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Influence of Environment on Secondary School Students' Reading Effectiveness in Uyo Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study sought to find out the influence of student' primary school, peer group and school location on their reading effectiveness. Two hundred junior secondary one students in Uyo Local Government Area responded to a 20-item questionnaire constructed and validated by the researchers. Two research questions were answered and one null hypothesis was tested using mean and independent t-test respectively. The results show that students' primary school experiences and peer group exert negative influence on their reading effectiveness. There was also significant mean difference between the urban and rural students' reading effectiveness. Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended among other things that attention be given to public primary schools in the state and nation to provide students with rich and enabling environment for their future academic growth.

Introduction

Every child born into the society is shaped by two major factors: genetic and environmental. While no one has any direct control over the genetic traits, much can be done to enhance the child's environment for its optimum growth and development; thus, the richer the child's environment, the better the

child's chances of developing faster, physically, emotionally, intellectually and socially. These developments are made possible through language, which is the medium through which the child interacts with people in its environment. At the early stage of the child's life, learning is primarily through imitation of the adults around him. He acquires language naturally as he associates the actions of people with language, and starts to imitate them. Positive reactions of the adults reinforce his language use.

Reading is one of the language skills that can shape and develop the child's personality. This means that the child needs to learn reading right at home where there are motivated 'others', that is, parents, older siblings, aunts and uncles to read, sing and tell stories to the child (May 1994; Udosen & Ukpak, 2005). Can we really boast of many of such homes in Akwa Ibom and Nigeria today? Our common experience leads us to understand that there is a literacy crisis confronting many homes. These include poor socio-economic status which makes it difficult for parents to provide literacy materials at home and high illiteracy rates of parents (Odejide, 1993) which accounts for their inability to read or encourage reading. The literate parents in the higher strata of the society cannot afford to spend quality time with their children because of materialistic pursuits. Thus, while the home has been identified in other societies to play the major role in learning to read (Schins-Machleidt, 1990), the school seems to be tasked with that responsibility in Nigeria (Odejide, 1993). The Nigerian society has been vividly described as a non-reading culture (Unoh, 1991). Quisenberry and Mathias (1989) paint the picture this way:

In many third world countries, the ability to read is important to learners only in so far as it is a sign of an educated person... For the majority of youngsters, particularly in rural areas, reading is functional only in the school setting. Print serves the rituals of the school, but not the rituals of the family, the village or the community (p. 17).

Children raised in this type of environment need to draw inspiration from other sources in order to read effectively, and that leads to the major thrust of this study. The students' environment goes far beyond the home. It includes the school, the peer group, the teachers, the classrooms and the community where the school is situated. In this study, the variables of interests are: primary school background of pupils, peers and school location. The next section discusses these variables.

Relevant Literature

The knowledge that children need skills early in the school for survival informed the assertion that since reading for pleasure usually decreases when students reach junior high school and high school, that older students should be “hooked on books before they leave elementary school” (Huck, Harper & Hickman 1987, cited in Odejide 1993, p.13). The point here is that if the school effectively shoulders the reading responsibility of the child abdicated to it by the home, it would help to avert the negative attitude that surrounds the child, namely, that of seeing reading as examination-oriented activity. But the contrary is the case in Akwa Ibom State. Studies have shown that some of the factors responsible for students' ineffective reading are poor preparation of children for the acquisition of good reading habits and the dearth of leisure books (Odejide, 1993).

In his own study, Abe (1991) observed that reading skills developed in the early years of a child's schooling are not adequate for the effective “reading of the specialized materials in higher classes and beyond” (p.227). Secondary school students are faced with a great deal of reading materials for various purposes. They must read for examinations, recreation, information and for critical analysis of texts among other things, which also implies that they read different types of texts. All these imbue the child with knowledge. Udosen (2000 & 2004) had enumerated the importance of reading not only to students but also as a survival skill for teachers, lawyers, medical practitioners, politicians, farmers and indeed for people from all walks of life who need to acquaint themselves with innovations in their different fields of endeavor in order to succeed. Such reading practice “reduces ignorance and increases one's self-esteem” (Udosen, 2004, p.132).

Despite the obvious benefits reading accrues to individual and the society, many youths seem not to acknowledge such gains. This is reflected in their poor attitude to reading (Kosemani & Ituen, 2005). Scholars like Obanya (1982), Emenyonu (1983) and Unoh (1983) have variously expressed concern about most Nigerian students' non-reading culture. They further stressed that many Nigerian students attend schools without the basic reading materials, and that even the few that have textbooks do not bother to read. It is pertinent to quickly add that those who venture to read do not adopt the right approaches to the reading task because they have not been equipped with relevant skills. Effective reading involves reading with understanding and being able to turn the text inside out for broader meaning.

The importance of a conducive environment to effective learning including reading has long been acknowledged in the literature (Idowu, 2002). According to Morrison & Ridley (1988) cited in Cohen & Morrison (1996), in developed countries of the world, parents and teachers take the initiative in providing imaginative and attractive environments for their children to learn. They realize that stimulating environment plays vital role in the emotional as well as cognitive processes of thinking and creativity which reading entails. In this regard, Whitmore & Crowell (2006), p.283) observe that non-school context for language and literacy have more influence on students' language maintenance than school contexts.

Closely related to the home variable is the primary school experience the child had. The primary school experience can affect the way the child responds to reading. Research has shown that the quality of school children attended and the caliber of teachers who taught them have influence on the children's reading achievement (Abe, 1991). In the views of Peterson (1992) cited in Whitmore & Crowell (2006), classrooms could and should be communities. In his words, "community in itself is more important to learning than any method or technique" (p.271). Such 'communities' make for interaction among students and encourage the urge for learning. This again depends on the type of teachers around the child. If the child attends school where the teachers do not understand the reading process (Udosen, 2004) and how to motivate the child to love reading, the child's experience could be retrogressive. This appears to be the experience in many of the public primary schools in Nigeria.

Studies have also shown the powerful influence that peer group has on secondary school students. As Datta (1984) pointed out, peer groups have the power to transmit the culture of the society, provide protection as well as condition the attitude and sentiments of the members. Because of this, it becomes imperative for stakeholders to give attention to the reading attitude of the youths of the society as a group. It has been shown that children who read at home perform better than those who do not (Goodman, 1996 cited in Kasten & Wilfong, 2005). But when only children from poor homes mix together, there seems to be no positive rub off. This is especially the case in public schools which is now being attended by children of the poor. Children from rich homes attend private high fee paying schools and they have rich experiences. In the public schools, the poor condition of service has eroded the little commitment one would expect of the teachers. It is important to stress here that positive role models are essential if children

must read. As Bandura (1997) shows, positive early influences/experiences from parent or parents or peers impact on children's cognitive behaviours. Children learn by observing others and adopting those behaviours themselves (Zimmerman & Schunk 2002, cited in Zambo, 2005).

Children from school settings and home where reading is a way of life would certainly love reading. When such children meet in a school setting where they are given opportunities to select reading materials of their choices and discuss experiences openly, their peers get encouraged and desire to read (Mercurio, 2005). The interactions between children that are afforded in a reading classroom have positive influence on students' reading effectiveness and in turn promote and develop life-long readers (Mercurio, 2005).

Also important to children's learning generally is the location of school. It has been shown that children who attend schools in the urban settings tend to perform better than their counterparts in rural schools (Udosen, 1992; Ayodele, 1988). This is because teachers in the urban schools have more exposure to seminars, workshops and have access to books. Besides, poor parents tend to be more in the rural settings. However, not much has been done to ascertain the influence of this variable on students reading effectiveness.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the influence which primary school and peer group have on secondary school students' reading effectiveness. Specifically, the study sought answers to the following research questions:

1. How does primary school experience influence students' reading effectiveness in Akwa Ibom State?
2. In what way does peer group influence students' reading effectiveness?

Hypothesis

There is no significant mean difference between the urban and rural students' reading effectiveness in Akwa Ibom State.

Method

The study is a survey design. Two hundred junior secondary one students randomly drawn from ten out of fourteen secondary schools in Uyo

Education Authority took part in the study. This was made up of 120 urban and 80 rural students of which 100 were males and 100 were females.

The subjects responded to a 20-item questionnaire with a 4-point scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) which were constructed and validated by the researchers. The data generated were analyzed using mean and independent t-test. The results are presented in tables according to each research question. Item mean of 2.5 and above shows students' positive agreement with the item, and vice versa.

Results

Table 1 reveals a low mean score for all the items indicating that the students' primary school background did not have positive influence on students' reading effectiveness. This is not surprising since most of the respondents passed through public primary schools.

Table 2 shows that peer group does not have a positive influence on students' reading effectiveness. This can be gleaned from the mean responses of 2.85 and 2.55 to items 6 and 9 respectively, indicating students' agreement with those items. The table also shows students disagreement with items 7, 8 and 10 on the table. Students' poor home background is reflected in their inability to share reading materials as shown by items 7 and 8 respectively. Their lack of positive interaction is reflected in their disagreement to item number 10 on the table.

Table 3 reveals that the mean score of urban students was 25.5 while that of rural was 21.9. The t calculated of 24.94 was higher than t-critical of 1.96, and so the null hypothesis was rejected. That means that there is a significant mean difference between urban and rural students' reading effectiveness.

Discussion of Findings

Primary School Experience and Reading Effectiveness

Table 1 shows that the primary school experience of students in this study did not pre-dispose them to effective reading. This is obvious from the responses to the items on the table. The various schools rarely organized reading competitions, had no functional library, seldom deliberately taught children how to read, rarely read stories to children and no reading on the timetable. These activities when properly carried out at the primary school level could set the tone for good and sustained reading habits which could have laid the foundation for reading effectiveness at a higher level. But

because teachers in public schools do not fully understand the reading process and the importance of inculcating appropriate reading skills in the pupils, they tend to overlook those activities. They often equate reading with English language arts. These types of activities create 'communities' (Peterson, 1992) and promote a healthy interaction that ensures reading growth. The result has been that children, who pass through such schools, grow up to view reading as something limited to prescribe textbooks, which are read only for purposes of taking examinations. The findings of this study is in agreement with Abe (1991) who found that type of school a child went through, and the caliber of teachers who taught him, have influence on his reading effectiveness. That teachers did not deliberately teach children how to read is indicative of their ignorance about the reading process (Udosen, 2004).

Peer Group and Secondary School Students' Reading Effectiveness

The result on table 2 points to the powerful influence of peers on students' reading effectiveness. The Majority of students' peer never encouraged them to read, neither did they exchange books. The youths are fun seeking. In recent times, it has been observed that rather than organized reading competitions to increase students' knowledge, the adults engage students in beauty contests. Thus, instead of rewarding excellence with book prizes, parents buy expensive clothes for their wards. The consequence has been students' poor attitude to reading (Obanya, 1982), which they transmit to their peer (Datta, 1984). The students of this study do not enjoy the type of rewarding experience from peers reported on by Mercurio, (2005) where positive peer interaction led to growth in reading.

Location of School and Student's Reading Effectiveness

The fact that urban students tend to read better than the rural students is indicative that the location of a school influences students' reading effectiveness. This may be attributed to the fact that most schools in the rural areas do not have functional libraries and so cannot cater for the reading needs of the students. Besides, more illiterate and poor homes (Odejide, 1993) abound in the rural areas. Teachers in the rural schools tend to be isolated and they do what they like. There seem to be no proper supervision. Some of them go to work from far distances, thus not being regular. They rarely engage students in activities that foster learning as well as reading.

Conclusion

The importance of effective reading to the academic growth of secondary school students has been acknowledged. The study however reveals that certain environmental variables do actually impede secondary school students' reading effectiveness. These variables include: students' primary school experience, peer group and location of school. Students in this study did not have a rewarding primary school experience. This is because their various schools did not give them adequate exposure to activities that could promote healthy attitude towards reading and this has negatively impacted on them.

In the same vein, the study has shown that students in this study do not benefit positively from their peers. This was explained away by the type of school (public) they attended. It has been shown that public schools these days are mostly attended by children from poor homes. The disadvantage is that there is no encouragement by way of material and cognitive borrowings. This is because majority of them do not have school materials including books. And because they do not read, there is no cross fertilization of knowledge among this group of students. The result is poor reading attitude exhibited by secondary school students in the state.

Also, there is evidence that urban students tend to read better than the rural students. This is not surprising since most of the poor parents reside in the rural areas. With lack of reading materials at home and almost non in the school, it is little wonder that the children would not do well.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proffered:

1. Teachers at the primary school level should be trained to understand the reading process so as to enable them inculcate appropriate reading skills. Good interaction among pupils should be encouraged.
2. Reading should be given adequate attention in the primary school timetable as the foundation stone. Public schools should be revived to cater for the interest of all categories of pupils, rich or poor.
3. The school should stock books of varied interests and taste for pupils' needs.

4. Youths should be encouraged to read so that they would have positive influence on their friends. This can be done through reading competitions.
5. Students in the rural areas should be given equal educational opportunities as their counterparts in the urban by providing functional libraries.
6. Neighborhood libraries should be built and equipped with diverse reading materials to meet the interest of the youths, thereby affording them the opportunity to widen their horizon and think positively and productively.

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Table 1: Mean responses of Primary School Background and Students' Reading Effectiveness

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	x
1.	We usually had reading competition during my Primary school days	10	30	40	120	2.05
2.	My primary school had a good library	20	50	30	100	2.30
3.	My primary school teacher taught us how to read	40	30	30	100	2.40
4.	My teachers always read stories to us	20	50	20	110	2.35
5.	Some periods were set aside for reading in my primary school.	20	20	20	140	2.20

Table 2: Mean Responses of Peer Group and Students' Reading Effectiveness

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	x
6.	My friends never encouraged me to visit the library	10	100	20	30	2.85
7.	Most of my friends are from rich homes	20	80	20	80	2.20
8.	I borrowed a lot of reading materials from my friends	20	70	40	70	2.20
9.	My friends are the play types without books	60	50	30	60	2.55
10.	My friends usually discuss what they read in books with me.	20	50	70	60	2.15

Table 3: t-test Analysis of Urban and Rural Students' Reading Effectiveness

LOCATION OF SCHOOL	N	x	SD	Df	t-cal	t-tri	DECISION
Urban	120	25.5	3.2	198	24.94	1.960	Reject
Rural	80	21.9	2.8				

$p < 0.05$