

GETTING PARENTS READY FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF LITERACY

S.S. Fowowe; Ashimolowo Ademuyiwa and Adebayo Komolafe, (Ph.D)

Abstract

When families are involved in the Children's Early Childhood Education, researches have shown that such children may experience greater success once they enter into elementary school. This paper therefore x-rays the parents' role in children's academic achievement and early literacy. The paper equally highlights the necessary steps to be taken for "better" parenting in African countries. Finally, the roles of programmes, school and government in the promotion of parents' literacy were critically examined.

As the twig is bent, so the branch will grow.
Give me a child at the age of one and I will give you a man at the age of six (Maduewesi 1999)

It's not out of order to attend to the primary task of our children's education, though; reports have shown that there has been family's involvement in one way or the other in the Early Childhood Education of their wards. It was found that when families are involved in their wards pre-schooling activities, such wards may experience greater success once they are admitted into the elementary school. (Fantuzzo, Tighe, Childs 2000 and Reymolds 1999). Educational involvement of families entail activities that parents conduct at home and in early childhood setting, that directly or indirectly support their children's learning.

Those activities can be conducted individually or through parents peer networks. Family involvement in education can boost young children's academic pursuit, moreso, that the transition between early childhood and elementary school is a crucial period in children's literacy and academic development.

Literacy in Focus

Literacy is commonly considered as the ability to read and write. At some level, proficiency and more precisely technical capability to decode written printed signs, symbols or letters, combined into word (Encarta 2004). An illiterate person is someone who cannot write a short simple statement in his / her everyday life (Microsoft Encarta 2007). People with minimal literacy skills may be described as "functionally illiterates" if they are judged unable to use a variety of skills beyond the reading or writing of a simple sentence. To be functionally literate implies that a person can "use reading, writing and calculation for his or her own and the community's development? Hence, for parents to really follow their children's academic activities, the parents need to be taken through the basic functional literacy as this will go a long way in assisting the children in their study.

Family Literacy – It is a complex concept, but IRA (1994) describes it as ways parents, children and extended family members use literacy at home and in their community. It occurs naturally during the routines of daily living and helps adults and children to "get things done". Family

literacy include using drawings or writing to share ideas, composing notes or letters to communicate messages, keeping records, making lists, following written directions, or sharing stories and ideas through conversation reading and writing.

Considerable information is equally available, regarding the importance of the early years of life, in laying the foundation of learning. The child is said to learn. In the first five years of life than at any other five years span (Maduewesi 1997). The brain also grows at a tremendous rate during the pre-school age, reaching almost its mature bulk before the age of six, while the mind develops with corresponding velocity. During the first few years, the infant learns to see, to hear, to handle, to walk, to comprehend and to talk. He acquires a large number of habits, fundamental to the complex art of living. Never again will he make such rapid advancement in so short a time as during the pre-school period (Waston And Lindgram, 1973).

It has been equally estimated that if 50% percent of growth potential in educational achievement takes place between the age of four and five years and that approximately 50 percent of general achievement at the age of 18 has been reached by the age of 9, literacy and learning patterns and attitudes are built and established at this time (Bloom (1964).

It is believed that 50 percent of adult intelligence is developed between conception and ages 4 and 8, while 20 percent is developed between 8 and 17 (Bloom 1964). Growth in literacy and in all ramifications is wrapped if the early years are not emotionally and academically secured for the child (Okeahialarn 1987, Fowowe and Ishola

2006). Hence, parents' attitudes and behaviours are crucial factors which affect young child's 'orientation toward school and education. Generally, parents who value education, they themselves are educated or want to be educated, can influence the child's attitude towards schooling and school activities from the way they refer to and/or discuss issues and build set time and resources for each pursuit (Maduewesi 1997).

A review of early childhood education and intervention literature suggests that these experiences can affect parents' current and future beliefs (Bernard 2001). Compared to non-pre school parent, parents of children who are participating in pre school activities have higher occupational aspirations for their children, more satisfaction with their children's school performances and greater parent involvement in elementary years at home and in school. Pre-school factors positively affecting later home and school involvement include the existence amount and number of years of pre-school, as well as follow up activities once the children reach school age. Bernard (2002) also found out in his studies that early interventions could lead to fewer homes - school communication and involvement later on.

Some literate parents provide home with a plentiful supply of books, pictures, toys, charts, maps and other educational mass, so that their children are surrounded by educative features. It takes some of level of literacy of the parents to provide all those mass, such children in this kind of environment can be described as living in an educationally rich atmosphere or environment (Maduewesi 1997). Children who see their parents reading or persisting in an endeavour (Literacy) have advantages of possessing the potential to do likewise.

Early Literacy Development- Parents, or the

family members who care for children, are children's first teachers. They are also their children's teacher for the longest time. The success of the school literacy programme frequently depends on the literacy environment at home. Studies equally carried out in homes have been a major catalyst for new early literacy strategies (Lesly 2001). The area of children's early reading, Godsden and Broman (1979), in their critical review of research on parents involvement in children's education and schooling, found out that parent' participation in literacy activities of their children affect their preparedness for school. These factors also may influence the direct and subtle messages that parents send to their children about the value, achieved ability and power associated with literacy, schooling and knowledge.

Other studies suggest that, parents' ability to support their child's learning affects the child's engagement with books and schooling. Pupils who have limited schooling as well as low reading and writing (literacy) abilities have difficulty participating in school related activities requiring high levels of literacy. However, these parents have high hopes for their children and depend on programmes to ensure that their children will become competent learners (Yarrow, Macturk, Vietze, Mccarthy, Klein, and Mcquisition, 1984)

Nord, Brimhall and Westu (1997) analysed data from the 1996 National House school Education Survey (NHES) and compared the involvement of non-resident and married parents. in school activities of kindergarten to 12th grade student examining married nonresident parents' involvement in four types of school activities during the school year: attending a general school meeting, attending a class or school event, attending a parent-teacher conference and volunteering. Involvement in this content was defined as low if parents did none or

one of the four activities during the school year, moderate, if they did two activities, and high, if they did three or four activities. Parents in two parents' families and non-resident parents who were moderately or highly involved in their children's school held children who were significantly more likely than children with less involved parents to receive mostly high marks, enjoy school, and never repeat a grade. Early literacy development therefore, is a significant part of preparing children to achieve academically.

Children's early literacy is one of the areas to show great promise in engaging parents. Although, empirical studies in this area are few, the applied activities suggested in young children and other publications demonstrated how parents can be invited to engage in basic literacy activities. Snow, Burns & Griffim (1995); White & Longman (1989); Dickson & Tabors (2001); and Wasik & Bond 2001) have identified a range of early literacy behaviours that are associated with children's engagement which include:

- Oral language development which include book reading.
- Phonemic awareness activities.
- Exposure to the left end of the alphabet. etc.

Factors that Promote Literacy in the Home

Lesley (2001) quoted Leichater (1984) that family influence development in three ways:

1. Interpersonal Interaction
2. Physical environment
3. Emotional and motivated climate

Interpersonal interaction consists of the literacy experiences shared with the child by parents,' siblings and other individual in the home.

The physical environment includes the literacy materials available in the home.

The emotional and motivational climate

comprises the relationships among the individuals in a home, especially as reflected in the parents' attitude toward literacy and their aspiration for children's literacy development.

Lesley (2001) however argued that it is a literacy-rich environment not parent's education occupation or socioeconomic level, that correlates most highly with children's early literacy ability. Children with an early interest in reading and writing tend to spend play time at home writing and drawing with paper and crayon or looking at book (early development of fine motor skills). Parents in these homes enforce rules for selecting and limiting T.V viewing.

Parent Involvement

Teachers can involve parents or guardians in the studies of their wards in the following way:

- Teachers should send home notes when a child is doing well, should not only send notes only when there is problem.
- Invite parents to help with literacy activities in the classroom such as reading to children, taking dictation and telling of stories.
- Invite parents to school to share special skills they may have to talk about their cultural heritage.
- At the beginning of the school year send home the goals to be achieved for the class which the teacher teach for literacy development, in a format that can be understood by all.
- Parents should be invited to school to participate with their children in literacy activities especially during periods of social-cooperative reading and writing.
- Provide lists of literature for parents to share with their children.

Rational for Early Literacy

A poor foundation in literacy prior to school entry not reduces the likelihood of later

success in literacy, but also increases, the risk of children dropping out of formal education. Poor reading and writing skills are associated with lower self esteem, poor educational and social outcomes and higher rates of unemployment welfare dependence and teenage pregnancy. Poor reading levels can also impact negatively on individuals' health (Adams, 1990). In contrast, literacy has many benefits for children, families, communities and society as a whole. High level of literacy and been linked to increased academic and occupational success, increased self-esteem and motivation to education, socially acceptable behaviour, posture regards for one's ability prospects learning to empowerment, a reduction in the need for programme required to address literacy and a subsequent reduction in social and financial cost associated with illiteracy.

Lesley (2001) opined that the child's ability to read and write depends a lot on the things you do at home from the time he or she is born. He suggests materials, activities, and attitudes that are important in helping the child to learn, read and write:

Materials

1. Have a space at home for books and magazines for your child.
2. If you can, subscribe to a magazine for your child.
3. Place some of your child's and some of your books, magazines, and newspapers in different parts of your home.
4. Provide materials that will encourage children to tell or create their own stories, such as puppets, dolls, and story tapes.
5. Provide materials for writing, such as crayons, markers, pencils, and paper in different sizes.

Activities

1. Read or look at books, magazines, or the newspaper with your child. Talk about

- what you looked at or read.
2. Visit the library and take out books and magazines to read at home.
3. Tell stories together about books, about your family, and about things that you do.
4. Look at and talk about written material you have such as catalogues, advertisements, work-related materials, and mail.
5. Provide a model for your child by reading and writing at a time when your child can see you.
6. Point to print outside, such as road signs and names of stores.
7. Write with your child and talk about what you write.
8. Point out in print your home such as words of food boxes or recipes, directions on medicine, or instructions on things that require assembly.
9. Visit the post office, supermarket, and zoo. Talk about what you saw and read. When you get home, draw and write about it.
10. Use print to talk to your child. Leave notes for each other. Make lists to do things, such as food lists, lists of errands, and lists for holiday shopping.

Foster Positive Attitudes toward Reading and Writing

1. Reward your child's attempts at reading and writing, even if they are not perfect, by offering praise. Say kind words like: "That's very good." "I'm happy to see you are reading." "I'm happy to see you are writing. Can I help you?" "That is good of you; you will soon become a fast reader"
2. Answer your child's questions about reading and writing
3. Be sure that reading and writing are enjoyable experiences.
4. Display your child's work in your home.
5. Visit school when your child asks you to

come. Volunteer to help at school, attend programmes in which your child is participating, attend parent's forum, and attend parents' teachers' meetings. This lets your child know you care about him.

Visit School and Speak to Your Child's Teacher

1. If you want to volunteer help in any way.
2. If you want to visit your child's class during school hours.
3. If you have concerns about your child's reading and writing.
4. If you feel your children have problems with vision, hearing, or other things.
5. If you need help because the language you speak at home is not English.
6. If you need help with reading and writing yourself.
7. If you would like to know more about how you can help your child at home.
8. If you want to know more about what your child is learning at school

Parenting Children for Learning in Nigeria

Parenting is the whole range of activities, concerns and all the knowledge and skills that being a parent entail (Ferreiro 1982). It involves nurturing and teaching over a considerably long period, with ultimate aim of exerting such influence over a young to shape the behaviour, the beliefs and quality of life. Parenting also goes on even where there is no parenthood because there are always children requiring parental care in any given environment.

Maduwesi (2005) noted that parenting is a delicate but critical skill which affects not just the fortunes of families but sets the pace of communities and determines the culture of society. Parents are the child's first teachers; hence, parents' education is highly imperative in order to prepare them adequately for their

role as bearers of responsibility for childhood education.

Parents can begin to engage their children in activities such as telling stories, discussing family issues, questioning and answering, encouraging them to express their opinions on certain issues, thereby enhancing their communication skills. Children of such parents, even where such parents are not school educated or semi illiterates, go on to do well in school and to become self confident adults, able to chart their own progress and success.

There are innovative programmes that support and educate parents around the world. Cuba, Indonesia, China, Turkey interestingly have proven popular, because they reached large numbers of people through existing community network at a relatively low cost (UNICEF 1999). In Nigeria too, there have been concerted efforts by NERDC in the training of care givers and parents. Community Participation for social Sector (COMPASS) too is equally embarking on national campaign, training for parents on Health related problems and parents' participation in their wards' school activities.

Parents as the child's first teacher: need to do the following:

- Ask their children questions in order to task their brain as all these will stimulate the intellect and encourage healthy mental development.
- Provide games or books that will develop their children mentally.
- Let them be familiar with seeing, touching, handling and observing parent working with books, so as to help them develop a healthy orientation towards education.

Bronfon (1976) & Halley and Honig (1977) confirm that when parents' care included in the

education process, whether in home tutoring or in school experience, it has longer and lasting gains in learning result for children, therefore, the parents should not see the child literacy as the sole responsibility of the teachers.

Achievement of parents and schools that work together:-

When parents and school teachers co-operate, there is reduction in the type of confusion which results in the child's mind.

- One of the objectives of pre-primary education in National Policy on Education (2004) is to "effecting a smooth transition from home to School". If parents co-operate with and relate closely with the school, this smooth transition is much easier to achieve.
- Parents, who actively participate in school activities, get to understand their own children better and also enjoy the various stages in their development. By doing this, they are assisting their children to succeed as learners and as persons.
- Parents, who co-operate or work with their children's teachers will use school like-activities at home and will develop ideas to enhance their children's learning.

Necessity for Parents' Education

Burton (1993), a Chief Adviser for the "New Parents and Teachers" Programme in the United States, identified four essential foundations or processes which are established during the first three years of life which must receive attention well, before formal school will begin. These foundations are:

- **Language Development and Curiosity Behaviour:-** Parents have to know and begin right from birth to

encourage their children's language development through performance of number of activities and building certain habits. They should also encourage the child to get into things by looking, smelling, touching and so on, of course, within the bounds of safety.

- **Social Development:-** The home is the micro society which forms the prototype for later relationship in the larger society. Relationship at this level needs to be wholesome, satisfactory and loving, to give the child a feeling of human belonging, adequacy and a viable framework for future relationships.
- **Cognitive Intelligence:** This is characterized by problem solving, activities understanding cause and effect relationship (e.g. pushing the switch results in the light coming on) etc. Though, such activities may look like play, but much learning takes place at the same time. For this reason, a child should be allowed, indeed encouraged, by parents to play, because, in the course of it, they acquire many other skills including those of cognitive intelligence. Other ways by which parents can help in the development of Cognitive Intelligence include:-
 - Talking to their babies and young children
 - Playing with them
 - Showing them things and places
 - Reading to them
 - Telling them stories and giving them opportunity to see and handle objects.

Parents as Teachers

Some of the Nigerian Parents feel that at the School, responsibility for the care of the child should be squarely that of the teachers worst still some parents avoid what they see as interference; rather, they should be encouraged to teach their children a large number of skills before they reach the age of schooling. This will greatly affect their performance later in life.

Conclusion

Some of the Nigerian Parents feel that in the. School, responsibility for the care of the child should be squarely that of the teachers and even some parents perceive their activities in the school as interference. This notion should be discouraged. Rather, parents should teach their children a large number of skills, habits, games and other educating activities before they reach the age of schooling. These activities will facilitate smooth transition from home to school as presented by the National Policy on Education (FGN 2004).

Pre-school children activities as highlighted in the paper, though severely constrained by major gaps and inadequacy in our research literature are achievable. But whatever constraints that exist, all effort must be geared by parents towards the improvement of their children's academic achievement in life. As we can see in this article as far as early childhood education is concerned, children are the "right" holders while parents are the responsibility (duty) bearer (Maduewesi, 2005). Parents are identified as key duty-bearers in early childhood education and so as parents make attempt to live up to their duty, this paper also advocates that parenting the children for learning is a crucial strategy, which Africa and Nigeria especially are called upon to adopt.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are therefore proffered:

- Parents should at all times be involved in the education of their children especially at the early education level.
- Homes should be child friendly with educational materials (books, pictures, toys, charts maps etc) that will facilitate literacy.
- Homes should bridge the gaps that are left by the school.
- Parents should be encouraged to teach their children a large number of skills (psycho-social, emotional intelligence, literacy etc) before the age of schooling.
- Schools should equip their classes with modern facilities that enhance acquisition and learning.

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- S. S. Fowowe**
Department of PES/ECCE
Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education
Otto-Ijanikin, Lagos.
- Ashimolowo Ademuyiwa**
School of Part-Time Studies
Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education
Otto-Ijanikin, Lagos.
- And**
- Adebayo Komolafe, (Ph.D.)**
Department of Guidance and Counselling
Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education
Otto-Ijanikin, Lagos.