



Fostering Positive Attitudes to Literacy Among Children: Insights from the Literacy Autobiographies of Young Nigerian Adults

Stella I. Ekpe

Department of English and Literary Studies
University of Calabar, Calabar,
Cross River State

Imoh A. Emenyi

Centre for General Studies
Cross River University of Technology
Calabar, Cross River State

Abstract

Interactions with books have long been recognised as perhaps the most powerful means of influencing children to become readers. The first part of the paper demonstrates the need to provide the enabling environment for making reading a more pleasurable experience. The second part analyses beginning reading stories of some Polytechnic, Calabar students. The third part advocates the adoption on a wider scale by teachers of some methods that have been used by Nigerian teachers to foster a love for reading among children.

The words of religious poets Harvey and Harvey (1984) capture the profundity of the dimensions of development open to a people through the investments they make in the lives of their young ones:

A builder built a temple
He wrought with grace and skill -
Pillars and groins and arches
All fashioned to work his will...

A teacher built a temple
With loving and infinite care,
Planning each arch with patience,
Laying each stone with prayer. . .

Gone is the builder's temple,
Crumbled into the dust;
But the temple the teacher builded
Will last while the ages roll; . . .

Source: E. F. Harvey and L. Harvey, 1984:
Soul sculpture: What you owe your child.
Hampton: Harvey & Tate.

Parents, teachers and adult caregivers who take seriously the task of inculcating values of sincerity, friendliness, compassion, warmth and acceptance of diversity in the minds of children are investing richly in the future greatness of the coming generations. In the words of Malum (1998), "Children are a powerful tool for societal change, and all investments on them are worthwhile", while Udo (1998) asks rhetorically - "What doesn't respond to love?" In this article we consider the need for adults to consciously provide the atmosphere for the affective to positively influence the cognitive in the development of literacy skills among Nigerian nursery and primary school children in the new millennium.

The Importance of Feelings in the Literacy Learning Process

Pitcher (1999:33) asserts that it is on both the minds and the emotions of young persons that people must count for their futures. It is her studied opinion that the basis of good judgment and rational thought

is emotions, and that:

...pain, remorse, guilt, fear, empathy, doubt and pride help us learn, change and grow. Without those emotional signals our thought processes rigidify. We get stuck in the present, unable to learn from the past or to envisage a better future and strive for it.

Pitcher's (1999) views infer a strong association between the way we feel and the way we think, learn and influence the future. Goleman, (Salopek, 1998:27) goes a step further to demonstrate that: "Emotional intelligence outweighs cognitive ability and technical skills as a contributor to success in the workplace." On his part, Thorne (1998) asserts that there is powerful evidence to suggest that a people's educational standards contribute little to its economic development. Rather it is the way the people are treated that counts.

It is important, therefore to consider the place of feelings in adult thought processes because these feelings and thoughts are the silent teachers instructing the next generation about how they might manage the children, the pupils, the world they are inheriting.

The Adult Caregiver's Feelings

As a professional fellow of education, and a professorial fellow in counselling, Thorne (1998) sounds a note of warning when he makes the interesting observation from his many years of counselling experience, that his adult clients, though physically beautiful, intellectually distinguished, and emotionally courageous, are plagued by feelings of worthlessness. In his analysis, these persons have a history of emotional abuse or deprivation or both, and have never been accepted and loved unconditionally. Kirk (2001), a trainer of teachers reports in a poignant autobiographical account that his literacy learning experience was characterized mostly by negative feelings of misery, shame, discouragement, frustration, foolishness, helplessness, mystification, loneliness and pain.

Many African parents, teachers and care-

givers can easily identify with the depressing but fairly accurate picture of the literacy learning experience painted above. There could therefore be a tension between the negative feelings of worthlessness, which the adult has developed about herself, and the positive values that she must inculcate in the children under her care. Thorne (1998) has further observed that "Most educational settings these days are the very antithesis of the therapeutic climate of relationships which is known to bring health", more so in Nigeria. Yet, it is in such an emotional climate that teachers are required to provide, in Relf's (1998:51) words:

a learning environment that emphasizes enjoyment and success, aims to develop pupils' confidence and resourcefulness, relates to them with care and sensitivity.

It is in such a setting fraught with anxiety, exhaustion, non payment/underpayment of entitlements, under funding, under qualification, stress, depression, sickness, zero facilities, inadequate materials and a collective wall chart deficit that teachers are expected to convey to their pupils the message that they are noble creatures who deserve to be cherished (Thorne, 1998; Udo, 1998; Davis, 2001; Marinho, 2001). How reasonable is this expectation?

Relf, Hobbs and Raymond (1998) studied teaching vacancies, and the attributes sought of new teachers as documented by schools advertising them. These qualities, valuable for teachers in all content areas, were listed as follows: being able to communicate a love for the subject, and demonstrate qualities like enthusiasm, commitment, reliability, drive, energy, initiative, resourcefulness, versatility, as well as a sense of humour, ambition, ability to cope under pressure, and ability to work as team members.

The challenge, then, to Nigerian adults involved in providing care for nursery and primary school age children appears to be chiefly in the affective domain. Parents and teachers involved in the development of children's literacy skills must therefore seek

ways to consciously project positive attitudes towards learning, by focusing on the development of positive attitudes towards reading. Already the observation has been made that "Many young persons are not reading well enough or early enough to keep up with the demands of a technologically advanced society" (Taylor, 2000), as the following survey demonstrates in part.

From the Literacy Autobiographies of Some Nigerians

A survey was conducted involving 136 young adults aged 20 - 25 years in a Nigerian Polytechnic. The aim was to discover the most significant influences in their quest for literacy, and the age at which the subjects began to actually read. It was found that:

- Females in the survey began to read at an earlier average age of 7 years than males who began at 9 years.
- Children learned to read at home, at church, at school and in the play group.
- Children learned from adults - their mothers, fathers, pastors, Sunday school teachers, neighbours, private teachers and school teachers.
- Children learned from older siblings, and were challenged by younger siblings, peers, and play mates.
- Children also learned from television.
- All the children learned to read by:
 - Memorising the alphabets
 - Singing the alphabets
 - Singing in the choir (before they could read)
 - Reciting poems and rhymes
 - Matching words with pictures
 - Copying
- In addition, the females in the study learned through
 - Choral "reading"/speaking
 - Reading after the teacher
 - Locating references in the Bible in church
 - Pretend reading of the Bible at home
 - "Reading" pictures
 - Making picture - alphabet - word connections

- Making picture - narrative connections
- Being asked to read to the whole class
- Having a print-rich home environment
- Looking at words, and handling the printed page

- Interestingly, the males more frequently linked growth in reading with unpleasant experiences such as punishment by teachers and parents, and mockery by peers.
- For the females, adult chastisement appeared to be less important than encouragement, their own inquisitiveness, and having big, colourful books and posters all around them.
- It is possible that there is greater pressure on male children to achieve in the area of reading than on female children.

Some of the influences considered above could actually provoke negative attitudes to reading, resulting in some of the stereotyped attitudes that stifle reading for relaxation among Nigerians. Viewed pragmatically, all of the above are legitimate pathways to literacy (Goodman, 2001), since they have yielded the desired effects for the group of children involved, but at what age? Again, not all the children were exposed to all the influences listed here, indicating the extent and level of deficiency characteristic of the language arts classroom of Nigerian schools, and of the home environment of many pupils.

Many scholars and teachers have tested and suggested guidelines to help pupils everywhere, not only learn to read earlier than the period of 7 - 9 years indicated in this survey, but also to benefit maximally from literacy by making reading a life-long habit.

Making Positive Attitudes a Part of Literacy Skills Development

At school: Omojuwa (1998), is one of the many authors who have suggested the use of the Mother Tongue in beginning reading to increase rapport. Ajayi (1998) suggests that teachers seek ways to foster feelings of happiness, confidence and emotional stability by providing a book corner commensurate with children's ability, maturational level and desire to read. The corner should have

things to do which engage all the senses. To do this successfully the teacher needs to understand the social context within which learning takes place (Kirk, 2001; Janes & Kerma, 2001).

Through training and retraining, teachers are expected to master as many methods as possible of teaching reading, modifying the method to suit the child, while avoiding stereotyping.

- Schools should have good libraries run by librarians trained in book selection. Libraries provide access to an abundance of print rich, colourful materials (Kirk, 2001).

Read Alouds need to be conducted with serious attention to appropriate gesture, facial expression, posture, rhythm, intonation, pacing, pausing, quality, use of space, vocal variety (Ekpe, 1997), and audience participation which de-emphasises incorrect grammar, and focuses rather on interest and comprehension (Kirk, 2001).

Children need to sit as close as possible to the teacher during a LAP (Read Aloud) lesson (Oyeneye, 1997), to strengthen positive feelings of warmth and closeness.

Teachers could ask children to explain, support, discuss, predict, question and summarise various interpretations of what they have read. This guides them towards becoming more proficient readers with an improved reading comprehension (Taylor, Graves and Broek, 2000).

Encouraging children to talk about their feelings in response to stories, reports, and accounts they have read (Raphael, 2000; Wilson with Botha, 1994 - 7) provides an avenue for them to be immersed in authentic reading and writing situation (Kirk, 2001), helps build self awareness; and helps children understand how their thoughts, feelings and behaviour influence them and others (Salopek, 1998). The teacher and the parent need to be models to encourage children to study, analyse and emulate them. Both the school and the home need to work together (Aboki, 1997) for a wholistic impartation of affective, cognitive and psychomotor skills for literacy development. Wilson with Botha (1994 - 7) shows that through an interdisciplinary approach which emphasises experience, enjoyment and learning, children can

be guided to master reading, thinking, study, listening, speaking, learning, environment and life skills. Teachers must try to recognize, appreciate and even glorify home culture as a key factor in success in literacy learning (Kirk, 2001).

At home: The whole business of acquisition and practice of literacy could start and be sustained in the home (Broek & Kramer, 2000; Aboderin 1998 - 9).

Parents can provide a reading and learning environment (Umolu & Oyetunde, 1997) which could also be used for writing as a response to reading (Ekpe, 1993). Such an environment needs to be safe for experimentation and mistakes, and for building creativity, innovativeness and initiative (Salopek 1998; Pitcher, 1999).

Parents and other caregivers could make words come to life for their children through reading/telling stories regularly to them at bed time (Oyeneye, 1997); and never stop.

Since growth in experience and language are essential to reading ability (Okwudire & Ikoroh, 1998 - 9), adult care givers should use every opportunity to build phonological awareness as they interact with the child (Umolu 1997).

Parents need to buy books: small, big, attractive and colourful books, and to surround, immerse, and flood the child with these books (Umolu, 1994).

Reading readiness could be consciously developed at home through developing the oral skills of the child, and through classification and partitioning, listening, discussing, grouping items of clothing or cutlery. All this should be done positively without pushing or being over-ambitious, but by reinforcing, rewarding, and prompting (Salopek, 1998; Aboderin, 1998 - 9).

The Language Experience Method (LEM) could be used at home, with the child telling the story, and the parent writing it. Parent and child then read it together, and the child illustrates her own story (Umolu & Oyetunde, 1997).

For the link between home culture and school culture to be kept active (Kirk, 2001), parents should feel able to share information about the child with the teacher: special

interests, activities which help the child to interact, problems with sight, and other relevant aspects of the child's socio-psychological development (Aboki, 1997; Umolu, 1997).

Conclusion

If the shape of things to come is in the shape of today's children, then the mould in which they are cast must be shaped with sensitivity and thoughtful care by well-adjusted adults, and not by contributing to, or sustaining the vicious cycle of deprivation/abuse, low productivity/poor quality of learning.

Despite the odds, as facilitators in the literacy learning process, teachers would achieve more by being warm, generous, people-oriented and funny to help them build rapport. By being emotional and inspiring, they could provoke infectious enthusiasm. By being open-minded, intuitive, visionary, daring and unpredictable, teachers and adult caregivers involved in literacy development of children encourage the development of creativity, innovativeness and dynamism. And by being imaginative, patient, tactful and positive, they inspire.

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