

KINDERGARTEN READING AS A PANACEA FOR LOW LITERACY AMONG NIGERIAN STUDENTS: A VYGOTSKIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This study explores motivations for kindergarten reading from the lens of Lev Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development. To achieve the objective of this study two (2) research questions were raised to include; 1: What is the perception of teachers and parents about motivations for kindergarten reading? 2: How does Lev Vygotsky's theory explain the motivations for kindergarten reading? A qualitative method was used for the study. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview. A Purposive sampling technique was used to select participants for the study. Twelve recorded voices were used for analysis. The analysis was done using qualitative content analysis. Findings revealed the motivations for kindergarten reading as a panacea for improving the literacy level of students as follows: Availability of Educational Books and Instructional Material; Parental Literacy Level and Parents-Child Relationship; Teacher Pupil Relationship; Well-trained Teacher. The study established that Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development explains the perception of teachers and parents about factors that motivate kindergarten reading as a panacea for low literacy. The results of this research will help teachers, parents, schools, and administrators in making decisions that can address the academic needs of all students to bridge the gaps in learning for students in pre-school, kindergarten, and other levels of education.

Keywords: Cognitive development, Reading skills, Kindergarten Reading, Literacy

Introduction

Low literacy is a major cause of poor academic performance among students. Low literacy is the lack of vital literacy skills that holds a person back at every stage of academic life. Youth illiteracy of Nigeria increased from 5.19 million in 1991 to 9.43 million in 2015, growing at an average annual rate of 24.32%. This percentage is the total number of youths between ages 15 and 24 who cannot read and write a short, simple statement in their

everyday life (Knoema, 2020). Furthermore, of the estimated 212 million people living in Nigeria, 75 million do not have basic literacy skills. Additionally, there are 10.5 million out-of-school children in Nigeria. The highest number of out-of-school children in the world is 20 million (Worldometers, 2021; Vecchiarelli, 2018). This is no doubt, responsible for low academic performance in national examinations like West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), National Examination Council

(NECO), and Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) examinations among Nigeria secondary school students (Udofia, and Udoh, 2017; Alade, Kuku, and Osoba, 2017; Ogundare, 2018). Besides low performance in national examinations, low literacy has other negative consequences such as examination malpractice (Akinselure, 2018), also a low level of literacy can negatively affect career opportunities/working life, social status, and health knowledge (Readability Guidelines, 2010). Most importantly, low literacy partly accounts for the low level of development in Nigeria, because the growth and development of any nation depend largely on the literacy level of all segments of its population including the young and growing population; and given the huge population of out-of-school children, it is, therefore, understandable the low level of development in Nigeria (This day Newspaper, 2019; Okeke, 2020).

To address the adverse effects of low level of academic literacy, there have been some efforts by the Federal Ministry of Education in Nigeria to boost literacy level among Nigerian students by setting up and implementing the mass literacy program to help youth and adults gain the literacy skills needed to improve their lives (Vecchiarelli, 2018). In addition, several studies have been conducted and recommendations suggested; for instance, Akwara, (2017); Abdullahi, Mlozi, and Nzalayaimisi, (2015); Asikhia, (2010), conducted studies on various methods intended at improving the performance of students at levels that consist of; Adopting free education in public schools, adopting social-educative programs on the media, funding of education by government, the use of new teaching aids and methods, training and re-training of teachers, adopting students mentor and welfare package, feature parents prominently in educational reforms, ensure parents and school administrators enlist

children and appropriately placed them in the right class or academic level to promote academic excellence, ensure that libraries in schools are adequately equipped with learning materials to assist students whose parents could not provide adequate learning materials. In spite of these studies, the challenge of low literacy and low academic performance among students persist (Murnane, Sawhill, and Snow, 2012; Al-Zoubi, and Younes, 2015). To move forward purposefully in addressing the issue of low literacy, researchers emphasize the need for the development of reading skills from kindergarten (Jung, 2016; Araújo, and Costa, 2015).

Kindergarten reading also referred to as 'early readers,' is the ability of a child from 0-7 years to learn sign and label identification, spelling and letter name identification, common word identification, consonant sound identification, and vowel sound identification. When this ability is sustained, a child is able to, in the long term comprehend the content of books at the different stages of subsequent grades and classes or academic level; apply this understanding to new situations based on background knowledge, enhanced vocabulary skills, reasoning and analytical skills, imagination, and judgment skills. Furthermore, engaging kindergarten in sign and label identification, spelling and letter name identification, common word identification, consonant sound identification, and vowel sound identification will increase their ability to be good readers as well as encourage them to enjoy reading books (Jacobs, and Crowley, 2010; Tomlinson, 2014).

Kindergarten reading viewed from the context of social interaction plays an important role in learning in children. Children interacting with other people has proven to be quite effective in learning to organize their thoughts, reflect on their understanding, and find gaps in their reasoning and cognitive development Okita,

(2012). Over the years, several theories have been applied to study cognitive development in children. Among these theories is Lev Vygotsky's cognitive development theory. Consequently, kindergarten reading from the lens of Vygotsky can best be understood from the point of social interactions because, at the heart of Vygotsky's theoretical lens, social interaction plays a key role in the development of learning and cognition in children. This article seeks to explore answers to the following questions.

1. What is the perception of teachers and parents about motivations for kindergarten reading?
2. How does Lev Vygotsky's theory explain the motivations for kindergarten reading?

Lev Vygotsky's Theory (1934)

Lev Vygotsky's theory is a socio-cultural cognitive theory that emphasizes developmental analysis, the role of language, and social relations. Three important constructs of the theory are; cognitive skills are mediated by words, language, and forms of discourse, which serve as psychological tools for facilitating and transforming mental activity; cognitive skills have their origins in social relations and are embedded in a socio-cultural backdrop and Zone of Proximal Development (Lally and Valentine-French, 2019). The theory views human psychological development as historically situated and culturally determined. Thus, human beings are born already immersed in an evolved society that uses conventional tools and signs for cognitive development. Also, cognitive development proceeds through the internalization of social interactions, with the fundamental social interaction being interaction through language Fox, (2008) as cited by Costley, (2012). Central to Vygotsky's theory is the idea that infants develop new social and cognitive skills through interactions with peers and older individuals (Heberle, Thomann and Carter, 2020). Therefore, learning is social, where social interaction

plays a critical role in children's learning. Through such social interactions daily with the environment, children go through a continuous process of learning. According to Vygotsky, when children engage in structured activities in a communal setting, they acquire complex language behaviors. Thus, through daily interaction with parents, teachers, peers, and significant others, children are able to acquire language skills and knowledge that broaden their learning. (Van Voorhis, Maier, Epstein and Lloyd (2013). Children benefit directly from the social interactions in the environment, and afterward, reach their learning potential. Vygotsky refers to these social interactions as critical factors in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) in a child's learning process. ZPD constitutes what needs to be done to take a learner where he/she needs to be and who is expected to do it. The ZPD as advanced by Vygotsky indicates that a less competent person will benefit from interacting with a more competent person, which enhances learning (Vygotsky, 1978). The more competent person, in this case, are parents, teachers, caregivers, older siblings, and peers who assist kindergarten in early grades to learn to read.

Methods

The study adopts a qualitative case study design to gain in-depth insight on the factors that motivate kindergarten reading as a panacea for improving the literacy level of students in primary and post-primary levels in Nigerian schools. The greatest advantage of a qualitative case study is that it gives researchers an opportunity to understand the problem under investigation (Mohammed and Molepo, 2017). The authors purposefully selected six teachers and six parents in Jos for the study with the belief that they are those who possess the required characteristics needed for the study. On the basis of the researchers' knowledge of the teachers' and parents' experiences at home and school, they should be able to give a good judgment on the

study problem. Furthermore, the reasons for the selection of teachers and parents for the study was that they are those actively involved with the pupils at school and home.

Data Collection

Using semi-structured interviews; the words of the participants were captured on a tape recorder and transcribed. The transcripts were

Data Analysis and presentation

analyzed using thematic content analysis. All transcripts of the interviews were read and examined for phrases and sentences that form patterns that are consistent with the objectives of the study through an analytic inductive process described by (Creswell, 2013). These patterns were grouped into sub-categories; then re-grouped into themes. The themes are presented in table 1.

Four themes emerged from the narratives of the participants of this study under research question 1 as presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1

What is the perception of teachers and parents about motivations for kindergarten reading?			
4 Major Findings (Themes)			
Availability of Educational Books and Instructional Material	Parental Literacy Level and Parents-Child Relationship	Teacher Pupil Relationship	Well-trained Teacher

Discussions

Vygotsky's theory and the perception of teachers and parents about motivations for kindergarten reading

The objective of this research is to determine the factors that motivate reading skills from kindergarten and how Vygotsky's theory explains each of these factors. Four themes emerged from the narratives of participants for research question 1 namely; 1) Availability of Educational Books and Instructional Material 2) Parental Literacy Level and Parents-Child Relationship, 3) Teacher Pupil Relationship, 4) Well-trained teacher

Theme 1: Availability of Educational Books and Instructional materials

Narratives 1

Participant 1 narrated thus...*books on how to read, should be provided for the children to practice how to read with it.....as a father, you need to spend money to acquire a number of instructional materials at home for the child e.g., educational toys..., allow the child watch educational programs on TV, Tapes, videos.*

Similarly, Participant 2 said ... *provision of instructional materials e.g., TV, pictures, educational Apps in handsets and computers, toys, etc....most of these instructional*

materials captures the attention of children at a tender age when teaching things like vowel sounds, consonant sounds, letters A-Z, etc.

In the same way, Participant 4 viewed that “... *the use of instructional materials such as placards with pictorial display... educative toys will help in improving the reading capacity of the pupil.*”

A related expression by Participant 5 is ...*the ways to improve reading skills in children most especially the kindergarten pupils are the use of objects and pictures and diagrams ...these enhance reading skill for kindergarten pupils at that level...they get attracted to pictorial images and it can easily stick to their memories.*

Participant 6 viewed that ...*by the time a child goes into the classroom set-up and notice eye-catching pictures, such as colorful and well-decorated alphabets and drawings of animals; and also, the use of colorful desk will motivate a child to embrace reading...with the use of talking computers and pictorial books, a child will be encouraged to learn ...they learn easily when they watch or hear...*

Finally, Participant 11 said ...*when a child has books around him/her and if he/she cannot read, picture books will motivate him/her to learn to read...*

Vygotsky, (1962) theory of cognitive development suggest that “meaning is conveyed through language; spoken or written, in mathematic symbols, art, music, literature; also, physical and cognitive tools are culturally passed along to make daily living more effective and efficient, such as scissors, computers, sewing machines, calculators; thus, educational books and Instructional materials are cognitive tools (Narratives 1) that use language and other symbols to help children learn self-regulation strategies. Neaum, (2017, p. 133) depicts Vygotsky theory in his book as follows:

As children grow and develop and broaden their experience, their ability to represent their understanding through the use of symbols emerged in different forms in their play as mark making and modeling, in music, and their movement. For example, their play may use loud sounds on instruments to represent something that is big or exciting or joyful or fast. They may begin to make marks on paper or in paints or sand and tell you what they represent. They may swish and swirl their body and tell you that they are rivers. This engagement in the representation of their thoughts, ideas, and imagining in symbolic ways is indicative of their developing ability to symbolize and with experience and opportunity, this will become increasingly focused and sophisticated.

Consequently, children’s great accomplishment in the early years involves the growing ability to use a variety of these signs and symbol systems, word formation, drawings, and written marks that prepare them for the increasingly complex symbol systems they will learn in school. The above proponent by Vygotsky is, therefore, in consonant with the finding on “availability of educational

books and Instructional materials” as a factor that motivates reading skills from kindergarten (Narratives 1). These findings imply that having a rich language environment with reading materials where adults and older siblings participate in reading and guiding young children on how to read, will facilitate improvement in reading skills among young children in early grades.

Theme 2: Parental literacy level and Parent-Child Relationship

Narratives 2

Participant 1 “...literate parents are a great advantage for their children because they will also help to teach the children how to read and write...”

Participant 1 also viewed that ...a very cordial relationship between parents and children is very important on a child's learning skill. If a child is growing in a happy home or family, it helps a child to learn faster.

Furthermore, Participant 2 expressed “...educational level of the parents ... is very important... in helping a child to pronounce words well.

Also, Participant 11 “...children that have parents that are lawyers, doctors, etc.... that need to read continually to widen their horizon ...and books are around the house...these children will read wide because they are imitating mommy and daddy. Children learn by example, whatever they see adults doing consistently especially their parents... they will like to do it; so, if it's reading, they will read too...”

Parental literacy level and Parent-child relationship fall within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) of a pupil. ZPD is a key construct in Vygotsky's theory of learning and development. It is defined as the space between what a learner can do without assistance and what a learner can do with adult guidance or in collaboration with a more capable person. ZPD as advanced by Vygotsky indicates that a less competent person will benefit from interacting with a more competent person, which enhances learning. Significantly, parental literacy level and the good parent-child relationship is a platform for providing the essential backing in a child's ZPD. Vygotsky, therefore, believed that when a child is in the zone of proximal development for a particular task, providing the appropriate assistance will give the pupil enough of a "boost" to achieve the task. It, therefore, means in ZPD, pupils can partly achieve an aspect of learning by themselves and partly with the help of an experienced mentor. This mentor could be a teacher, parent, or peer. For Vygotsky, parents play key roles in providing a conducive atmosphere and rich literacy environment at home for the development of children (Tamis-LeMonda, Luo, McFadden, Bandel, and Vallotton, 2019). The home environment is thus, an important setting for pupils and it appears to be most vital in the

early years of a child and also important for the subsequent years in elementary school learning. The significance of parental literacy which enriches the home literacy activities and the parent-child relationship are examples of the influence of Vygotsky's ideology in the educational systems (Narrative 2). Vygotsky, consequently, implied that a rich literacy home environment is essential for triggering and solidifying the literacy development of children as parents can help children through reciprocal teaching and scaffolding (Mahmoodi-Shahreabaki, 2019). Research evidence has corroborated this perspective as children raised in families with a higher socioeconomic status where the environment is linguistically stimulating to have higher literacy development. On the other side, children raised in family environments devoid of consistent linguistic verbal interactions have slower literacy development (Pace, Luo, Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff, 2017; Chen, Kong, Gao, and Mo, 2018).

Unlike learning to read, children normally learn to speak at a very young age and with very little effort. This occurs because language is a basic means for communication of basic needs, and because children are immersed in a rich verbal environment in which they live, speaking the dominant language comes with ease (Meece and Soderman, 2010; Byers-

Heinlein, and Lew-Williams, 2013; Connell, 2014; Aussie, 2015). However, reading is not essential for young children to express their feelings or respond to queries, also, children are not usually immersed in an environment rich with print materials that can aid reading at an early age. It is then necessary that parents being a child's first educator, deliberately provide a literacy-rich environment that can aid early reading. Parents' attitudes and thoughts about early reading are of great

Theme 3: teacher-pupil relationship

Narratives 3

Participant 1 pointed out that...*children at this level unlike adults, need more attention, the teacher should be patient and gentle to the plight of the children, if not the teacher-pupil relationship will affect the learning process*

Participant 4 viewed that ...*teacher-pupil relationship will encourage the pupil to learn. The teacher should not be aggressive in his approach.*

Teacher pupil relationship emerged as a factor that motivated kindergarten reading (Narratives 3). This encompasses the direct relationship between a teacher's personal qualities, his/her moral values as it impacts a pupil's self-esteem. In line with Vygotsky's theory on cognitive development, the interaction between a pupil and a teacher is central to learning; one that allows a more collaborative learning process to develop, one in which teachers learn as children are learning. Teacher pupil relationship also provides a supportive learning environment where pupils can ask questions and receive feedback, minimizes frustration for the learner or intimidation, and provides a personalized teaching experience that allows for efficient learning. Vygotsky refers to this as a "scaffolding experience" whereby teachers and others support the learner's development and provide the necessary structures to get the learner to that next stage or level (Pentimonti and Justice 2010). Hence, Vygotsky's proponent that, within the zone of proximal development, interactions between a pupil and

importance in children's literary development and children are influenced by how literacy is perceived within the family (Lee and Yeo, 2014).

This, therefore, indicates that parental literacy level and parent-child relationship have great potential in motivating kindergarten learning to read processes. This assertion is in agreement with Vygotsky as captured from the participants' narratives.

significant others leads to internalization of cognitive processes as depicted in 'Narratives 3' is of great benefit in kindergarten learning processes. Contrarily, an unfriendly teacher characterized with unfriendly and aggressive behaviour does not give room for pupils to learn especially, low academic performing pupils. Victims of aggressive behaviour may become passive or dormant when learning is ongoing. Prior research suggests that exposure to elementary classrooms characterized by a high level of aggression may contribute to less academic improvement in a child due to fear of standing out. According to Juvenon (2010, p. 3) students who experience aggressive behaviour such as bullying repeatedly, "receive poorer grades and participate less in class discussions; these students get mislabeled as low achievers because they do not want to speak up in class for fear of getting bullied". Juvenon also remarked that "Once students get labeled as 'dumb,' they get picked on and perform even worse". However, a positive classroom environment where students feel comfortable, valued, and socially accepted in a climate based on support, mutual

respect, and trust will enhance reading and learning. Two principal elements that constitute this positive environment at school as enumerated by Estévez, Inglés, and Martínez-Monteaudo (2013) are support and respect from teachers and enjoyment of

Theme 4: Well-trained Teacher

Narratives 4

... Participant 1...*The level of education of the teacher matters a lot...a teacher that will teach a child at this level should be somebody that is well trained...*

Participant 4...*good and well-trained teachers...the teacher must be passionate to teach and also must have gone through teacher's training school. This is because teaching at the kindergarten level requires a lot of skills... If the right teacher is not at the kindergarten level, the capacity of the children will not be ascertained.*

Well-trained Teacher was cited as one of the factors that motive kindergarten reading (Narratives 4). From the lens of Vygotsky, the core idea of ZPD is that a more knowledgeable person can enhance a student's learning by guiding them through a task slightly above their ability. The "more knowledgeable person" in this respect is a teacher. A well-trained teacher possessed the requisite skills that underlie the activities of teaching and learning (Narrative 4). Thus, with a little support from the teacher, the students can construct more meaning when working on a specific task. From the view of Vygotsky, students need opportunities in their classrooms or early childhood settings to construct the necessary knowledge and make connections between these interactions and early literacy skills. Instructive interactions with students within the classroom settings provide ample opportunities for teachers to assist with the progression of learning (Bluiett, 2018; Devi, Fleeer, and Li, 2018). Vygotsky's theory, therefore, is beneficial in helping teachers to plan out instructions; think through the knowledge and skills that students are expected to master, and determine the order in which to teach those things. Supporting this statement, Brown, Feger, and Mowry, (2015)

relationships with peers in the class. Consequently, school authorities and teachers can create a learning environment that maximizes the learner's ability to interact with others

as cited in Wood, (2019) emphasized the importance of teachers offering early childhood pupil opportunities throughout the school year to gain the knowledge and appropriate skills necessary to be successful as they enter kindergarten. Young children may have limited opportunities for experiences and interactions as they enter kindergarten, but the role teachers' play regarding these limitations continues to become more important as they advance in age (Sagud, and Hajdin, 2018).

It's important to note that one of the complex factors resulting in pupils' poor reading, learning, and achievement are untrained teachers; most of them are not trained to teach basic reading. The employment of unqualified language teachers has had a negative impact on the quality of teaching and learning of reading subjects in schools. In addition to the reasons for pupils' poor reading abilities in schools, Moats, and Tolman, (2011) as cited by Mohammed, and Amponsah, (2018) assert that the majority of pupils who are poor readers and poor spellers have weak phonological processing skills as a result of teacher's incompetency and the poor teaching methodology used to teach reading in the classroom. The challenge, however, is for school proprietors to employ qualified teachers

who have the requisite knowledge of effective language teaching.

Conclusion

The study established that Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development explains the perception of teachers and parents about factors that motivate kindergarten reading as a panacea for low literacy.

The results of this research will help teachers, parents, schools, and administrators in making decisions that can address the academic needs of all students to bridge the gaps in learning for students in pre-school, kindergarten, and other levels of education.

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