkable brain development. These years lay the foundation for subsequent learning. Early childhood education programmes include any type of educational programme that serves children in the school years and it is designed to improve later school performance. Early childhood education also refers to the teaching of young children by people outside the family or in setting outside the home, the age of which is usually defined by most nations as before the age of normal schooling while the U.S. National Association for the Education of young Children defines it as before the age of eight (www.wikipedia.org/early_childhood_education)

As good as the above definition is, it places more emphasis on children being taught by people outside the home or family whereas if children are to be well grounded in the issue of literacy, efforts of the home must be given great emphasis since parents are the first and best teachers of children (Early Years Framework, Scottish Government 2008 www.wikipedia.org/early_childhood_education)

Early childhood education is one of the best investments any nation can make and in making this effort, literacy in early childhood must not be side tracked because literacy is one of the most important foundations for success in school and life (ABS, 2006) (Same as above)

American medical Association (AMA), 1999, Baker, 1999, Rowe and Rowe, 1999) all believe that the printed text that represents spoken language which implies being literate, does not develop as a matter of course but with concerted effort. Literacy has been variously defined as the ability to read and write to a competent level (www.bing.com/Dictionary/search). This definition of literacy is quite different from its definition of having knowledge or competence in a subject or area of activity like when one refers to “computer literacy”. In a wider perspective, literacy is the ability to read for knowledge and write coherently and think critically about the written word. Literacy can also include the ability to understand all forms of communication be it body language, pictures, video or sound. Literacy therefore represents the lifelong, intellectual process of gaining meaning from print (www.wikipedia.org/wiki/literacy).

UNESCO defines literacy as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying contents. It involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals to develop their knowledge and potentials and to participate fully in their Community and wider Society (“The Plurality of Literacy and its Implications for Policies and Programs”, UNESCO Education Sector, Position Paper 13 (www.wikipedia.org/wiki/literacy). 26-6-12)

Key to all literacy is reading development which involves the ability to understand spoken words and decode written words and culminates in the deep understanding of the text. If literacy is as important as described above, then it must not be taken with levity, children need to be taught to read very early in life as the saying goes “Catch them Young”. The building block of literacy must therefore begin from infancy and thus they can learn through day to day activities which expose babies and toddlers to sounds, words, speech and print. Before programmes in childhood education will be effective in promoting the learning and development of young children, literacy in early childhood must be focused as this will lead to early childhood education producing significant gains in the future for children and the society.

Silverstein (et.al 2002), believes that a poor foundation in literacy prior to school entry not only reduces the likelihood of later success in literacy but also increases the risk of dropping out of formal education. Poor reading and writing skills are associated with lower self esteem, poorer education and social outcomes. All these are linked with high rates of unemployment, welfare dependence and teenage pregnancy (Silverstein et.al, 2002).

Freebody and Ludwig, 1995, Weedlman, et.al, 1991, all stated that reading difficulties are mostly found in children from disadvantaged homes and Stanoritch (1986) believed that those children who experience difficulties in learning to read are not likely to catch up in school work. The American Medical Association (AMA,1999) also believes that poor reading levels also impact negatively on individual’s health (AMA, 1999). Ineffective use of literacy skills can eventually lead to a perpetuation of poverty cycle. It was researched that children from literate homes have been found to do well in reading in later years and such tend to thrive and grow academically (Literacy in Early Childhood in www.emplibrary/ccch/PB13_Literacy_Earlychildhood).

A successful transition from pre-literacy to literacy would be based on a number of factors such as:

- ❖ Language ability.
- ❖ Speaking, listening, and understanding and comprehension of the narrative stories and conversations the children are exposed to.
- ❖ Letter identification/knowledge.
- ❖ Phonological awareness/sensitivity.
- ❖ Conventions of print i.e. understanding the basic concept of reading – left to right or top to bottom etc. (Whitehurst, Lonigan, 2001).
- ❖ Literacy – Promoting environment (keeping books in the home, helping children to read at home etc.)

With the above stated factors, the burden of developing early literacy in children is not that of teachers in formal school alone. The responsibility should be shared among the families’ caregivers, early years’ teachers and real later years’ teachers. All these people not only facilitate literacy skills in children but their activities determine the attitude of children to words and reading in life (Evan et. al, 2000, Rickelman and Henk 1991).

The role parents/families would play in entrenching literacy culture into their children will depend on their level of interaction with them, their level of education and their socio-economic status (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003, Flouri & Bucharian, 2003, 2004). This implies that literate parents and those that are well off or those that are average socio-economically have a better chance of providing their children with necessary materials that would aid reading in early years. Things like interesting books for children, cartoons, either in book or CD forms could aid early literacy in children. The implication of this is that children from poor homes may not have access to the above facilities and thus may not be well affirmed in reading as those of their counterparts from enlightened homes and literacy promoting environments.

The Purpose of the study therefore is to examine whether early childhood literacy has anything to do with later years academic performance and also to examine whether being literate will help individuals in later years to be developed in terms of their knowledge and potentials thereby aiding them to participate in their Community and wider society, by way of interacting and contributing in the literate society.

Statement of the problem

The problem being tackled was wound around these questions.

- a) What is the effect of socio-economic background of parents on literacy development in early years?
- b) What is the effect of literacy in early childhood on personal and community development?

Methodology

The study is a descriptive study of survey type. The population for the study consists of male and female residents of Ado Local Government, Ekiti State. The sample size of 100 respondents was randomly picked from businessmen, teachers and civil servants in the local government under study. The instrument used for the study was questionnaire tagged "literacy in early childhood". The results obtained were analysed using frequency counts and percentages.

Table 1: Frequency table on Sex

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative percent
Male	47	47.0	47.0	47.0
Female	53	53.0	57.0	53.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 1 shows that 47 male and 53 female respondents were used for the study.

Table 2: Frequency table on Occupation+

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative percent
Business	27	27	30	30.0
Civil Servant	35	35	36.6	36.6
Teacher	38	38	33.3	33.3
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 shows distribution by occupation. The study made use of literate adults in the above professions. In the business field 27 respondents were randomly picked, civil service, 35 respondents and in the teaching profession, 38 respondents were randomly picked.

Results and Interpretations

Research Question 1: What is the effect of socio economic background of parents on literacy in early childhood?

Table 3: Effect of Socio Economic Background of Parents on literacy in early childhood

S/N						AGREED		DISAGREED	
		SA	A	D	SD	F	%	F	%
1.	Literacy involves reading, writing and solving arithmetic problems	51	20	19	10	71	71	29	29
2.	Literacy is important for all members of the community	43	27	15	11	70	70	26	26
3.	Providing the following to								

	my children will aid early literacy: a) shared reading, a) Video tapes b) Story books c) Mini computers	43 47 35	30 39 30	17 06 15	10 08 20	73 86 65	73 86 65	27 14 35	27 14 35
4.	Children from high socio-economic backgrounds enjoy early childhood literacy	35	35	13	17	70	70	30	30
5.	The level of education of the parents will dictate the support given to literacy in early childhood.	38	33	10	19	71	71	29	29
6.	Children from non-literacy promoting environments suffer various setbacks in reading in later years	30	21	16	33	51	51	49	49
7.	Literacy should start at the formal school age.	17	13	31	39	30	30	70	70
8.	Lack of good literacy skills can lead to children dropping out of school.	47	38	07	08	85	85	15	15

The results in Table 1 indicated that 71(70%) of the respondents agreed that literacy involves reading, writing and doing arithmetic, while 70 (70%) agreed that literacy is important for all members of the community. 73 (73%) of the respondents indicated that providing video for children will aid early literacy, while 86 (86%) agreed that providing story books to children will aid early literacy and 65 (65%) agreed that Providing Mini Computers for children will aid early literacy. 70 (70%) agreed that Children from high Socio-Economic backgrounds enjoy early literacy, while 71 (71%) agreed that the level of education of parents will dictate the support given to literacy in early childhood while 51 (51%) respondents agreed that Children from non-literacy promoting environments suffer various setbacks in reading in later years and 70 (70%) respondents disagreed that Literacy should start at the formal school age. 85 (85%) respondents agreed that lack of good literacy skills can lead to children dropping out of school.

Research Question 2: What is the impact of literacy in early childhood on personal and community development?

Table 4: Impact of literacy in early childhood and community development

S/N						AGREED		DISAGREED	
		SA	A	D	SD	F	%	F	%
1.	Literacy benefits both individuals and communities.	47	38	7	8	85	85	15	15
2.	Literacy is a key for Socio-economic development.	49	31	15	5	80	80	20	20
3.	Literacy enables individuals to achieve their goals, develop their knowledge and potentials	44	36	11	9	80	80	20	20
4.	Development requires educated, skilled and competent people for development purposes.	51	23	13	11	74	74	24	24
5.	Literacy plays a key role in providing skilled manpower.	48	25	14	13	73	73	27	27

6.	Literate persons have better standards of living.	32	34	21	13	66	66	34	34
7.	Literate parents, caregivers, teachers must play roles in literacy in early childhood.	49	30	16	5	79	79	21	21

The Results in Table 2 indicated that 85 (85%) of the respondents agreed that literacy benefits both individuals and communities, while 80 (80%) agreed that literacy is a key for Socio-economic development. 80 (80%) of the respondents indicated that literacy enables individuals to achieve their goals, develop their knowledge and potentials, while 74 (74%) agreed that development requires educated, skilled and competent people for development purposes 73 (73%) agreed that literacy plays a key role in providing skilled manpower and 66 (66%) agreed that literate persons have better standards of living and that 79 (79%) agreed that literate parents, caregivers and teachers must play roles in literacy in early childhood (79%).

Discussion

The study revealed that socio-economic background of parents has a lot of roles to play in entrenching literacy early in children. The study revealed that children from enlightened homes have better opportunities for early literacy than children from illiterate homes. Baydar et al, (1993), DEST, (2005) believe that children who struggle with literacy have shown signs of poor emergent literacy skills prior to school entry. This might be an indication of the fact that children come from non-literate homes where they are not exposed to literacy incentives such as availability of computers, video tapes and other gadgets that could aid literacy skills being acquired early in life.

The study lent credence to the fact that when children live in literate enabled environment where they have access to materials such as books, crayons and paper, alphabet materials or are linked to families, Caregivers or teachers who are literate or have access to literacy related activities such as reading bed time stories, watching cartoons on T.V; listening to children's songs on CD ROMs, children become literate early in life in this type of environment. This fact is supported by Hood et. al, (2008), Malhussh et. al (2008), Weigel et. al, 2006). They believed that though schools are specifically designed to facilitate formal learning of reading and writing, however the quality of the home and the quality of early year's services and environments are the most important factors in literacy development.

The study, discovered that because disadvantaged homes were limited in the provision of literacy promoting environments implying that fewer or no books could be found in such homes, possibly the parents are not literate, no time was spent in reading to children, children from such homes lacked early literacy skills. The implication here is that a literacy rich environment can override some of the educational advantages that lower income family often face (Literacy in Early Childhood: www.rch.org.au/ccch/policybriefs.cfm 2-7-12).

The study also revealed that some literacy activities that are effective in improving and developing literacy skills include, regular shared reading, use of appropriate books for appropriate age, reciting of nursery rhymes and singing of songs. Senechal & Cornell, 1993 believed that regular shared reading from a young age has been shown to correlate positively in the language development and Stahl, (2003), believed that the types of books selected to read with children impact their emergent literacy as they assist in the development of word identification and help children develop an awareness of how letters map unto sounds, (Stahl, 2003).

The study opened up the fact that children with early literacy skills tend to perform and grow academically while the less disadvantaged students tend to get left behind. Since literacy is to be used in various contexts, it is therefore important that children be caught young in literacy issues as literacy involves a continuum of learning and thus helps individuals to achieve stated goals and develop knowledge and potentials for future personal and community activities. This will help them to participate fully in their communities and literacy becomes important in development as development requires educated, skilled and competent people who eventually will constitute skilled manpower (www.envis.maharashtra.gov.in/envis_data 5-7-12).

When children are taught to read early, they are being exposed to new opportunities for social understanding, for learning about the world, for showing experiences, pleasures and needs. Pre-literacy and literacy activities have been shown to help further children's language competences in both the preschool years and after schooling (www.child-encyclopedia.com/en-ca/la Accessed – 7/7/12).

Because the ability to read and write is the basis for all other education; literacy should therefore be introduced early in life since literacy is necessary for an individual to understand information that is out of context whether written or verbal. If poverty is to be eradicated, if infant mortality rate is to be reduced, if gender inequality is to be addressed and if sustainable development is to be achieved and created, children who will become nations' great men must be introduced to literacy early in life.

Recommendations

Based on the above expositions, parents, caregivers and teachers of Children in early years must provide a good environment for pre-school literacy.

Parents should endeavor to teach their children to read long before they enter school. They should read to their children, buy them books and encourage children to read so that they will be prepared adequately for school. Parents should create time to interact with their children as this is the only way to help them to be literate early in life.

Shared book reading, exposing children to various forms of print, playing language games, singing songs and reciting rhymes should be encouraged in children.

Everyone/Professionals that has a touch with the family; child health nurses, teachers, community's health care professionals, should see themselves as partakers in the development of early literacy skills in children.

Literacy activities such as language games, computers and toys that are educative should be made available to motivate children to learn literacy skills.

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