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Recommended Citation

Andima, G. (2014). Creating a Link between School and Home Literacy Practices: The Case of Rural Primary Schools in Kisii Central District, Kisii County, Kenya. *International Journal of Literacy and Development*, 1(1), 11-16.

Available at: https://ecommons.aku.edu/eastafrica_ihd/18

Creating a Link between School and Home Literacy Practices: The Case of Rural Primary Schools in Kisii Central District, Kisii County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

There is overwhelming evidence about the important role that parents play in enhancing their children's reading development. Despite, this growing evidence, parental involvement in developing the reading skills of primary school-going children in Kenya has not been given appropriate attention. This paper presents findings of a study that sought to establish whether Standard 4 teachers of English language and school Heads involve parents in developing pupils' reading skills. The study sought to answer the question on how parents were involved in the development of learners' reading skills. The study is built on Bernhardt's 1986 Constructivist Model of Second Language Reading which emphasizes that reading is an active process of constructing meaning where the reader incorporates textual information to his existing system of knowledge - prior knowledge. The study used a descriptive research design. 20 teachers and 20 head teachers were sampled using three sampling procedures: proportional stratified sampling, criterion purposive sampling and simple random sampling. A parental reading involvement questionnaire and an interview schedule were used to collect data from teachers and head teachers. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings indicate that parents are not meaningfully involved in their children's reading development. The results provide important insights into the literacy educational opportunities for teachers, parents and learners.

Introduction

The aim of teaching the English language in Kenyan primary schools is to enable pupils to acquire a sufficient command of English language in spoken and written forms, communicate fluently, follow subject courses and textbooks, and read for pleasure and information (Kenya Institute of Education Syllabus, 2006). The primary English language course is meant to address itself to the four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Of these four language skills, reading is the most important skill that any child can leave primary school with, in terms of the ability to read independently and effectively for meaning (Mynard, 2007).

Reading plays a significant role in the education of an individual, especially children and hence it is an integral part of any child's education. Reading is indeed, a basic life skill and as such, it is the cornerstone of a child's success in school and throughout life (Zygouris, 2001). It creates a good foundation and inspiration for a child's development and education. It is an important foundational skill that influences academic success across the school curriculum and an indicator for overall school achievement (N'Namdi, 2005). The long-term goal of reading instruction therefore, is to provide learners with the skills necessary to construct meaning from a text. Oyetunde (2007)

observes that education without literacy is no education at all.

Kenyan primary school pupils are not attaining literacy skills necessary for successful learning hence low educational outcomes are experienced. Kigotho (October 3, 2012) observes that 20% of children complete primary school without having learned how to read and write; skills that should be obtained in the first two years of primary school learning. Out of 770,000 pupils who sat for the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (K.C.P.E) examination in 2011, a total of 153,000 pupils registered no tangible academic skills. Otieno (July 23, 2013) in documenting the Uwezo National Learning Assessment Report observes that school-age going children are not acquiring the basic competencies in literacy. The report postulates that this situation is more pronounced in most rural public primary schools spread across the country.

For learners to fully develop appropriate reading skills, a number of learning strategies will need to be put in place. One of such is the need for teachers to create a link between the reading activities that learners are exposed to at home and in school. This is because success in learning to read is, to a larger extent, dependent upon the amount of reading that children do both in and out of school. Learners who are exposed to reading

both at home and at school are in a better position to comprehend reading texts given to them much more easily. Despite the fact that home literacy practices have immense contributions in children's reading development, there is need to have an appropriate and deliberate linkage between school literacy practices and the ones at home, if reading success is to be realized.

While recognizing that parents or care-givers play a significant role in a teacher's instructional programme, most research on reading in Kenya has exclusively focused on learners' reading abilities. There exists limited research on parental involvement in children's reading development in Kenya. This paper attempts to understand the teacher's involvement of parents in reading instruction. The objective guiding the study was to determine how teachers involved parents in developing their children's reading skills.

The theoretical framework guiding this study is based on Bernhardt's 1986 Constructivist Model of Second Language Reading, which emphasizes that reading is an active process of constructing meaning where the reader incorporates textual information to his existing system of knowledge - prior knowledge. A learner's prior knowledge plays a key role in enhancing the understanding of new knowledge. The teacher's instructional practices are enhanced more by instructional interventions at home; otherwise referred to as prior knowledge.

This study formed part of the researcher's post-graduate research project conducted in rural public primary schools in Kisii Central District of Kisii County. In addition to reporting the research findings the paper also discusses the implications of for reading instruction in Kenyan primary schools.

What Do We Know about Parental Involvement in Children's Reading Development? A Literature Review

Parental involvement with children's reading activities at home has significant positive influences not only on reading achievement, language comprehension and expressive language skills, but also on pupils' interest in reading, attitudes towards reading and attentiveness in the classroom (Rowe, 1991; Gest, Freeman, Domitrovich, & Welsh, 2004, cited in Adam, 2010). It should be realized that literacy development does not begin with formal instruction when children enter school. Instead, children bring to school many concepts from home

about literacy and certain competencies in oral language, phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, writing, reading and knowledge about letters, the functions of print and their language skills (Monique et al., 2002; Morrow, 1997; Rasinski, 1995 in Adam, 2010).

Wade and Moore (2000 in Adam, 2010) agree that early reading experiences with parents prepare children for reading skills development in formal literacy instruction. Some skills, probably acquired through specific experiences at home or in kindergarten have a significant impact on children's literacy development in later schooling years. If teachers developed purposeful linkages between home and school literacy practices, then children's reading development will greatly be enhanced.

Robb (2003) and Browne (2004) as cited in Adam (2010) suggest that the participation of parents in their children's literacy activities at home should be carried out in the following ways:

- Being members of a public library and taking their children to the library, letting them browse through picture books and selecting the ones to borrow. This activity requires parents who are literate since they are able to access the library facilities and choose books that are relevant for their children's literacy levels. Illiterate parents from rural areas, however, may face challenges in that they have no library facilities and even where they exist, they are not able to read and thus cannot perform this activity. This basically means that there is need for creating a link between school- and home -literacy practices, if pupils' reading skills are to be enhanced.
- Reading to children every day, then inviting them to use the illustrations learned to tell about the book's storyline after several attempts in rereading it. The availability of appropriate resources such as grade-level books is major a challenge in rural areas. Illiterate parents may also not be very useful in this activity.
- Provide resources for learning at home such as writing materials and books. The low socio-economic status of parents in rural areas may affect this adversely given that parents are unable to provide the resources necessary to undertake this activity.
- Translate children's stories, published books, labels, notices, letters and circulars and also supply materials for use in school.

The performance of this activity requires literate parents. Challenges may emerge where illiterate cannot translate the learning materials; and thus play limited roles in enhancing their children's literacy development through this activity.

In her study on the roles parents play in their children's reading development Monique (2002) reported a clear correlation between children's reading development and their early literacy experiences mediated by the home environment. Oyetunde, et al. (2007) argues that strengthening of parental involvement in children's education enhances better school performance. In particular Anderson, Hiebert, Scott and Wilkinson (1985) in Oyetunde, et al. (2007) observe that "Parents play roles of inestimable importance in laying the foundation for learning to read among early school learners". Rasinski, et al., (1988) also argue that "Parents have an obligation to support their children's continued growth as readers".

It should however, be understood that for the parental role to have positive impact in promoting children's literacy development, the parents will need to be guided on which literacy practices they need to engage themselves in, so as to enhance reading development among children at home. As observed by Oyetunde, et al. (2007).

"...what is needed by parents is information on how to participate in their children's literacy activities more purposefully and meaningfully. 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 what, why they do what they do and be consistent in doing it".

While knowledge about parental involvement in the literacy development of primary school pupils exists, research has not provided information on how teachers in Kenya involve parents in their reading instruction. This study sought to explore how Standard 4 teachers and head teachers involve parents in children's reading development.

Methodology

The study used a descriptive survey research design to establish the nature of teachers' parental involvement in the reading development of Standard 4 (4th Grade) pupils in the location of the study. The main purpose of this design is to describe the state of affairs as it exists (Kombo &

Tromp, 2009; Orodho, 2005). Three sampling techniques were used to draw the samples for the study namely: proportional stratified sampling technique, criterion purposive sampling technique and simple random sampling technique.

The study sample consisted of 20 head teachers and 20 Standard 4 teachers teaching English Language in the sampled schools. The study utilized an interview schedule and a questionnaire for the head teachers and teachers to collect data.

To ensure that the instruments were valid the researcher consulted educational experts in the fields of education and language pedagogy in Kenyatta University with a view of getting their expert in-put. Item inconsistencies realized during piloting and the expert opinions helped to validate the instruments used to collect data in the study. The reliability of the data collection instruments in this study was based on the use of the triangulation method. Different methods of data collection were used to collect data on a similar area of study. After piloting, those items found inconsistent with the study in each instrument were removed so as to increase the instrument's reliability.

Both qualitative and quantitative data were generated from the primary sources. Qualitative data generated from the interview schedule was organized according to the study themes and presented descriptively on the basis of the study objective and research question. Quantitative data generated from the questionnaire was edited, coded and entered into the computer for analysis using a computer programme - the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17.0. Data in this paper is presented in tables and figures.

Discussion of Results

Results of data analysis are presented and discussed under the following sub-headings: Sensitization of parents in helping children's reading development, Provision of reading resources for their children, participating in reading for their children during lessons in school and monitoring children's reading performance while at home.

Sensitization of Parents in helping their Children's Reading Development

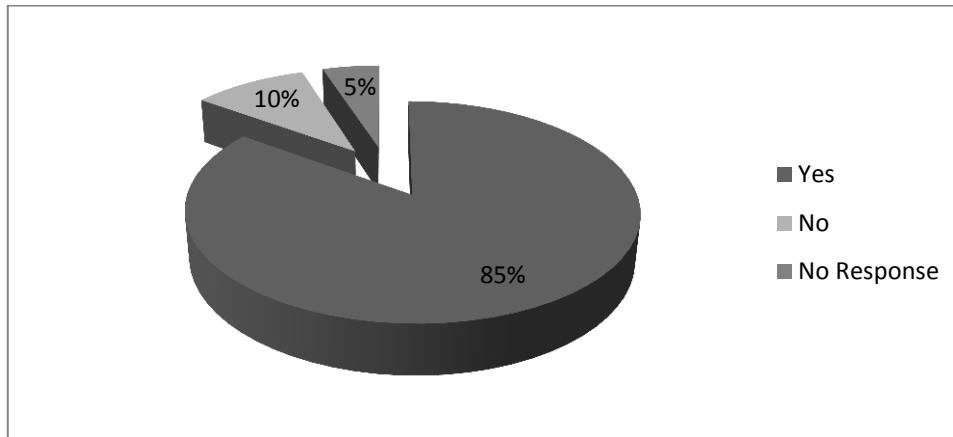
Before delving into whether parents helped with their children's reading development in and outside school, the study sought to find out from the

head teachers if parents were sensitized on helping children with reading. Their responses are presented in figure 1 below. The figure shows that 85% of the head teachers indicated that indeed, parents were sensitized on helping their children with reading while at home.

This information corroborates very well with the responses from the Standard 4 teachers’

interview on whether parents were asked to support the reading development of their children. They indicated that parents were engaged during parents’ meetings and asked to provide support in their children’s reading development.

FIGURE 1
Parental Sensitization on their Role in Children’s Reading Development

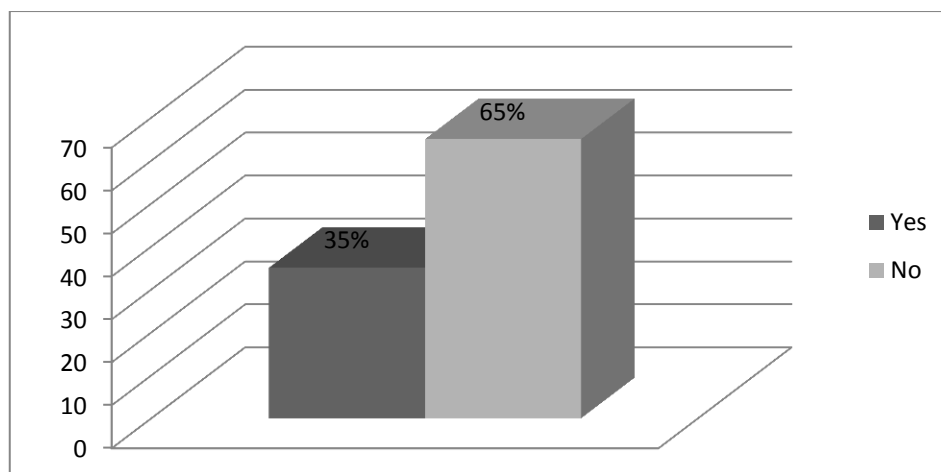


Provision of Reading Materials for Children

The head teachers also were asked to indicate whether parents provided their children with reading materials either for use in school or at home. Their responses are shown in figure 2 below.

Figure 2 below shows a large percentage of the respondents (65%) indicated that parents did not provide reading materials for their children. Despite the fact that 85% of the head teachers had indicated early that parents were sensitized on their role in helping with their children’s reading development it is still interesting to note that many of them do not provide reading resources for their children.

FIGURE 2
Parents’ Provision of Reading Materials for the Children



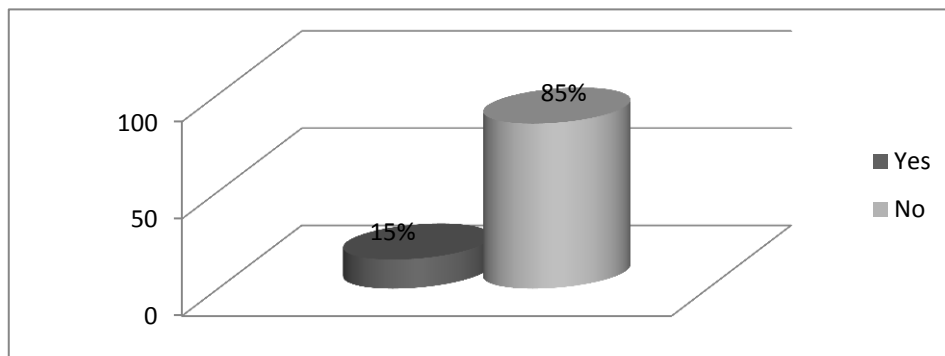
Parents' Participation in Reading for the Children during Reading Lessons

The head teachers were also asked to provide information whether parents were utilized in reading for their children during reading lessons. Their responses are summarized in figure 3 below.

With regard to whether parents were involved in reading for their children during reading lessons at school, a large percentage of head teachers (85%)

indicated that parents did not participate in reading for their children during reading lessons. A small percentage (15%) of head teachers however, indicates that parents participated in reading for their children during reading lessons. This perhaps represents literate parents whose numbers are extremely low in rural public primary schools and who may not have sufficient time to attend reading instructional sessions in their children's schools.

FIGURE 3
Parents Participate in Reading for their Children during Reading Lessons



Parental Involvement in Monitoring their Children's Reading Performance at Home

The findings from the Standard 4 teachers' interview indicated that pupils were given reading homework to do while at home. The nature of the homework included reading short passages and answering comprehension questions, reading short stories and attempting grammar exercises. Asked to explain how they involved parents or caregivers in monitoring the pupils' performance of these tasks, most teachers indicated that they did not involve the parents or caregivers in these tasks. They explained that majority of parents in the catchment of their schools were illiterate and not cooperative, hence the lack of involvement. In an attempt to understand whether the teachers ever attempted to bring parents on board to improve the reading development of their children, one parent openly remarked as follows: "These teachers don't want to teach... how do they expect me to teach my child how to read and yet am not trained like them...".

From the findings of this study it is evident that parental involvement in children's reading development in the study locale is minimal. Despite the fact that parents are sensitized on helping their children with reading development, they do not in reality provide the necessary support for their

children's reading development. The findings are in agreement with Smith and Elish-Piper (2002) in Menheere et al. (2010) who observe that one cannot expect parents who lack basic reading skills to not only provide books for their children, monitor children's reading performance in homework but also read for them during reading lessons.

Implications and Conclusion

Oyetunde, et al. (2007) advance the argument that strengthening parental involvement in children's reading development will go a long way towards enhancing the children's literacy development. This means therefore, that there is need to link the reading activities children are exposed to at school to the ones they are exposed to while at home. The teacher is a key instrument in creating this link more especially in rural settings where the literacy levels are considerably low. According to the Kenya Adult Literacy Survey (2007), over 7.8 million Kenyan adults (38.5%) and out-of-school youth aged between 15–19 years had never enrolled on school, dropped out or were illiterate in 2007.

In homes where one or both parents are illiterate, Pamela, et al. (1991) suggests ways that teachers can use to facilitate literacy. These are:

- Teacher will need to schedule parents' meetings which focus on ways of not only nurturing literacy, but also promoting its value. Presentations during these sessions should be positive and enjoyable so that the parents are willing to make concerted efforts to return again and again.
- Parents can also be encouraged to tell stories to their children as a way of promoting literacy in the home. The stories can be told during different times when the parent and child are involved in common chores i.e. preparing a meal, working on a broken fence among others.
- Teachers can stock classroom libraries with more children's literature texts. Pupils will be encouraged to borrow these books so as to read to their parents at home.
- Through use of wordless picture-books parents should be encouraged to tell the stories contained in the book and encourage their children to retell the story to them. The teacher should ensure that these picture books are easily available to the parent either in form of photocopied material, texts or in whichever form that is easy to access.
- The teacher can make use of content-area books, with the parent and child discussions highly encouraged. More often than not, early childhood and primary grade teachers emphasize narrative books and overlook content-area books. There are several good picture books which depict simple scientific and social studies concepts that require little or no reading. These books present concepts in a less complicated form with illustrations that stimulate parents and children on the actions portrayed in the books.
- The teacher can also use home visits to model on literate behaviors which the parents can easily imitate and perform with a child. For example, the teacher may take along a wordless picture book and encourage the child to tell the story. The teacher can then leave the book with the family so that it is collected later.
- The teacher can also make use of children's videos, children books and read along cassettes which can be shared through an established library collection in the classroom. Children should be encouraged to borrow these materials so as to share with their parents while at home.

In conclusion, primary school teachers should play an important role in enabling illiterate parents to get involved in literacy activities with their children at home. However, there should be a clear understanding that parents will need a caring and understanding teacher who is willing to gently nudge them in the right direction so that their children will acquire literacy and be able to share in the rewards and joys of being able to read and write.

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