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STRATEGIES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTENANCE OF READING CULTURE IN NIGERIAN CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Learning to speak precedes learning to read. Young learners attain certain language competence through listening and talking and this is eventually transferred to the reading situation. There are however gaps between the spoken and written communication situations that often hinder Nigerian children from transferring comprehension directly from the speaking to the writing and reading stages. This paper gives in-dept analysis of these situational gaps. It gives an overview of available facilities accessible to the young learners of 0 – 7 years (the reading age) and the possible instructional strategies that could be adopted for the development and sustenance of reading culture in Nigerian children.

INTRODUCTION

Reading may be seen as the key to learning and personal enjoyment. Chapman and Zerniewska (1978) see reading proficiency as the royal road to knowledge, for it is essential to all academic success. From available literature, a relationship has been established between reading disability and premature school leaving or drop out rate. It is generally held that many students who drop out of school do so because of reading inability. A reading disability or severe retardation in reading can therefore have the same influence on educational growth as a severe emotional involvement. This is so because reading retardation often produces a chain of consequences viz:- inability to successfully do the School

assignments and take part in class discussion, leading to a feeling of inferiority, hopelessness, school phobia, hostility which leads to truancy. This trend whenever observable requires definite attention and solution. These problems are present in Nigerian educational system especially in the public schools. Most Nigerian children are able to communicate verbally at tender age because of enriched life space, (objects, forces and learning experiences).

It may take these same children quite a while before they can read due to unfavorable life space. These are the gaps that hinder them from developing their reading skills. Thus, the task of providing adequate reading instruction requires specific competencies of every teacher.

Similarly, the development of a reading culture in an individual requires a combination of a rich and favourable home/school environment in addition to a competently trained teacher.

There are few misconceptions regarding the concept of reading. Some see reading as a passive process, and as synonymous with word calling. Reading is more than seeing words clearly; it is more than pronouncing printed words correctly; and more than recognizing the meaning of isolated words. Reading requires one to think, feel and imagine. It is the intelligent response to an interpretation of the symbol stimulus. Therefore, reading is purposeful. Simply put, it may be regarded as the process of bringing meaning to the printed words so as to get meaning from the printed page. Thus, the quantity and quality of a person's reading are reflected in many ways to those around him or her. Since reading is such a vital need for the academic, emotional and social development of an individual, Nigerian children should be encouraged to develop a reading culture for the acquisition of higher order skills. Children with a reading culture will joyously read for experience to expand their horizon and gain deeper understanding of themselves or of other human beings in the universe, and sustain the reading interest with or without examination.

ANALYSIS OF FACTORS THAT COULD ENHANCE THE DEVELOPMENT OF READING IN CHILDREN

THE READING ENVIRONMENT:

Reading is a complex process involving physiological and cerebral activities. Children develop in perception and cognition by attending to their environmental sights, sounds, events, printed words and sentences and by responding to them. The child's home and learning environment are vital in this developmental process. In homes where reading is never done in any form or where English language (the official medium of communication used in this country) is not known or spoken, children have a very serious handicap in reading. Ingham (1982) in support of this fact stressed that without doubt, the socio-economic status of a family correlates highly with the degree of a child's reading success. The parents set the tone for reading in the home. For homes where the vocabulary is extensive and the use of language patterns is good, and there are many different kinds of information materials, reading in such homes is a daily occurrence because the home conditions are favourable for the child's success. Similarly, if children are to read independently in their class rooms thereafter, and if these learning activities must be part of their school curriculum, then every learning environment should be provided with a wide range of reading materials that are challenging and in a continuous supply. Bush and Huebner (1979) observed that

reading is associated with availability of reading materials, and if every classroom should have some permanent collection as well as rotating ones, such collection could be built gradually from time to time and stored centrally in a school library and or keep as satellite classroom collections. The cumulative supply should include appropriate curricular books, comics, magazines, short stories, information articles, pictures, puzzles, instructional and recreational games, poems, songs, information in cassettes, video tapes and in all other audio-visual formats. The variety of materials would pique each child's curiosity and challenge his or her abilities and interest.

READING INSTRUCTORS

One hindrance to the development of reading skill among children is the absence of teachers who themselves are avid readers. There is need for teachers to be well grounded in the practical aspects of effective reading instruction. There is need for them to be aware of the nature of reading and the skills involved, the various methods of planning and teaching efficient reading habits, and the valuation of children's reading achievement/progress. But much more, teachers need to be avid readers themselves. A little of the teacher's love for reading rubs off on the children and sets the desirable model for them to emulate. He brings a wide range of knowledge into the classroom as a constant resource for enrichment and factual support for discussion. Moreover, to practice constantly the skills one is

trying to teach reinforces the aids passed on to the youngsters, and as a resource person, a teacher who is an avid reader will know authors and reading materials, which he can give on the spot as recommendations to the children.

READING FACILITIES

A casual survey of existing nursery/primary schools in most states in Nigeria will reveal that very few classrooms have the range of requisite materials for the development of reading, materials that will continuously challenge and provide enjoyment for every child within the age bracket of 0 – 7 years.. children's learning environment should be attractively decorated with visuals to stimulate them to read and think. Modern audio-visual media are significant for relating sight and sound in children's learning. They should no longer be seen as supplementary enrichment aspects of school curriculum. Some children are familiar with these media in their homes e.g. radio, video, television and computer games.

A child who reads a storybook wants to see it in picture (movie) and a child who sees a video or drama of it is inclined to want to read the book. Thus, in the absence of such reading kits, comic books should be used largely as a starting point of interest building. Good comics are attractively illustrated, they contain action, adventure, excitement, humor and visuals. Such resource materials are necessary to make book reading alive and interesting and

make learning generally an active process.

In Nigeria, the pre-primary segment of our educational system is the most neglected by the three tier governments and yet this is foundation for reading readiness and a preparatory stage for a smooth transition from home to school (NPE, 1981 p. 10). Nursery education unfortunately is left in the hands of private individuals and organizations such that majority of the children can hardly afford this exposure. We all are living in a reading world. There is virtually nothing that does not entail reading. Since reading skills can only be acquired through reading, many educationists have tried to analyse the unsavory situation existing in most Nigerian nursery/primary schools that hinders the development of reading skills. Ohiaeri (1994) identified six causative factors to children's inability to read at appropriate age as follows:-

- (i) Use of English language for instruction at the primary school level;
- (ii) High cost of books and lack of class readers by most pupils;
- (iii) Lockstepping pupils through their class readers;
- (iv) Inadequate instructional time
- (v) Poor preparation of teachers on reading at the initial institutions;

(vi) Adoption of poor teaching methods.

These identified problems could be surmounted if progressive strategies are used to motivate the learners reading ability and enriched teachers training programmes to meet the pupil's reading needs. Such strategies should include:-

- a) Orientation programmes for all newly admitted pupils in schools where there are library resources. This is needed to wet their appetite for reading and discovering learning. It does direct them and assist them find their way through available information materials. Part of such exposure will entail direct instruction on how to handle information materials without vandalizing them.
- b) Insertion of a compulsory 30 minutes to 1-hour library time in the school timetable for all, and a strict observance of the period.
- c) Establishment of class library clubs for news generating and presentation. This strategy if effectively managed will help in smooth transition from the use of children's

mother tongue to English language, as they are encouraged to retell stories read in their own words. Bigger children could be encouraged to search out stories from library books (adventures or comedies) and summarize for presentation during club time.

- d) The use of story telling strategy. This is a strategy where a teacher who is an avid reader reads stories and narrates same to the pupils. This strategy could be very popular among the young readers. If the story presentation is wrapped in colourful exciting expression it will captivate the children's interest. This strategy acts as appetizer, stimulating children to more reading experiences, it bridges the gap between their desire to read and their inability to read. With the help of class library clubs and the story telling activities, every child could be motivated to read a book a day, retell the story to peers and maintain personal reading records. By

so doing the culture of reading will be naturally developed and nurtured.

CONCLUSION

Ability to read entails recognizing the printed words on paper, understanding and dealing with the meaning as intended by the communicator. Reading is therefore the key to human survival in a complex, developing and literate world such as ours. It is imperative that Nigerian children who constitute tomorrow's adults and leaders be helped to develop a reading culture. There should be no doubt as to the right age to start inculcating this habit, in children. According to Piaget's stages of cognitive development, children at the sensory motor stage (0 – 2 years) are ready to acquire the reading skill. From three months children can recognize the printed material, form concept of object permanence and progress gradually from reflexive behaviour to goal directed behaviour (Slavin, 1991). At this stage, moves by the young learners to take the reading materials to their mouth or to vandalize same should not deter parents and teachers from providing them with this exposure. At the preoperational stage (2 – 7 years) every average child should be able to associate visual and audio information and develop some understanding of the printed message received. He or she can also deal in part with the meaning of the printed message as intended by the sender.

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Early exposure of Nigeria children to good reading habits within favourable environment will help them develop reading habit. However, to develop and sustain reading culture, there must be a definite government involvement at the pre-primary education stage. The initial teacher training institutions should be equipped to handle reading as a separate subject from English language or any mother tongue. Reading should be included in the curriculum and student teachers should be well grounded in the practical aspects of effective reading instruction so that they can make appreciable impact on the young learners. Pre-primary section should be given prescribed textbooks appropriate for their level and the practice of discarding unfinished previous class should be censored.

Finally, since children can only learn to read by reading, progressive strategies to encourage them read should be adopted in schools. The Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN) should widen their scope of operation and come up with workable solutions to halt the unhealthy trend in our public primary schools.

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