



ISSN: 0975-833X

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A CONCERTED EFFORT IN ELIMINATING READING DEFICIENCIES IN KENYAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN 6 – 8 YEARS OF AGE

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 20th September, 2014

Received in revised form

25th October, 2014

Accepted 19th November, 2014

Published online 27th December, 2014

Key words:

Reading problems in children,
Reading in elementary school children.

ABSTRACT

Reading deficiency has many times been reported as a serious problem that affects academic performance in Kenyan schools. Some children in elementary classes are not able to read simple words or sentences at their class level. Consequently, politicians, parents and general public throw the blame on teachers to have failed to teach children how to read and write. Teachers and other educationists boomerang the problem to parents and economic constraints. Solving reading deficiency problem in Kenyan schools needs concerted efforts but not blaming each other. This theoretical article intends to give valuable solutions to reading deficiencies in Kenyan primary school children.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading deficiency in children is inability to read to the expected class level and age. According to McCormick (1995) reading deficiency is a mild reading disability in which the individual lacks a specific skill necessary for effective reading. McCormick described a child with reading deficiency as one who is reading significantly below his or her own potential ability. As early 1971, Dechant explained that reading deficiency may result from non-disability factors such as low general intelligence, missed instructions, poor teaching methods, dyslexia and lack of parental involvement. The term deficiency according to Dechant, does not imply a particular cause or even a particular kind of impairment; it merely indicates a relative inability to read or learn and retain facts.

Reading deficiency in Kenyan nursery and elementary school children 6-8 years of age is rampant and not much effort is being made by parents and educators including the Ministry of Education to minimize or eradicate it. Mulanda (March, 2002) published an article in the East African Standard (Kenya's major Newspaper) claiming that performance of students in English and Kiswahili has declined compared to social sciences.

He said that one of the causes of poor performance of students in the National Examinations is poor foundation right from home environment, nursery schools through elementary school levels. He said that many parents are not concerned with how their children learn but they are more concerned with winning bread for the day and that many parents have transferred their responsibilities of reading with their children at home to teachers; hence, children get to even grade six with no reading skills.

Although Mulanda published his article about eleven years ago, still children move through classes without learning how to read and write. Young children as early as four years start their nursery schools in order to learn some of the required skills in kindergarten and grade one. If children are promoted to higher grades without acquiring word recognition and writing skills; who should bare the blame? Should we ask parents to explain why their children are pushed to higher classes without acquiring reading and writing skills? It is sometimes waste of time asking an illiterate parent to give a substantial response to the above question. In as much as teachers would bare the blame, parents are equally accountable for their children's reading deficiencies. A number of questions may still be asked to establish the causes of reading deficiencies in Kenyan school children straight from nursery levels. Does mass failure of children to acquire reading skills in Kenyan schools indicate that the teachers of young children are non-modeling? Do Kenyan societies have visions and missions for their children? Does the Kenyan school

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curriculum emphasize reading as a component of promotion from one grade to the other? Do Kenyan universities offer degree programs in reading? These are some of the questions that Kenyan policy makers and curriculum developers should address if they have to strengthen the education system and encourage reading and writing in lower grades, and also identify the causes of reading deficiencies in young children.

Identification of reading deficiencies in children

Identification of a child who appears to have reading problems in schools or at their homes is very important and should be conducted at early stages of children. Children who are likely to have difficulties in learning to read, according to Lyon (Spring, 2004), can be readily observed in the initial stages of their literacy development. Lyon points out that those children demonstrate reading difficulties in linking sounds (phonemes) to letters and letter patterns. Their reading is hesitant and characterized by frequent starts, stops, and mispronunciations. Children who exhibit reading deficiencies dropout of their schools because of poor comprehension of the materials being read that lead to poor performance in their classes.

The causes of reading deficiencies in Kenyan kindergarten and elementary school children

Reading is the corner stone of all learning in the child's life. Children who do not know how to read are those that perform below the expectation of their classes. They need extra and specialized instructions and guidance. Mwaniki (August, 2002) postulated that children with special needs are not receiving adequate attention in Kenya as required by the international, Dakar and Thailand Declaration on Education For All (EFA) which was held on the April 26-28, 2000. Catts and Kamhi (1999) explained that reading is a skill that in the most part must be taught, and that differences in the quality or quantity of instruction affect reading development. However, they said that children with reading deficiencies (RD) do not have instructional deficits because it may be environmental problems. This is a specialized area where guiding and counseling is to be involved and get the child's home background for proper identification and placement. Bigenho (August, 1997) explained that children experiencing reading difficulties in the medical model have neurological, physical, and physiological factors that impede their reading abilities.

Bigenho added that some of the causes of reading difficulties in medical model include aphasia, brain lesions, biochemical imbalances, maturation, myopia, hypermetropia, astigmatism, damage or malfunctions that affect the brain organs or physical structures of the body. He cited other causes of reading deficiencies in children as visual problems that track and saccadic eye movement irregularities, speech difficulties, auditory problems, hearing problems, lack of reading materials, lack of word recognition, and accident that may cause head injuries. These symptoms according to Bigenho, are manifested in children's difficulties in coding printed words and paying special attention to reading and understanding what they are reading. Bigenho was concerned with the causes of reading disabilities that are affiliated to the child's health, but ignored those that are environmental and others that may originate from the school where a child learns

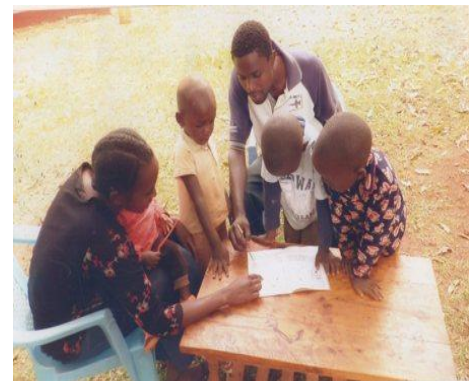
specifically the teacher of the child and the teaching methods applied when teaching. This paper is concern with reading deficiencies in Kenyan children but not reading disabilities that may be reflected in Bigenho's observations. According to Rono (April, 2010), about 53.6% of children in Kenya have reading deficiencies with the number of boys higher than the number of girls. Children especially living in rural areas have serious reading deficiencies. Most reading deficiencies in rural areas are caused by lack of reading materials. Many parents in rural areas claim to be poor and leave educational matters or problems to be solved by teachers in schools. The Kenyan Ministry of Education supplies both text and exercise books to all schools both secondary and primary. Why can't parents who claim to be poor encourage their children to borrow books from their schools and read at their homes? Mwaniki (August, 2002) reported that parents' negative attitudes towards education, poor quality training of teachers, lack of community and parental involvement, lack of teaching and learning materials contribute to children's reading deficiencies in Kenyan schools.

Another insidious cause of reading deficiencies especially in rural areas which many educators do not recognize, concern physical facilities that include classrooms, desks or chairs and tables. Many rural schools have inadequate of these facilities to boost effective teaching and learning how to read and write. Lyon (Spring, 2003) said that reading failure is disproportionately prevalent among children living in poverty. This problem is prevalent in many African countries and even in the industrialized countries such as Britain and the United States. Reading deficiencies in such developed countries is mild because almost all parents have at least a high school education unlike many parents in developing countries who may not have attended any school.

The role of parents of children with reading deficiencies

Each parent has a role to play in ensuring that his or her child receives a sound education. The parents of children with reading deficiencies have big responsibilities in ensuring that their children feel like other children who are categorized by their teachers as good readers. The parents have to remove the stigma of inferiority from their children and develop self-actualization which may be realized through love and support. Humphrey (June, 2010) said that even if a parent can only read to his or her child 10 minutes a day, it will change the child's situation.

Read to your children story books illustrated with pictures





The above pictures show parents reading to their young children a simple picture book



McCormick (1995) advised parents to read to their children on a regular basis. He explained that children whose parents read to them simple story books illustrated with pictures, develop a larger quantity of vocabulary awareness, a higher quality of vocabulary knowledge, and acquire comprehensive skills. He also noted that a parent reading to his or her child is an introduction to the development of comprehension. It helps the children to view reading as a pleasurable act, and acquaints them with syntactic patterns in reading and also motivates them to desire to read. Hood, Conlon, and Andres (2008) encouraged parents to read to their children from an early age in order to prepare them for literacy acquisition when they join schools. They pointed out that parent-child reading fosters oral language skills (phonological awareness and vocabulary) and written language skills (especially letter knowledge). They also noted that parent-child reading cements parent-child relationship.

Parents reading simple and interesting stories to their children not only improve their syntactic preparation for complex sentences but it also improves their personalities and listening skills. It may also build a strong foundation of love in the family and develop a culture of reading in that family. Most parents will not rush through as some teachers do in schools but they will read slowly, encouraging their children to repeat the pronunciation of some words and recognizing them. When children listen to the parents reading, they will also be learning variations of sounds of some words. Kennedy (1974) advised parents of young children with reading deficiencies to subscribe to easy reading periodicals which should come directly to the child every month. The magazine will be a strong incentive for the child to learn to read. Such magazines will motivate and create a positive contribution to reading development in the child and other either at home or at the school where the child learns. Since the purpose of prescribing a simple magazine for the child is to inspire him or her to read, Kennedy advised parents not to ask the child some questions about the content of the page because doing so will make the child hate reading. The child may, however, be asked to draw some pictures to illustrate what he or is reading. Although Kennedy published his book about 40 years ago, his advice and ideas can still assist current parents to encourage their children to read.

Similar advice was given by Beaty and Pratt (2007) that family literacy activities in the home and school have a large and important role to play in helping young children emerge into reading. They pointed out that parents should read with their children in a conducive setting and in addition, support their literacy development with an attractive physical space equipped with necessary furniture, storage space, and writing tools. Landry and Smith in their article “the influence of parenting on emerging literacy skills” edited by Dickinson and Neuman (2006) revealed that parents’ interactive strategies, particularly the quality of their language input and shared book reading, show strong relations with children’s language development. They also noted that conventions of print include a child’s ability to understand characteristics of books, such as knowing that writing goes from left to right and top to bottom, grasping the difference between pictures and printed words, and realizing that printed words carry meaning. These are valid and on the target information about encouraging young children to desire to read, but there are some hitches that may make such advice be unpractical in Kenya. How many of these recommendations from reading experts can be met by most regular Kenyan parents whose daily income ranges from zero to a dollar? Regretfully to ask, where in this world has a blind person led another blind to a destination? The story of the wonder child (Genie) led to the clinic by her 90 percent blind mother, may be related to this scenario. Most Kenyan parents especially those in rural areas are illiterate. Presumably, massive illiteracy in Kenyan parents highly contributes to the children’s reading deficiencies.

Teachers of children with reading deficiencies

Teachers play the greatest role in the education of children right from nursery schools to any level of academic and social life. They plan and apply all methods of teaching that would improve their children’s reading abilities. Some of them take the responsibilities of counselors and psychologists to identify those children with reading problems or any other symptom that may impede children’s effective learning. Children who show some reading problems are treated as special learners who need extra time for remediation. Beaty and Pratt (2007) said that children need to feel good about themselves and comfortable in the classroom environment in order to improve in reading and writing. They referred to a most recent research which found that teachers who are sensitive to children’s needs and who engage, encourage, and verbally communicate with them appear to be nurturing more optimal cognitive, language and socio-emotional development.

The identification of the causes of reading deficiency are evasive and need a more qualified examiner or assessor in the areas of counseling, a psychologist or a medical doctor. Some of the reading deficiencies have multiple causals that may not be easily diagnosed unless the assessor investigates the history background of the child’s family and whether the mother of the child had some problem during labor, and during birth time. Rono (April, 2010) conducted a study in Kenya to establish whether or not teachers can identify the causes of reading problems in children. The study also investigated the methods and materials teachers use in teaching and remediating children with reading deficiencies. The study

found that teachers assessed their children’s reading abilities haphazardly without pinpointing the specific reading difficulties. In order to equip Kenyan nursery and elementary school teachers with knowledge and the skills of assessing and teaching children with reading deficiencies, the study recommended that teacher training syllabus on reading whether in mother tongue, Kiswahili or English should be adequately developed. The teacher training syllabus should be used to equip the teacher trainees with knowledge and the skills of handling children with reading deficiencies and the methods of teaching that are relevant in the teaching of reading in nursery and lower classes in elementary schools. The study suggested that more time should be spent on teaching reading, assessing reading and helping those children with reading problems. The study further recommended that reading should be taught as a subject in Kenyan early childhood and elementary schools.

Reading deficiencies in Kenyan young children either in early childhood or elementary classes originates from poor teacher training programs in the teacher training colleges. There is no reading course on the teachers’ curriculum. The Kenya Institute of Education (K.I.E), a body charged with the responsibility of preparing and developing curriculums for nursery, primary, high schools and teachers training colleges together with the Ministry of Education (M.O.E) did not include reading as a subject on the school curriculum. To my knowledge, the two bodies, thus K.I.E and M.O.E. assumed that college lecturers who teach languages would include reading in their schemes of work and teach it as a part of Kiswahili or English periods. To further improve on children’s reading abilities, the Kenyan universities should develop and offer reading degree programs from bachelors to doctoral degrees.

Rono’s study reported genuine findings about the teaching of reading in Kenyan schools. No emphasis has been put on the effective teaching of reading and nobody in the educational hierarchy talks about including reading as a subject on the Kenyan curriculum although there is an outcry of children’s failure to read and write in kindergarten, lower and upper primary classes. Kenya as one of the six East African countries is known to be a country of no reading culture. Glogowski (Oct., 2008) Retorted that students in Kenya need to see in their teachers a high level of authentic engagement with text books in order to be encouraged to read. Glogowski advised Kenyan teachers to learn how to communicate their passion for reading and also need to inspire students to read and sustain meaningful conversations about reading not only books but authentic literature.

Commenting on what a reading teacher should do, Miller (1972) said that the teacher should be sure that he or she has a sincere personal understanding and enthusiastic support of the process for developing reading efficiency and that the teacher should have participated in the reading laboratory experience. What Miller recommended about 40 years ago is lacking in the Kenyan system of education. The training of teachers does not include reading as a subject. The ministry’s sidelining reading is the source of poor reading that results into what many other educators generalize or characterize the vice as reading deficiencies in Kenyan children.

Reading deficiency in other countries

Reading deficiency is an insidious problem that has permeated in every society and in every country. The United States which is the richest nation in the world has children in some schools who cannot read to the expected level of their grades and age. A study conducted by Fluss et al. (June, 2008) found that children from low socioeconomic status (SES) have academic performances that is significantly lower than their peers in schools that are located in the middle class or affluent communities. The research pointed out that a significant reading delay is observed in 12.7% of children in the United States. The research further noted that the prevalence of poor reading is highly correlated with the community in which the school is located and that the community contributes to the variations in reading as from 3.3% in the higher high SES area to 24.2% in low SES area. Fluss et al. Study significantly differs with that conducted by Rono (April, 2010) who found that about 53.6% of children in Kenya have reading difficulties. Darling-Hammond (2010) in her thrilling book on the American education said:

An estimated 30 to 40% of children enter Kindergarten without the social and emotional skills and language experiences needed to be initially successful in school. Studies have found that the size of the working vocabulary of 4-year-old children from low-income families is approximately one-third that of children from middle income families, which makes it much more difficult for them to read with comprehension or to engage in academic learning relying on that vocabulary, even when they can decode text. By first grade, only half as many first graders from poor families are proficient at understanding words in context and engaging in basic mathematics as first graders from non-poor families (p. 33). Like in Kenya, children from poor families in the United States experience reading problems due to lack of support from parents, the required reading resources, poor schools and poor teaching methods and also home environment.

Reading deficiency in Australia is almost brought under control. Ferrari (September, 2009) reported that the prevalence of reading difficulties in Australian school children is estimated at between 4 and 8 percent. The causes of the reading deficiencies in Australia according to the report are dyslexia and poor teaching methods. The Australian Ministry of Education was requested to immediately intervene by ensuring that teachers get specialist training, develop clear guidance for parents and schools on the use of available literacy resources, and the schools to evaluate their programs. The Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister the Honorable Julia Gillard expressed her deep concern over Australian children's poor reading skills. According to the report, Gillard said that a new national curriculum is being developed in consultation with government and non-governmental education authorities, teachers, parents, students, academics, professional organizations and business groups. If the new curriculum that is to be developed is intended to eradicate reading difficulties among school going children then it may become a model for the Kenyan curriculum developers.

Unlike Kenya, every sector in Australia is concerned about children's reading difficulties. The percentage of children who have reading problems in Australia showed between 4 and 8% reveal to Kenyans that 53.6% of children with reading difficulties needs concerted effort of all Kenyans and especially the Ministry of Education (MOE) and Kenya Institute of Education (KIE) to bring it down to the Australian level. Reading difficulties in school children in Britain according to Paton (December, 2009) is caused by dyslexia. Paton explained that the characteristic features of dyslexia include difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and processing speed. This condition according to Paton, affect one out of ten children in Britain. This percentage is about 10% which is also much lower than Kenyan reading problem.

Summary

Reading deficiency in other definitions is known as, reading difficulty or reading problem which significantly affect children from mostly poor families. Many families in Kenya live under poverty lines which at times make them become unconcerned with their children's education. To reduce the percentage of children with reading deficiencies, the Kenyan Ministry of Education and the entire population should be aware of the problems that cause reading difficulties. The educational experts should come up with strategies to formulate and develop a curriculum that reduces or eradicate this insidious educational vice that has permeated in almost every Kenyan society. The Ministry of Education together with local public administration should organize seminars for teachers and parents in order to disseminate an awareness of the reading deficiencies in Kenyan school going children and how to overcome the problem. In-service training and workshops for teachers should be stepped up and parents be actively involved in teaching and reading with their children at their homes. Although text books have become expensive, parents should buy simple story books for their children. All institutions that train teachers of any grade level should emphasize the methods of teaching reading. The Kenyan Teachers Service Commission should pair reading with linguistics when recruiting school teachers. Quality Assurance Officers should be re-trained or in-serviced in order to effectively help teachers on reading deficiencies in schools.

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