



BASIC EDUCATION AND READING READINESS SKILLS: AN APPRAISAL OF EARLY CHILDHOOD KINDERGARTEN IN IMO STATE, SOUTH-EAST OF NIGERIA

Njoku Christopher Nkemakolam

Department of English, Federal College of Education, Okene, Kogi State, Nigeria.

Email: njokuchristopher147@gmail.com; Tel: 08060395624

Cite this article:

Njoku Christopher Nkemakolam (2023), Basic Education and Reading Readiness Skills: An Appraisal of Early Childhood Kindergarten in Imo State, South-East of Nigeria. British Journal of Education, Learning and Development Psychology 6(1), 63-73. DOI: 10.52589/BJELDP-PYSIFVVF

Manuscript History

Received: 10 Feb 2023

Accepted: 12 March 2023

Published: 27 March 2023

Copyright © 2022 The Author(s).

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0), which permits anyone to share, use, reproduce and redistribute in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

ABSTRACT: *Reading is a basic tool of education and also a crucial aspect in the Nigerian language curriculum. As a receptive skill, it involves the ability to meaningfully interpret or decode written or graphic symbols of a language. It is not merely about how to pronounce words; it is significant that the children understand the meaning of the words they read in order to unfold the hidden treasure of knowledge and also participate in the words' universal culture and civilization. It becomes imperative to kindle reading culture among the children who are faced with several competing leisure time activities. The early childhood or the kindergarten, being the best time to imbibe reading culture and early literacy skills in children, is also the time to get them reading ready. This research, therefore, was mainly initiated to investigate how reading readiness could enhance children's early literacy and factors that affect reading readiness among the kindergarten in Imo State. The sample of the study was drawn from the population of nursery/ primary school teachers in the three educational zones using stratified sampling technique. The main objective of the study being to ascertain the essence of reading readiness in building early childhood literacy skill; thus, a qualitative research method was employed. The findings indicated that the majority of the kindergarten teachers are unqualified and inexperienced to impart reading culture into the children. Other factors are overcrowded classrooms and poor environment that prohibit one-to-one teacher/pupil relationship in the reading class. It was suggested that the government should always organize all-inclusive workshops to train the teachers on the steps in teaching reading. Also, parents should always be provided with regular information on the reading progress of their children for them to make their own input in the reading skill of their children. All the above will help to build a solid reading skill which will promote basic functional education in Imo State.*

KEYWORDS: Basic education, Reading readiness skills, Early childhood education, Kindergarten.



INTRODUCTION

There has been much ado about reading for many years; this is as a result of employers who lament the level of basic skills of some of those entering the labor market. This problem transcends to tertiary education because deficiency from the foundation, kindergarten, affects the learner's overall basic education. Actually, the concerns go back very much further, as do the efforts to redress them.

The importance of basic functional education cannot be overemphasized. No individual state or nation can exist functionally without basic education. As language is the crux of human existence, reading as one of the four language skills is also a very important form or means of communication. To Shihab (2011), reading is a process of thinking actively in order to unlock or understand the idea an author portrays. It involves connecting an author's idea to what one already knows and appropriately coordinating all the ideas for usage. This process of interpreting, connecting and organizing both the author and reader's ideas requires skills and ability on the part of the reader. The learning of reading therefore starts from the mastery of the alphabet of the language as well as the mastery of the skills required for learning reading (Akubulo, Okorie, Onwuka, & Uloh-Bethels, 2015). Reading as an aspect of language curriculum is not merely about how to pronounce words, it transcends to the child understanding the meaning of the words he reads (UBEC & SUBEB, 2022).

Reading is a negotiated activity between the reader and text. Hence reading is a perceptual process of making meaning from what a writer has put down on paper. It is a complex task that involves eye and hand muscles. It requires a degree of reasoning ability and a degree of physical development. Reading readiness, therefore, requires some language activities such as introduction and practice of skills that will be used when the child learns how to read. The reading readiness factors include skills, motivation, desire and attitudes concerning the task and how the child feels about him/herself. The process whereby the teacher or parent encourages and engages the child in reading which helps him to develop mentally, physically, and socio-emotionally is getting the child reading ready. In the basic education context, reading readiness starts from the time a child moves from being a non-reader to a reader. It is therefore necessary to ensure that children are mentally, physically and psychologically matured and prepared to face the task of reading before engaging them in reading. By doing so, they will be ready, willing and capable of reading.

The objective of the research study is to enable the early childhood learners to acquire basic literacy without hesitation, delay, or difficulty and subscribe to reading as an active thinking process of understanding an author's ideas and also connect the ideas to what they already know. It also creates stimulating reading environments for the children and to inculcate in them the ability to use leisure to read for pleasure. Finally, to inform teachers and parents of the essence of their help in their pupils'/children's reading readiness.

The study, therefore, focuses on the efficiency of the teachers and the preparedness of the parents in equipping the children psychologically, emotionally, physically, and socio-economically to face the complex process of reading. Causes and improvement of reading readiness will also be discussed. The collection of data for this study will be done through observations and administration questionnaires.



LITERATURE REVIEW

This section dwells on various scholars that have conducted research on works that have relationship with and relevance to this topic. The aspect, reading readiness, is not popular and therefore, has few researchers that have done some work on it, but no study related to this research has been identified to have been done in Imo State. Language as a means through which man communicates his thoughts and experiences demands the total knowledge of the four language skills. That is to say, communication is a total picture in which speaking, listening, written symbols, and the reading of those symbols are logically connected. Acquiring the oral aspect of a language is quite different from learning a language in a formal setting or classroom. According to Williams (2004), reading instruction involves the development of skills related to the various stages of the curriculum. The reading skill enables the reader to interpret the meaning of words and sentences in connected discourse. There are many problems with second language reading. Reading is a complex task which involves eye and hand muscles and requires a degree of reasoning ability and a degree of physical development (Machado, 1980). The child needs the ability to discover organization of the written symbols in the reading text by putting together the different parts of descriptive passages; unraveling ideas in argumentative discourse; or following the development and analyzing the plot mechanisms of a text.

Reading culture in Nigeria is a phenomenon that cannot be toyed with because the good habit of reading in this present generation is going into serious extinction as a result of various scientific discoveries that have brought about unlimited pleasure to the lives of the generation (Jimoh & Onoja, 2021). In the Nigerian culture, reading is not widely encouraged. Many have seen reading as an activity in which you involve yourself in order to pass an examination and in this case, parents usually provide motivation for their children to make them develop priority in studying their textbooks. In some cases, some parents develop aversion to reading. Such parents see reading as devilish and therefore discourage their children from reading because they think reading will bring unnecessary stress that is capable of causing their children ill health. Some teachers on the other hand see teaching reading as part of the curriculum they must present to the pupils to complete their teaching task and to keep their jobs. Such teachers make no impact in encouraging the pupils to develop reading readiness. Teachers and parents who see reading as a rewarding exercise definitely make sure that something is done urgently to halt the decline.

In her “How Do we Review our Dying Reading Culture?”, Aina (2012) lamented the death of a reading culture among Nigerians especially the youths, stressing that this was one of the problems militating against the quality of education in Nigeria and at the same time affecting the sound growth of this nation. She further stated that for sound reading culture to be cultivated into the child, expectant mothers would be given books to be read to their unborn babies in order to increase the intelligence of their babies and stimulate them to become readers. This is to say that the reading culture should be cultivated from a tender age to make a solid foundation.

One of the most essential needs of every child during early childhood is to acquire reading readiness skills necessary to begin communication through reading later in life. The interest of the children should be stimulated at the kindergarten by exposing them to various activities necessary to develop reading readiness skills. Unfortunately, these basic needs are not usually met by families and schools (Okwudire & Okoroh, 2018). Some of the important pre-reading activities necessary to get the children reading ready do not appear like reading at all, but they



set the stage for a child to become a reader. These pre-reading behaviors may appear spontaneously through a child's observation and mimicry or an adult can encourage them.

Some of the activities that demonstrate that the child is ready to learn to read are that the child tends to know which way is up on a book and the pages turn one at a time and always in the same direction. Also, the knowledge of rhyme indicates that the child is ready to know and read the graphic representation. Lastly, the child's ability to discriminate sounds indicates that he/she is ready to identify them on print.

When any child demonstrates the above behaviors and abilities, he/she may be ready to learn to read. There are several ways of improving reading readiness in children. One of such ways is making reading fun for children. This can be obtainable by singing and talking about reading and also reading to the child and allowing the child to read to you. Try and encourage the child no matter how silly the child reading sounds. Play a game of pronunciation of words with the child. Such games, according to Stow (2011), will improve memory skills and help the child to distinguish between different sounds.

Another strategy that can accompany the above behaviors is reading aloud to the child. Reading aloud supports children's development of reading as an enjoyable experience. Though reading is considered the third language skill by some scholars while some as fourth, it is pertinent to note that no two children learn exactly the same way or at the same age. There is no particular time when all children born the same day become ready for reading instruction. Machado (1980) opines that some have picked up the skill on their own, while others spent time with older family members.

Reading Readiness

The concept of reading readiness is therefore said to be the ability or willingness that allows one to proceed without hesitation, delay, or difficulty to learn reading. Readiness according to Machado (1980) includes skills, motivation, desire, and attitude concerning reading. On reading readiness, Schifferdecker (2007) states that reading readiness actually commences from that particular time when a child transforms from being a non-reader to a reader. According to him, this can be a tough transition but highly rewarding. Children are proud of themselves as they learn to read, but the better ones are better learners throughout their school years. Wikipedia (2013) states that readiness is that point at which a person is ready to learn to read and the time during which a person transitions from being a non-reader into reader. It is, therefore, necessary to ensure that children are mentally, physically and psychologically prepared to face the task of reading before engaging them in reading. By doing so, they will be ready, willing and capable of reading. Reading readiness is so important in learning that no teacher should be anxious to teach the child how to read if he or she is not mentally, physically, and psychologically ready for it (Akubuilu, Okorie, Onwuka, & Uloh-Bethels, 2015).

Click and Parker (2012), in their opinion, state that learning to read and write is a developmental milestone in our society. It was once believed that the language and literacy skills of reading and writing would simply develop when the child was ready, but literacy skills do not come that easily. Children need direct instruction and practice. They need encouragement to practice complex language skills and experience how those skills translate to the written word. The children need meaningful experiences that help them relate literacy skills to events in their everyday lives.



Therefore, the lack of success is evident specifically in children who lack sufficient emerging literacy skills. That is, reading-related skills that children obtain prior to actually reading and writing. It is reading related behaviors and skills that precede formal reading which is conventional literacy.

Early Childhood Education

According to Ofsted (2010), understanding the relationship between the sounds of spoken language and the way those sounds can be represented by one or more letters of the alphabet is fundamental to reading in English. From research carried out, it appears that some children are born readers, some achieve reading skills and others have reading thrust upon them. It is the duty of the primary schools to provide for the three groups. The best schools work on the principle that every child can learn to read.

Early childhood education is a broad term used to describe any type of educational program that serves children in their preschool years, before they are old enough to enter kindergarten. Early childhood education may consist of any number of activities and experiences designed to aid in the cognitive and social development of preschoolers before they enter elementary school.

The indispensability of early childhood education as the basis for the development of cognitive, affective and psychomotor potentials needed in adult life cannot be overemphasized. Hence, it is said that a child should be trained in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it. This is because naturally, anything that is tender is easily amenable and shaped unlike anything that is old or hardened. Anderson (2002) opines that early childhood education instills in the children a critical inquiring mind, basic communication skills, sociality and necessary physical ability needed to guide them in adulthood. Early childhood education refers to the education which provides the pre-school child with physical health, nutritional well-being, and intellectual capabilities. It also enhances the child's aesthetic, emotional and social development in a semi-formal education setting outside the home (Nakpodia, 2011). It is the foundation of the education of the child as it represents the first important step in achieving the goals of education. Mishra (2008) submits that early childhood education refers to a wide range of programmes all aimed at the physical, cognitive and social development of children before they enter primary school. The Federal Republic of Nigeria in the National Policy on Education (NPE) holds that early childhood education is the education given in an educational institution to children prior to their entering the primary school. It includes the crèche, the nursery and the kindergarten (FRN, 2004). The crèche is for children between 0-2 years; the nursery for children between 3-4 years while kindergarten is for children between 3-5 years. Therefore, in an attempt to ensure that every Nigerian child receives adequate early childhood education, the Federal Government of Nigeria through the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act of 2004 integrated early childhood education into the existing public primary schools (UBE, 2004).

Early childhood education is focused on the critical developmental milestones, skills, and concepts that children attain during this period of their lives, from social-emotional skills to the beginnings of numeracy, literacy, and critical thinking. Citing Lewis (2019), early childhood education is a term that refers to educational programs and strategies geared toward children from birth to the age of eight. This time period is widely considered the most vulnerable and crucial stage of a person's life. Early childhood education often focuses on guiding children to learn through play. The term commonly refers to preschool or infant/child



care programs. Learning through play is a common teaching philosophy for young children. Jean Piaget developed the PILES theme to meet the physical, intellectual, language, emotional and social needs of children. Piaget's constructivist theory emphasizes educational experiences, giving children the chance to explore and manipulate objects. Children in preschool learn both academic and social-based lessons. They prepare for school by learning letters, numbers, and how to write. They also learn sharing, cooperation, taking turns, and operating within a structured environment.

There are several different facets that all combine to contribute to a child's early education. Tanja (2022) states that in terms of informal education, the primary source of input when it comes to a child's development is, of course, its relationship with its parents or primary caregivers. In essence, parents can be considered to be a child's first teacher. This relationship is especially critical between 0-2 years of age as the child begins to develop its sense of self and establishes an attachment with its parents. The quality of the attachment formed at this stage of life can have a significant impact on a child's future education. The objectives of early childhood education in Nigeria as outlined in the National Policy on Education are as follow:

- i. To effect a smooth transition from home to the school;
- ii. To prepare the child for the primary level of education;
- iii. To provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (on the farms, in the market, offices etc);
- iv. To inculcate social norms;
- v. To inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music, and playing with toys;
- vi. To develop a sense of cooperation and team spirit;
- vii. To learn good habits, especially good health habits, and
- viii. To teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colors, shapes, forms etc. through play (FRN, 2004, p. 11).

The other part of the equation when it comes to early childhood education is the formal education that it receives at a young age. This stage of education typically spans years 2 to 8 of a child's life. There can be a variety of formats in which a child receives formal education at a young age, which can vary from state to state and program to program. Educational programs may be designed specifically for children at each individual age. They can be provided in settings including childcare, daycare, nursery school, preschool, and kindergarten. Some of these programs are privately run. Others are operated by a local school system or under a federal funded program.



METHODOLOGY

The design adopted for this study is the qualitative descriptive design. This design is guided by the fact that it is a systematic method of collecting and analyzing data collected from a large sample of the population through the use of structured questionnaires and observation. The tools will be used to identify the opinion and attitude of the respondents about the topic under study. Ihejirika and Omego (2011) observed that this type of research is interested in how patterns of behavior by individuals in the society are related to or different from those of other individuals in the society. The design seeks to preserve and analyze the situation form, content, and experience of social action with the use of actual talks, gestures, and so on as the raw materials of analysis. All these gave the researchers the opportunity to gather the necessary information about the targeted population. The population of the study is the sample of teachers drawn from the larger population from the three educational zones in Imo State which are Orlu, Okigwe and Owerri, where 130 teachers were randomly sampled from the three zones. The total number was selected out of the 1466 recorded public nursery/primary schools in Imo State. 15 schools were sampled from each zone making up the total of 45 schools, and from each school, a total of 3 teachers were sampled.

In all, 130 copies of the questionnaire containing 10 items were distributed to respondents in the 45 selected schools and effort was put into collecting them all as completed. The respondents' verdict on each item was established by counting the number of people who considered the item **strongly agreed** or **strongly disagreed** and those who considered it **agreed** or **disagreed**. For easy reference, these figures were converted to simple percentages.

DATA ANALYSIS

ITEMS	SA	%	SD	%	A	%	D	%	Total
Only qualified teachers are employed to teach the kindergartens		-	85	62.5%	10	7.1%	40	30.4%	100%
Parents motivate their children to be reading ready	72	55.0%		-	58	45%	-	-	100%
Teachers of the kindergarten always associate their teachings with objects	-	-	50	38.46%	25	19.23%	55	42.31%	100%
Government always organizes workshop programmes and other incentives for the teacher.	25	19.23%	10	7.70%	65	50%	30	23.07%	100%
Overcrowded classroom prevents the teachers from achieving one-to-one reading attention to the children	130	100%	-	-	-	-	-	-	100%



The choice of teachers for the kindergarten should be based on maturity and experience	120	92.30%	-	-	10	7.70%	-	-	100%
Necessary reading materials are all available in the schools	-	-	100	76.92%	5	3.85%	25	19.23%	100%
The background of the child affects his/her reading readiness ability	85	65.38%	6	4.62%	32	24.62%	7	5.38%	100%
Schools give parents the update of their children's reading progress regularly	-	-	55	42.31%	12	9.23%	63	48.46%	100%
Some schools' environments pose distractions to the child's reading	87	66.92%	-	-	35	26.93%	8	6.15%	100%

The respondents' verdict presented item number one to have indicated that schools employ unqualified teachers in the kindergarten classes which affects the reading readiness of the children. It is surprising that 62.5% of the respondents strongly disagreed that "only qualified teachers are employed to teach the kindergartens", while 30.4% disagreed to that effect and only 7.1% just agreed. This indicates that 92.9% refute the claim of employing only qualified teachers.

The response in item two indicates that 55.0% of the respondents strongly agreed that parents motivate their children to be reading ready, while 45% agreed to the claim which indicates some parents put positive efforts to motivate their children to be reading ready. Item number three shows that 38.46% of the respondents strongly refute the statement and 42.31% also disagreed with it, while 19.23% of the respondents agreed that "teachers of the kindergarten always associate their teaching with objects."

The exclusive nature of workshop programmes and other incentives organized by the government for the teachers is indicated in the responses of the respondents. 19.23% strongly agreed to the statement in item number four and 50% just agreed to it, while 7.70% strongly disagreed with the claim and 23.07% just disagreed. Overwhelmingly, in item number five, 100% of the respondents strongly agreed that "overcrowded classrooms prevent the teachers from achieving one-to-one reading attention to the children". Item number six also received a serious positive response. 92.30% strongly agreed that "the choice of teachers for the kindergarten should be based on maturity and experience", while 7.70% responded as agreed therefore giving the item 100% positive acceptance.

The serious lack of necessary reading materials for the kindergarten class is demonstrated above in item number seven. A total response of 76.92% strongly disagreed with the claim and 19.23% disagreed, while only 3.85% only agreed. Item number eight also received a serious positive response, 65.38% strongly agreed that "the background of the child affects his/her reading readiness ability" and 24.62% agreed to the statement, while 4.62% strongly disagreed and 5.38% disagreed. For regular updates of children's reading progress, 42.31% of the respondents strongly disagreed that "schools give parents the update of their children's reading progress regularly" and 48.46% disagreed, while 9.23% agreed to that effect. For item number



ten, 66.92% strongly agreed that “some schools’ environments pose distractions to the child’s reading readiness” and 26.93% agreed, while 6.15% disagreed with the statement.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the data gathered revealed the following:

- i. Majority of the teachers of the kindergarten classes are unqualified, not matured and inexperienced which makes it difficult for them to handle the children effectively.
- ii. Parents’ motivation goes a long way in helping the child to achieve reading readiness.
- iii. At the kindergarten level, associating teaching with objects is paramount because it motivates the children to learn, understand and to retain what they learn.
- iv. Workshop programmes and incentives should be granted to the teachers as motivating factors and to update their knowledge.
- v. Both the physical and social environment of the school should be enhanced to enable the child to be reading ready.
- vi. Overcrowded classrooms should be discouraged so that one-to-one teacher attention and reading should be promoted.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the concept of reading readiness and how important it is to acquire the reading skill especially at the kindergarten level because children at young ages tend to be more receptive at that age. If the reading skill is missed at that foundational stage, it does not necessarily become impossible to read, rather, it affects the smooth running of the general basic education. Hence, pupils are advised to become reading ready at an early age. As simple as this may sound, it does not come without hitches when it comes to acquiring the reading skill. There exist several factors that limit reading readiness in early kindergarten years. These factors include poor reading culture, lack of parental involvement, parental educational and socio-economic background, unqualified and inexperienced teachers, exclusive workshop programmes, lack of incentives and many more. However, these limiting factors in Imo state do not exist without a working solution. Some ideas were recommended in this paper to help enhance reading readiness in early years. Some of these ideas include identifying the needs of each pupil, adopting the right one-to-one instructional method to suit the individual needs of each child, improving the standard and quality of teachers employed in the primary schools, parents having regular progress report of their children’s learning ability, parents helping the children to develop good reading culture in the home by exposing the young ones to books at early ages to enable them start reading, creating enabling environment for the children to be ready to read and the government providing regular all-inclusive workshops for the teachers. If these ideas recommended in this paper are put to work, reading readiness at the kindergarten will be achievable in the educational sector of Imo State.



REFERENCES

- Aina, A. (2016). A practical guide to purposeful reading for students: school panorama. 11(2),9.
- Akubuilu, F. Okorie, E.U., Onuleka, G. and uloh – bethels, A.C. (2015). Reading readiness deficiency in children: causes and ways of improvement. *Journal of education and practice*. Vol. 6(24), 38 – 43.
- Anderson, R. H. (2002). Implications of early children's education for life-long learning. Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education. Year Book II.
- Click, P. M.& Parker, J. (2012). Caring for school-age children. Wordsworth, Cengage learning: USA.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria.(2004). National policy on education (4th Ed). Lagos: NERDC Press.
- <https://home.exfordowl.co.uk/reading/early-reading-skill-age-3-4/>
- <https://www.readingspell.com/16-early-literacy-skills>
- <https://www.readinghorizons.com/literacy-articles/early-literacy/early-reading-skills/>
- <https://www.understood.org/en/articles/reading-skills-what-to-expect-at-different-ages>.
- Ihejirika, W. C. & Omega, C. U. (2011). Research methods in linguistics and communication studies. Nigeria: University of Port-Harcourt Press Ltd.
- Jimoh, I. O. & Onoja, J. A. (2021). Revitalizing reading in English as a tool for promoting English language towards achieving good governance. *OJED*. Vol.11(1).
- Machado, J.M (1980).Early childhood experiences in language arts. New York: DELMAR PUBLISHERS INC.
- Mishra, R. C. (2008). Early child care and education New Delhi: APH Publishing Corporation.
- Nakpodia, E. D. (2011). Early childhood education: Its policy formulation and implementation in Nigerian educational system. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 5(3): 159-163.
- National Open University of Nigeria (2013). Methods of teaching reading in the primary school. <http://www.Nou.edu.ng/NOUNOCL/pdf/EDUs/PED.pdf>. Retrieved September 20, 2022.
- Okwudire, A. N. & Ikoroh, I. (2018). Nurturing reading readiness skills in children: A family awareness. Unpublished M. A. theses, University of Jos.
- Schifferdecker, S. (2007). Reading readiness. <http://education.more4kids.info/88/reading-readiness/>
- Shihab, I.A.(2011). Reading as critical thinking. *Asian Social Science*. 7 (8). 209-218.
- Stow (2011). 10 Tips to Promote Reading Readiness. <http://stowedstuff.com/2011/05/promoting-reading-readiness.html> Retrieved January 10, 2014.
- Tanja, M. (2022). Early literacy skill and how to build them. <https://empoweredparents.co/early-literacy-skill/>. Retrieved september2022
- UBEC & SUBEB (2022). English pedagogy: reading and writing. Kogi State Universal Basic Education Training Manual.
- UBEC. (2004). The UBEC standard action plan. Abuja: Universal Basic Education Commission.



-
- UNICEF (2012). *School readiness: a conceptual framework*. New York: UNICEF.
- Wikipedia (2013). Reading readiness in the United States. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reading_readiness_in_the_United_States
- William, D. (2004). *English language teaching: an integrated approach*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited.
- www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications (2010). Reading by six: how the best schools do it. The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills: UK.