
Caregiver Years of Schooling and Their Behaviours and Strategies with Children around Print Materials

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ABSTRACT

The level of children's reading achievement has raised serious concerns in Kenya in the last decade. Research has consistently reported poor reading among children in all primary school classes. Although, the reading levels vary across counties, these are on average significantly wanting. Adult involvement has in the recent past been found to have significant contribution to children's education. Adults, who get involved in appropriate ways, tend to impact positively on children's learning outcomes. Children's reading development begins before formal schooling. The interactions adults have with children around print are valuable for their reading progress, particularly in the early years of development, when foundation for reading is being formed. Parents' characteristics including their educational background are critical in ensuring satisfactory reading foundation for the reading process. Without adequate reading foundation, children are likely to struggle in their reading development and successive progress in primary school. This paper explores the relationship between caregivers' years of schooling and the direct and indirect behaviours and strategies they employ with children around print before formal schooling.

Keywords: Reading, print, Direct behaviours, indirect behaviours, Years of schooling.

INTRODUCTION

One very critical development that every country needs to pay special attention to in order to enhance educational attainment is literacy development. Reading development begins long before children are introduced to conventional reading. It begins with emergent literacy developments. Emergent literacy includes the development of attitudes, knowledge and skills that are pre-requisite to conventional reading and writing (Sulzby & Teale, 1986). Experiences that include informal interactions with print, such as learning about reading are associated with the development of emergent literacy (Leslie & Allen, 1999). This constitutes an important aspect of early reading development. Various pathways that lead to fluent reading have their roots in different aspects of children's early experiences (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Children have been reported to become more successful readers when they have appropriate reading related experiences in early childhood.

Early reading development is a complex process that requires involvement of significant adults. The importance of parental involvement in children's reading is no longer a subject of debate. Studies (Wambiri, 2007; Maina, 2010) have reported significant gains when parents and caregivers get involved in children's reading experiences. These studies have established that adult involvement in children's early experiences with print enhances children's reading or reading related developments paving way for success in reading. Parental involvement in a reading intervention for children that were either non-readers or were behind by one or two grade levels resulted in children's reading growth (Leslie and Allen, 1999). In Kenya, studies (NASMLA, 2010; UWEZO, 2010; 2011) have consistently reported low reading achievement levels among primary school children. The support of adults in children's reading development is critical for enhanced reading development (Wambiri, 2013). This support is principally in terms of the social and physical literacy environment. Studies have also reported a wanting reading culture among Kenyan children. Parent involvement could provide a solution by enhancing children's interest in reading from the early stages of reading development. Children whose parents are involved tend to develop interest in reading, have positive attitudes towards reading and become attentive in class (Rowe, 1991).

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Parents who provide stimulating environments for their children make significant contribution to their children's reading. Success in reading opens doors to success in other academic areas as well (Jordan, Snow & Porsche, 2000). In a study by Sénéchal & LeFevre (2002) exposure to home literacy activities and parent involvement in teaching children about reading and writing words correlated positively with the development of early literacy skills. The early literacy skills directly predicted word reading at the end of grade 1 and indirectly predicted the children's reading in grade 3 implying that exposure to reading is key in getting children along the developmental path to successful reading.

Involvement in reading activities at home has significant positive influences on children's interest in reading and attitudes towards reading (Rowe, 1991). According to Flouri & Buchanan (2004) parental involvement in child's literacy experiences is a more powerful influence than other family variables. The timing of parental involvement in children's reading is a noteworthy variable in children's literacy development. The earlier parents stimulate their children's reading, the more intense the results and the longer-lasting the effects of such stimulation (Mullis, Mullis, Cornille, Ritchson, & Sullender 2004). Parents, being very significant adults in the child's environment need to pay attention to children's experiences at the earliest opportunity.

Children develop into more efficient readers when significant adults stimulate their emergent reading development (Clay, 1966, 1975; Sulzby & Teale, 1986). Parents who emphasize the view that reading is a worthwhile and valuable activity have children who are motivated to read for pleasure (Baker & Scher, 2002).

These studies provide clear evidence of the crucial role of parent involvement in children's reading development. The benefits of parental involvement extend beyond the realm of literacy and educational achievement. It is therefore important that parents and carers be aware of the significant contribution they make to their children's learning by providing a stimulating environment around reading as well as supporting the school's literacy agenda at home, particularly during the early. Such stimulation is particularly crucial during the early childhood years when children are developing a foundation for later reading development. To obtain a clear understanding of such involvement calls for exploration of factors that could influence this involvement.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The influence of parents' level of education on children's school achievement has received a lot of attention in research with studies reporting positive influence on children's school success especially at the primary and high school levels. At the early childhood level, such studies are minimal. Koech (2010) and Ndani (2009) reported that parents' level of education influences parent involvement in early childhood education. The relationship between parents' level of education and their involvement in stimulating emergent literacy development is still unclear. This kind of involvement does not purely entail actual reading and writing per se. An adult may still stimulate a child's reading related development without having to read conventionally. Whether they do so or not is something that requires investigation. According to Farris & Denner (1991) illiterate parents may be overly sensitive about not being able to read and write. If this happens such a parent may not stimulate the child's reading development.

In Kenya, Studies on adult involvement in children's reading (Maina, 2010; Kimathi, 2014) have mainly focused on the involvement of parents during the formal schooling years. Furthermore, there is need to study other adults that occupy a position that makes them significant players in supporting children's reading. Alternative caregivers such as ayahs, grandparents and siblings in some cases spend more time with children than parents do. In Kenya for instance a significant number of children are left under the care of hired caregivers and other relatives. The involvement of such caregivers is therefore critical in understanding emergent reading stimulation. Children spend considerable amount of time with such alternative caregivers. Consequently the behaviours of these household members may contribute significantly to children's emergent reading development as the children spend most of their time while awake with them. This makes such alternative caregivers crucial players in the family involvement practices. They may therefore have some significant contributions to children's emergent reading development. Any comprehensive study of family involvement in children's reading development should, therefore, incorporate the involvement of parents and alternative caregivers.

Caregivers in Kenya vary in terms of their education. While some of the parents may have completed schooling, most of the hired caregivers are often females who dropped out of school at some point for various reasons. Bearing in mind the varied educational attainment levels among caregivers in Kenya, It is crucial for educators to understand the connection between caregivers’ level of education and their ability to stimulate children’s reading development. This understanding is useful as it may inform the support that educators need to provide for caregivers to provide friendly and stimulating reading environments for young children. The study on which this paper is based focused on the involvement of caregivers including parents, hired caregivers and other relatives.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study was to explore the behaviours and strategies employed by caregivers with children around print materials and how these correlated with caregivers’ level of education. The objective of this study was to determine the relationship between caregivers’ level of education and the behaviours and strategies they employed with children around print.

METHODOLOGY

Majority of the 30-42 months old children in the study population are left under the care of parents or alternative caregivers who include siblings, relatives or hired house helps. The term caregiver in this paper refers to adults that were taking care of children, irrespective of their relationship with the child. This study focused on the child’s main caregiver. In some households, 30-42 months old children are taken care of by hired caregivers. It was anticipated that there would be changes of caregivers due to hiring and firing of house helps. The researcher interviewed the current caregiver who had stayed with the child for a period of at least one month. The study eliminated any surrogate caregiver who had not been with the child for at least one month. This was done to ensure that only those caregivers who were accustomed to the child were studied.

Among the Kikuyu community, some of the areas in the home like the bedrooms are considered private. Visitors and other people that are not close associates of the family are not expected to get into such rooms. This study focused on the caregiver-child interactions occurring in the living room, the kitchen, washing area, laundry, garden and any other accessible place.

Data was obtained using a researcher developed questionnaire that caregivers responded to by indicating how often they employed certain behaviours and strategies that have relevance for reading while with children around print materials. In addition, observations of caregivers and children around print materials were also conducted. Data from the observations was collected using an observation schedule in which the researcher tallied each time a behaviour or strategy was used by the caregiver. The researcher also took field notes during these observations.

STUDY FINDINGS

Caregivers Levels of Education

The level of education of the caregivers in this study varied from unschooled to university education. Most of the caregivers with college and university education were parents.

Table1. Proportions of caregivers by level of education

Level of Education	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Unschool	7	5.3	5.3
Primary	39	29.3	34.6
Secondary	46	34.6	69.2
High School	5	3.8	73.0
College	25	18.8	91.7
University	11	8.3	100
Total	133	100	100

The frequencies and percentages of caregivers according to their level of schooling are shown in Table 1. The largest category of caregivers had secondary education (34.6%). The rest followed in the order primary (29.3%) college (18.7%), university (8.3%) and the unschooled (5.3%). It is clear from these results that majority of the caregivers had secondary education. The least category of caregivers was the unschooled.

Relationship between Caregivers’ Level of Education and Their Behaviors and Strategies with Children around Print.

To determine the relationship between caregivers’ level of education and caregivers’ behaviours and strategies with print, three hypotheses (H₀1, H₀2 and H₀3) were formulated. The results obtained from testing these hypotheses are as follows:

H₀1: There is no significant difference between caregivers years of schooling (CYS) and caregivers’ total behaviour scores (CTBS) at .05 level of significance.

Table 2 shows the correlation coefficients obtained from this test.

CTBS refers to the overall score on all responses, actions and interactions employed by caregivers, that stimulate children’s reading related behaviours, irrespective of whether these were directly related to print or not. There was a significant correlation at .05 level of significance. The null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis was accepted.

Table2. Spearman’s rank order correlation coefficients for caregivers’ years of schooling and caregivers’ total behaviour scores

Correlations

		YEAR_SC H	TOBESC
Spearman's rho	YEAR_SCH	1.000	.499*
	Correlation Coefficient	.	.015
	Sig. (2-tailed)	23	23
	TOBESC	.499*	1.000
	Correlation Coefficient	.015	.
	Sig. (2-tailed)	23	23

*. Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

It was concluded that there was a significant relationship between Caregivers years of schooling (CYS) and Caregivers total behaviour scores (CTBS). The null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypotheses adopted. Frequencies of caregivers’ behaviours with print increased with increasing level of education. Thus, caregiver’s with more years of schooling stimulated children’s emergent reading development than caregivers with fewer years of schooling. This implies that children whose caregivers had low level of schooling may be receiving less emergent reading stimulation.

Relationship between Caregiver’s Years of Schooling and Caregivers’ Direct Behaviors Scores

H₀2: There is no relationship between caregiver’s years of schooling (CYS) and caregivers’ Direct behaviour scores (CDBS) at .05 level of significance.

The Spearman’s Rank Order Correlation Coefficients obtained are indicated in Table 3. CDBS refers to the caregivers’ actions, responses and interactions that are based on print including reading to the child, looking at pictures with the child, drawing a child’s attention to print to print, asking and answering questions about print/pictures among others.

Table3. Correlations of Caregivers’ Years of Schooling and CDBS

Correlations

		YEAR_SC H	caregiver direct behavior score
YEAR_SCH	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.466*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.025
	N	23	23
caregiver direct behavior score	Pearson Correlation	.466*	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.025	.
	N	23	23

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The correlation coefficient obtained for the comparison between CYS and CDBS was significant at .05 level of significance. The null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis accepted. There was a positive correlation between CYS and CDBS. It was concluded that caregivers’ use of direct behaviours and strategies increased with the level of education. Thus, caregiver’s with more years of schooling stimulated children’s emergent reading development by way of direct behaviours and strategies than caregivers with fewer years of schooling.

Relationship between Caregivers’ Years of Schooling and Caregivers’ Indirect Behavior Scores

H₀3: There is no significant relationship between caregivers’ years of schooling and caregivers’ indirect behaviour scores (CIBS) at .05 level of significance.

CIBS refers to caregivers’ actions, responses and interactions with the child that are reading related but are not based on print including showing a child how to hold a book, how to turn pages in a book, encouraging a child to hold a book among others. The Spearman’s Rank Order Correlation Coefficient obtained the CIBS and CYS are shown in Table 4.

Table4. Spearman’s Correlation Coefficients for CIBS and CYS

			YEAR_SC H	caregiver indirect behavior score
Spearman's rho	YEAR_SCH	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.347
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.105
		N	23	23
	caregiver indirect behavior score	Correlation Coefficient	.347	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.105	.
		N	23	23

The Correlation coefficient obtained was not significant at .05 level. There was no significant correlation between CYS and CIBS and at .05 level. The null hypothesis was therefore accepted. It was concluded that caregivers’ use of indirect behaviours and strategies was not significantly related to their level of education.

DISCUSSION

Correlations between CYS and CTBS were significant at .05 level of significance. It was concluded that caregivers’ overall behaviours and strategies around print with children were related to their level of schooling. Thus caregivers’ level of education influenced their overall involvement with children around print. Caregivers’ overall involvement with children around print increased with an increase in their years of schooling. This indicates that caregivers’ who had more years of schooling were more involved around print environment with their children. This study is in agreement with a study by Moreno and Lopez (1999) that found that more educated mothers were more involved in their children’s education than less educated mothers. In a study conducted in Nairobi, Ngugi (2006) also found that parents’ level of education influenced the extent to which they stimulated children’s development. In this study, the more educated parents were more involved in stimulating their children’s olfactory perception than the less educated parents. This in turn had a significant effect on the children’s concept formation through olfactory perception. These studies support the current findings that education level is an important indicator of caregivers’ ability to stimulate children’s emergent reading development.

Correlations between CYS and CDBS were also significant at .05 level. Caregivers’ level of education thus was related to caregivers’ tendency to use print based behaviours and strategies. However correlations between CYS and CIBS were not significant. Caregivers’ use of indirect behaviours and strategies were, therefore, not significantly related with caregivers’ level of schooling. The frequencies of caregivers’ direct behaviours and strategies increased as their level of education increased. These results suggest that the level of education of a caregiver is related to the use of direct

behaviours and strategies around print environment with children. However it's not related to the use of indirect behaviours and strategies. These findings are in agreement with findings by Crowe et. al. (2013) who found that more educated caregivers used different strategies to enhance their children's language development than those who were less educated. They found that more educated caregivers actually used more effective strategies to stimulate their children's language development. Moreno and Lopez (1999) found that the less educated Latina mothers faced greater barriers in their involvement with children's education than the more educated mothers.

Use of print based behaviours and strategies may require more experience with print. A caregiver with higher education has usually spent more time interacting with print than those with lower levels of schooling. As a result they may have developed a habit of interacting with print that makes it more likely for them to employ behaviours and strategies that are directly based on print. In addition the findings of the present study can be attributed to the fact that caregivers with higher years of schooling have spent more time in reading than caregivers with few or no years of schooling. Consequently they have more experience with print and more knowledge and skills about reading. They may be more informed about the reading process, how it works and how it can be facilitated. They may, therefore, be better placed to employ specific print based behaviours and strategies around print with their children. On the other hand caregivers with less years of schooling are less informed about the reading process and are likely, therefore, to be less knowledgeable on how to stimulate it.

In addition caregivers with low level of education may be unaware that their young children benefit from indirect behaviours and strategies around print materials. According to Wambiri (2014) caregivers in general did not realise that print is important for children before preschool. This belief was more prevalent among caregivers with low education. Such caregivers are likely to operate on this belief. The result is that they may not be keen to use indirect behaviours and strategies as they interact with young children around print. Such caregivers may require training on what to do with children around print. This is in line with studies by Abrutyn-Leslye (1997) and Van-Wyk (1997) that showed that caregivers needed directions and advice on effective ways of helping children learn certain skills.

According to Wambiri (2007; 2014) the belief that reading is for school age children was widespread among caregivers. Consequently majority of them believed that the teacher is the first person who has a role to play in children's reading development. This was so irrespective of their level of education. Schooling does not necessary imply knowledge about children's reading development and the needs of such development. This implies that children irrespective of their caregivers' level of education may be joining school without a strong background foundation for reading development.

Caregivers with more years of schooling tended to interact using direct behaviours and strategies while interacting with children around print materials than caregivers with less or no years of schooling. Caregivers who are responsive to print materials are likely to have children who are more responsive to print and who develop emergent reading faster than children with less print responsive caregivers. Such children may become more successful readers in later years. What this suggests is that children who have more educated caregivers may be more stimulated in general because they may receive more direct stimulation than those whose caregivers have less education. Indirect behaviours and strategies mainly impact on attitude, interest and motivation for reading. Thus children irrespective of their caregivers level of education may be equally interested and motivated to read.

CONCLUSIONS

Caregivers in this study appeared to equate stimulation to a teacher activity that is way beyond the capability of caregivers. They were oblivious of the kind of experiences that enhance children's emergent reading development. Currently there is a gap in training for ayahs and others involved in care giving before formal instruction. This gap was witnessed even among caregivers that had higher levels of schooling. Child development knowledge is key in creating awareness about the stimulation role of caregivers in children's emergent reading. Being more schooled does not necessarily imply that a caregiver is aware of what role s/he plays in the child's emergent reading development. There is, therefore, need to provide basic education about stimulation of children's emergent reading development to practicing caregivers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Provision should be made for various strategies could be employed to provide basic education in children’s development among practising caregivers. Various strategies may be employed to achieve this: (1) The media: By way of newspaper articles, radio and television programmes that provide information on children’s development and effective ways of enhancing it (2) Intervention programmes: This intervention could take either of two forms: At home intervention: This could be done through home visiting by trainers and others who are in a position to influence caregiver involvement at home. At resource centres intervention: Resource centres should be established at schools, churches, hospitals and other central places.

Specifically caregivers need to be trained on the practices (behaviours and strategies) that impact on children’s emergent reading development. Caregivers need to be equipped with tips and techniques for supporting children’s emergent reading development.

Training is essential not just for the practicing caregivers but for potential caregivers as well. The education system in Kenya does not equip students, who in essence, are potential future caregivers to stimulate children’s reading and other aspects of development. A curriculum needs to be developed for potential caregivers. This curriculum should exemplify children’s literacy development and stimulation needs for this development. A special curriculum could be developed for the under fours to serve as a guide for the caregivers on what sort of reading related activities they could incorporate in the child’s day to day experiences.

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