

AN EXPLORATION OF EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS' INVOLVEMENT IN CHILDREN'S READING DEVELOPMENT

Aishat UMAR

Department of English and Literary Studies, Bayero University, Kano

Abstract

This paper highlights the place of reading in children's educational development. It focuses on children's reading development from the parental involvement perspective. The article discusses the concept of parental involvement in depth and how important it is to children's reading development. It also presents some guidelines for parents to become involved in their children's reading activities. To guide discussion and practice, Joyce Epstein's (1990) Parental Involvement Framework was highlighted. Joyce Epstein's framework is a widely recognized model for parental involvement in schools. Developed in the early 1990s, it outlines six types of involvement that help build partnerships between schools, families, and communities. Schools, families, and communities can improve children's reading and learning performance when they properly utilize these six types of involvement. It goes further to describe extensively and recommend two reading strategies—shared and dialogic reading—that parents can implement with children to foster their reading skills. These strategies have been proven to be effective in enhancing reading skills.

Introduction

Reading has been one of the most essential components in an individual's successful language learning. It plays a significant role in children's educational development. Research has shown that reading skills are essential for children's academic success (Murnane et al., 2012). All school-based learning relies heavily on reading as a fundamental skill, which limits the chances of academic and occupational success. Yet, reading has been a common problem in English language learning, as it requires an acquired rather than a natural developmental process (Vaughn & Fletcher, 2021). This is to say that, unlike listening and speaking, developing children's abilities in reading and writing requires more deliberate efforts from all stakeholders, including teachers, schools, parents, and the entire community. Therefore, identifying what can develop children's reading skills is of utmost importance.

While it can be argued that efforts are being made to improve the children's

reading from the school perspective, parents' and community perspectives do not receive the much-needed attention. Kim, Boyle, Zulkowski, & Nakamura (2016) reported that 'Virtually all efforts to address this learning crisis in LDCs by specifically targeting children's reading development have been school-centric, focusing on teacher training, curriculum reform, textbook revisions, and other school-bound factors.' Consequently, these efforts have ignored the majority of children's waking hours, which are spent outside school (Friedlander, Arshan, Zhou, and Goldenberg, 2018). This creates a gap in children's reading ability, making the school-centric measures difficult to yield the expected positive results. According to the Ecological Systems Theory, interactions in multiple layers of environment shape human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and therefore, children's daily interactions in their homes and communities beyond the school setting influence their learning, including literacy skills (Bracken & Fischel, 2008; Senechal,

LeFevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998). This article, therefore, focuses on children's reading development from the parental involvement perspective. The article discusses the concept of parental involvement in depth and how important it is to children's reading development. It also presents some guidelines for parents to become involved in their children's reading activities.

It goes further to describe extensively and recommend two reading strategies—shared and dialogic reading—that parents can implement with children to foster their reading skills. These strategies have been proven to be effective in enhancing reading skills.

What is Parental Involvement?

Also referred to as home involvement or family involvement, parental involvement refers to the ways parents can support the learning process through involvement with homework, supporting their child with academic programs at home, and showing an interest in their child's learning (Dor & Rucker-Naidu, 2012). This does not mean parents doing homework or assignments given to their children, but guiding them on how to do the homework and assignments. Parental involvement also involves providing children with opportunities to do what teachers ask them to do at home. That is allowing them adequate time to do the work, organizing the time appropriately, i.e., time for domestic work, play, and schoolwork. This approach helps children not only improve in their learning but also develop positive learning habits that are usually maintained throughout life. Parent involvement is one way through which parents can show their interest and help their children develop reading skills, as well as promote their children's reading motivation.

In a broader sense, Wehlburg (1996) and Epstein (2005), cited in

Adeyanju and Lasade (2017), explained that parent involvement should be considered as basic obligations of the parent (health, safety, etc.), basic obligations of the schools (schools communicate to parents about programs/progress), participating in schools' activities (volunteering and participating in extracurricular activities, sports, plays, etc.), initiating learning activities in the home (parents initiating activities with their child or children initiating help through questions), and participating in governance and advocacy (parents assuming decision-making roles). To achieve this, Wehlburg (1996) indicated that parent involvement programs might require making opportunities available for some parents while having to provide knowledge and skills for other parents so they could learn how to be involved and feel comfortable taking advantage of the opportunities to be involved.

Why Parental Involvement in Children's Reading Development?

In almost all respects, parental involvement has proven to be effective in improving children's learning outcomes. Effective parental involvement can be regarded as a requirement for children's effective learning. Parent involvement facilitates children's development of pre-literacy skills such as phonological awareness and letter name knowledge (Powell et al., 2010). These skills are essential for later school success. Pre-literacy skills learned early in life, such as oral language and print awareness, contribute directly to later literacy skills and academic achievement and tend to follow a predictable growth trajectory (Butler, Marsh, Sheppard, & Sheppard, 1985; Dickinson, McCabe, Anastasopoulos, Piesner-Feinberg, & Poe, 2003). Developing these early skills through the practice of home and community literacy activities is, therefore,

an important foundation for academic success (Opeyemi, 2020).

Research has shown that parents' active involvement in their children's learning improves their academic outcomes (Powell, Son, File, & San, 2010). When parents read to their children or guide children to identify a given letter, sound, or word, they strengthen their reading skills, and at the same time, their ideas are taught in the classroom. This, in turn, improves their ability to perform better during examinations. Furthermore, early reading experiences with their parents prepare children for the benefits of formal literacy instruction. Parents who introduce their babies to books provide them a head start in school and an advantage over their peers throughout primary school (Wade & Moore, 2000).

Involvement with reading activities at home has a significant positive influence not only on reading achievement (Gest, Freeman, Domitrovich & Welsh, 2004), but also on pupils' interest in reading, attitudes towards reading, and attentiveness in the classroom (Rowe, 1991). Building children's interest in reading automatically activates their academic success. Research also indicates that the earlier parents become involved in their children's literacy practices, the more profound the results and the longer-lasting the effects (Mullis, Mullis, Cornille et al., 2004). Additionally, of all school subjects, reading is most sensitive to parental influences (Senechal & LeFevre, 2002).

Studies show that children whose parents are involved show greater social and emotional development, including more resilience to stress, greater life satisfaction, greater self-direction and self-control, greater social adjustment, greater mental health, more supportive relationships, greater social competence, more positive peer relations, more tolerance, more successful marriages, and fewer delinquent behaviors (Desforges &

Abouchaar, 2003). This is especially true in that learning to read improves one's life skills and ideas, which automatically influences social and economic behaviors.

Joyce Epstein's Parental Involvement Framework

To guide discussion and practice, Joyce Epstein (1990) developed the Parental Involvement Framework. Joyce Epstein's framework is a widely recognized model for parental involvement in schools. Developed in the early 1990s, it outlines six types of involvement that help build partnerships between schools, families, and communities. Schools, families, and communities can improve children's reading and learning performance when they properly utilize these six types of involvement.

Epstein's Six Types of Parental Involvement

1. **Parenting:** Assist families with parenting skills, understanding child development, and setting home conditions that support learning.
2. **Communicating:** Effective communication between school and home about school programs and student progress.
3. **Volunteering:** Recruit and organize parent volunteers to support school activities.
4. **Learning at Home:** Involve families in learning activities at home, including homework and curriculum-related activities.
5. **Decision Making:** Include families in school decision-making processes through parent organizations or committees.
6. **Collaborating with the Community:** Coordinate community resources and services to support students, families, and schools.

Epstein's framework has undergone revisions since its development, but its core

elements remain consistent. It serves as a guide for schools to develop comprehensive programs of school-family-community partnerships. When schools apply this framework effectively, parents are empowered to support schools in implementing the curriculum and, in effect, improve children's learning.

Challenges of Parental Involvement in Children's Reading Development

Different factors are responsible for parents' low involvement in children's reading and general learning. As oral language facilitates literacy development, some parents have very busy schedules, making it difficult to have time to even talk and interact with their children, let alone read for or with them. Lasode and Adeyanju (2017) found in their research that some parents find it difficult to devote quality time to engaging their children in literacy-related activities. When parents are at home, their children are often not present, or the parents have other important commitments that limit the positive parent-child relationship. Sometimes, barriers to parent involvement could be attributed to school practices and perceptions as an institution and the perceptions parents brought to bear relative to their role and life situation (Trotman, 2001; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Trotman (2001) suggested that one factor contributing to low parent involvement in schools is the inconsistent definition of parent involvement, which encompasses a wide range of interpretations, including parents actively participating in their child's education. She noted Epstein's classification system, which included school and home interactions and activities, communication, providing home learning activities, and parents serving as decision-makers. Another major barrier to parental involvement in children's learning is parents' literacy level. Not all parents are literate and educated enough to help

children improve their reading. When parents cannot read, their involvement will be limited to oral language in an unorganized form.

Parents' Involvement in Children's Reading: Basic Guidelines

Parents can have a huge impact on how quickly their children learn to read, and research offers numerous ways in which adults can help their children with reading. From print awareness to writing, parents can play significant roles in helping their children develop interest and skills that make them proficient readers. The following suggestions have been beneficial to many parents:

- a. **Set aside a regular time to read to your children every day:** to improve children's interest in reading and their reading skills, parents and siblings should set time to be reading books to children, appropriately, daily. Even if the children could not identify letters, holding a book by a parent or sibling, reading it loudly, etc. improves children's print awareness and vocabulary.
- b. **Surround children with reading material:** when reading materials are available and seen everywhere at home, children are motivated to read or at least play with the books, which in any way improves children's reading skills.
- c. **Have a family reading time:** this goes beyond the parent or sibling reading to the children but the whole family reading to one another, including the children. That's to say, parents should set a time when the whole family will come together to read a text.
- d. **Encourage a wide variety of reading activities:** there are different types of texts. Encouraging children's reading requires making it an integral part of their lives. Have them read

menus, roadside signs, game directions, and other practical everyday information. This surely improves children's general literacy skills.

- e. **Develop the library habit:** Encourage children to read more by taking them to the library every few weeks to get new reading materials. Parents can also create their own library at home in addition to the school and public libraries.
- f. **Look for reading problems:** Teachers do not always detect children's reading problems until they have become serious. Parents are in a better position to detect children's reading problems and act upon them swiftly. Find out if children can sound out words, know sight words, use context to identify unknown words, and clearly understand what they read.
- g. **Use a variety of aids to help children:** textbooks, computer programs, books-on-tape, and other materials available in stores can be used to boost children's reading skills.
- h. **Show enthusiasm for your children's reading:** The parents' reaction and attitude have a great influence on how hard children will try to become good readers.

Shared Reading is an interactive reading experience that occurs when students join in or share the reading of a book or other text while guided and supported by a teacher or parent. Dickinson & Tabors (2001) explained that parents reading with their children fosters a positive attitude towards reading and improves comprehension.

The teacher or parent explicitly models the skills of proficient readers, including reading with fluency and expression. The shared reading model often uses oversized books (referred to as big

books) with enlarged prints and illustrations. Not only teachers, but also parents at home can be involved and shape their children's reading through shared reading. Parents can share a text, say a storybook, with their children. Shared reading serves various purposes, including

- a. exposing students to a wide range of text forms and genres;
- b. engaging students in supported reading so that the whole group can share the reading experience;
- c. increasing students' exposure to text;
- d. teaching before, during, and after reading strategies;
- e. integrating content of other curricula areas;
- f. teaching intentionally concepts of print, phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency in context;
- g. sharing responsibility toward the goal of independent reading and engaging students in conversation.

Shared Reading Strategies

Parents can employ various strategies when engaging in shared reading with their children. These strategies include, among others,

1. Introduce the story by discussing the title, cover, and author/illustrator. Ask the children to make predictions regarding what they think the story might be about. Welcome all responses and use the story to validate.
2. Read the story aloud to the students using appropriate inflection and tone. Pause and ask the children to make predictions. Ask brief questions to determine students' comprehension level.
3. Conclude the reading by reserving time for reactions and comments. Ask questions about the story and relate it to the students' similar experiences. Ask the children to retell the story in their own words.

4. Re-read the story and allow time for independent reading.
5. Conduct follow-up activities. Ask children whether they can remember some vocabulary, book titles, settings, etc.

2. Dialogic Reading

This is an act of reading in conversation with the learners/children, involving them actively in the text. Dialogic reading involves using dialogue to engage students while reading. In short, you read with them instead of to them. Generally, the teacher asks them questions about what's happening and what they think might happen next. Whitehurst et al. (1988) explained in relation to dialogic reading that “engaging in conversations about the text enhances vocabulary and critical thinking.” When vocabulary knowledge is enhanced, interest in reading is also improved, and this in turn improves children’s reading skills.

Purpose of Dialogic Reading

- a. Increase engagement with the text: Dialogic reading is a form of active reading, so it helps children to increase their engagement with texts.
- b. Improve vocabulary and oral language skills: The nature of dialogic reading helps to improve oral language skills by practicing more formal channels of communication than a child would use when they’re just chatting with their mates.
- c. Studies have shown that dialogic reading is excellent for aiding cognitive development. Dialogic strategies have been shown to register greater activity in the brain, which can help improve cognitive ability.

Dialogic reading strategies

1. **PEER** is an acronym to help guide you through one possible example of

the dialogic reading process. It works equally well with children of all ages, from young learners to their older siblings.

- Prompt the child to say something about the text. Ask them a question about what’s going on.
- Evaluate their response: This involves evaluating whether or not you think they’ve understood the question you’ve asked and if their answer displays sufficient comprehension and engagement with the text.
- Expand on their answer: Add some new information to it, or rephrase it in a new way. If, when you evaluated their response, you deemed it incorrect or insufficient, you could provide some new information to help them see things differently.
- Repeat the prompt: This will see if the child has learned anything from your expansion.

2. **CROWD** is another acronym to help you come up with new and exciting questions to help prompt your child with.

- Completion prompts. These are where you ask a question to your child in the form of an incomplete sentence.
- Recall prompts. You ask questions about parts of the text the child has read, like asking them to summarize the plot or recall a detail.
- Open-ended prompts. These often work better with older children, who can respond to questions in a more free-thinking manner. They’re excellent for promoting independent thinking and for encouraging children’s thoughts on a text.

- W prompts—these are all the classic 'w' questions, like who, what, where, why, and when. These can be really useful when you want to target a specific element of the text and are great for testing comprehension.
- Distancing prompts. These are where you take a step back and ask a question to get your learner to reflect on their own life experiences. This helps them to build connections between the world within the book and the real world around them.

Conclusion

It's clear from the foregoing that parental involvement is critical in children's learning, including reading. Although many problems in Nigeria still hinder the practice, it is very likely to help address reading problems. The anonymous poem below sums up the possibilities:

- Twenty minutes a day; you have the time, and so do they.
- Read while the laundry is in the machine, read while dinner cooks,
- Tuck a child in the crook of your arm and reach for the library books.
- Hide the remote, let the computer games cool,
- One day, your child will be off to school.
- Make it fun! You have the choice.
- Let them hear their first tales in the sound of your voice.
- Reading in the morning, reading over noon, reading by the light of
- Goodnight, moon.
- Turn the pages together, sitting as close as you'll fit,
- 'Till a small voice beside you says,
- "Hey, don't quit!"
- *Anonymous poem*

References

- Bracken, S. S., & Fischel, J. E. (2008). Family reading behavior and early literacy skills in preschool children from low income backgrounds. *Early Education & Development*, 19(1), 45–67.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10409280701838835>
- Dickinson, D. K., & Tabors, P. O. (2001). *Beginning Literacy with Language: Young Children Learning at Home and School*.
- Hornby, G. & Lafaele, R. (2011). Barriers to parental involvement in education: An explanatory model, *Educational Review*, 63(1), 37-52.
- Lasode, A.O. & Adeyanju, O.S. (2017). Parental Involvement in Early Childhood Education In Ogun-State, Nigeria: Implication For Counselling. *European Proceedings*, 10(20).
- Opeyemi, A.O. (2020). Environmental Factors that Promote Reading in the Early Grade in Nigeria. In Tsiga, I.A., Zuilkowski, S.S. & Barnes, A. (2020). *Issues in the Teaching of Early Grade Reading in Nigeria*. Havillah Publishers
- Powell, D. R, son, S. file, N. X San Juan, R.R (2010) Parent-school relationships and Children's academic and Social outcomes in Public School Pre-Kindergarten. *Journal of School Psychology*, 48(4), 269-292.
- Senechal, M., LeFevre, J., Thomas, E. M., & Daley, K. E. (1998). Differential effects of home literacy experiences on the development of oral and written language. *Reading Research*

- Quarterly, 33, 96–116.
<https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.33.1.5>
- Sénéchal, M., & LeFevre, J. (2002). Parental Involvement in the Development of Children's Reading Skill: A Five-Year Longitudinal Study.
- Trotman, M. F. (2001). Involving African-American parents: Recommendations to increase the level of parent involvement in African-American families. *Journal of Negro Education*, 70, 275-285.
- Wehlburg, C. (1996). The future of high school: The importance of parent involvement in programs. *The High School Journal*, 79(2), 125-128.
- Whitehurst, G. J., et al. (1988). The Relationship Between Parental Style and Dialogic Reading.