Child-Centered Teaching: Children Writing Books on the Curriculum: “IT WORKS!”

Research by Dr. Jill Jenkins, PhD

Note: The following information is used by direction and permission of Dr. Jill Jenkins, PhD, which was taken from her PhD dissertation, entitled: “Influences on the Decision-Making, Beliefs, Pedagogy, and Practices of a Primary Grade 3 Literacy Teacher in Uganda” UMI: 3364582 2009 Printed: Ann Arbor, MI

The intent of “Children Writing Books to Read” is to help students become fluent readers and writers. As reported by the teacher after two years, scores on District Exams increased by as much as 325% for some students.

The program has been successful in changing a Ugandan P3 literacy teacher’s beliefs, pedagogy, and practices in a context with no books on the curriculum, with 87 students (average attendance), high stakes testing, and 18 mother tongues in the classroom. With experimentation, mentoring, teacher choice and paper and colored pencils, the teacher was able to use child-centered teaching methods with mixed ability groups to help the students produce a student-authored book flood on the curriculum.

In sub-Saharan Africa, it has been estimated that only one-fourth of the children who have completed primary school gain literacy skills. Many NGOs, whether international, national, or local, have implemented educational programs that try to raise literacy levels in developing countries. What is most lacking, is a willingness and determination of these organizations to improve primary education through locally developed solutions, which are most relevant to meet the needs of developing countries from the “ground up” rather than through ideas and plans created at a world level.

The evaluation by wise educators further advises that leaving teachers out of the development process results in programs that are not relevant and applicable in teacher training, materials, development, and curriculum. Also, it is essential to experiment with alternative instructional practices because there are still debates on which instructional practices are appropriate in this context.

Another issue with low literacy rates is the lack of resources and reading materials in many developing countries. These issues can limit the efficacy of most programs. Research has shown measured increases in student achievement when reading materials are available. Although the introduction of reading materials is related to student achievement in developing countries, some issues limit the effectiveness of most programs. Two problems are “poverty” and the “lack of resources in the school programs.” Low-income areas and financially “strapped” schools don’t have the money to purchase enough books and supplies that are needed. And donated books from NGOs sometimes are not relative to all cultures, and this can limit the comprehension level of what students need to read.
Another issue is the lack of books in minority languages. Consequently, books are scarce, and primary schools in low-income areas often have no books for children to read. Another issue is that school administrators and teachers will not let the school children use the books in fear that the school children might damage, lose, or take the books, and administrators or teachers will have to pay for their replacement. With low-income salaries, it may cost as much as several days wages to pay for the replacement of some books and supplies.

Book floods have been proven to be an excellent way to improve children’s abilities to read. There have been book floods in many different countries of the world, including Fiji, Singapore, Sri Lanka, New Guinea, Canada, the Island of Niue, and Israel. In Fiji, after two years, the Fiji schools that benefitted from the book flood had double the standard pass rate on the Fiji Intermediate exam, and a comparison of sentences written by the book flood students and those written by the control group vividly displayed the impact of the students writing in English.

The limiting factors in using book floods are the cost of books and the problems associated with their distribution. Worldwide Access to Literacy has received book donations from a large retail book corporation in the United States. In 2018, we checked to see what the cost would be to ship only five boxes containing approximately 500 of these books, to Africa. We were told that the price would be $3000 US dollars to do so. So, we decided, for now, not to ship books from the United States to Africa. We will eventually do so when we can receive enough donations to fill a whole large freight container full of books, and secure enough financial contributions to pay for the cost of shipping. Or we will print our own leveled readers and books in Africa. The best thing is to teach administrators and teachers on how to train students to write their own books.

Before then, we (Worldwide Access to Literacy) will choose to do what we have successfully done best in Africa. Which is to:

1. Teach school administrators, teachers, and librarians on how to successfully use tutors to help weak readers become good readers (we have almost a 100% success rate on this), and how to support good readers to become excellent readers.

2. And then work with principals, teachers, and librarians to teach children on how to write their own books and read them, as well as books written by their fellow students, to become good readers and excellent readers.

3. To assist school principals, teachers, and librarians to successfully open-up student access to the books that are in libraries, storage facilities, closets, and desks so that students can read, and read, and read, to become excellent readers.

In the Ekuthuleni Primary School library in South Africa, the students were not allowed to pull books off library shelves, because they made a “mess” of the organized books. The school librarian instead pulled the books herself and placed them into 22 cardboard boxes (11 boxes of easy reading books and 11 boxes of regular reading books).
These boxes are moved weekly from table to table, and changed periodically, so that students can read both regular books and leveled readers when they come into the library. When school administrators came into the library during a 45-minute lunch break, they were amazed to see students sitting in all 50 chairs and some sitting on the floor, reading books. The school principal said, “we are seeing the birth of a reading culture!”

Where a lot of students came early to school at the Church of Uganda Primary School in Seeta, Uganda, the Principal of the School invited us to set up a reading program in the School District “Teacher Resource Center” that was on the school property, so that arriving students could read books while they were waiting for school to start. Using the Teacher Resource Center building was a marvelous decision since there were no books in the school for children to read. We opened the “Resource Center” one hour before the first class started school and asked good reading students to be tutors to help the other students that would go to the “Resource Center” to read. All the books were in English. When a student successfully read ten books (they had to learn to read the words and what they meant), then they were given a “ribbon” that said, “I am a good reader” to wear on their uniforms during that school day and the days after that. Soon, we had over 100 students come to the “Center” to read books and get ribbons. It was amazing. We thank the principal of the primary school for his decision. We also thank the District Supervisor for his approval. Wow, what a marvelous experience.

4. Student-authored books in sub-Saharan Africa could be the best way to produce culturally appropriate reading materials in minor languages. The students in the Seeta Church of Uganda Primary School, who were involved in authoring books on the curriculum in Luganda proved that.

The main idea behind the impact of book floods and all that we are doing in schools is to allow school children to read a lot. Research has shown (International Reading Association and other sources) that the more children read, the more fluent they become and the more they enjoy reading. Also, repeated readings increase reading fluency, comprehension, and confidence. It prepares children to score higher on literacy and other tests, which can give them the opportunity to continue their schooling in secondary school and possibly entrance to the university. It is a door to opportunity and not poverty.

One of the central tenants of LEA (Language Experience Approach) is that writing should be based on children’s language and experiences and that reading, and writing should be meaningful. The IRA (International Reading Association) and NAWYC (National Association for the Education of Children) concurred with these tenets by promoting the following practices: making content meaningful and building on prior knowledge, providing regular opportunities for children to write for real purposes without corrections, writing dictated ideas and stories for children who are not ready to do so on their own, using language experience charts that put children’s
experience in print, and teaching children that writing is expressing your ideas so others can understand it.

In the Seeta Church of Uganda Primary School, another benefit of the student-authored materials is that teachers can use the writings, which are meaningful, to directly instruct the children in reading and writing. Before this study my observations indicated that at the beginning before I taught the teacher, the children had just used oral learning and copying off material from the blackboard. The materials also could have been used in shared reading in the place of literature books (which were not available), to generate discussion, and to support literacy activities. The student-authored materials could have been written on the theme-based curriculum. A theme-based curriculum could have allowed the students to work from the known—what they had written—to the unknown to acquire new literacy skills and understandings.

**P3 Teacher Pedagogy and Context Changed**

from

**Blackboard**
Chalk-and-talk (40-45 minutes)
Synthetic Phonics Approach

Group rote recitation and individual reading from the board
Class participation limited to most able learners. The weak readers were not fully catered to
Students punished for talking
Students copying from the board to exercise books

to

**Child-Centered**
Chalk-and-talk (10-15 minutes)
Students contribute sentences about the curriculum (LEA - Language Experience Approach)

Individual, group, and partner reading
Students help each other read and write in mixed ability groups
Students encouraged to talk and help each other
LEA book writing and reading based on the curriculum

Class participation was limited to the ablest learners. Since then, the teacher walks around the class, editing group books, and helping students during the literacy class. The class is divided up into groups of six, generally with three good readers and three weak readers. The good readers help weak readers. The students usually write in Luganda, but a few write in English or their native tongue.

**Teacher involvement in book writing**

Through the initial book writing process, Eva and the English teacher each came for three sessions. They got very involved in helping the students with their topics, reading what they had written, and helping them with suggestions and ideas (while all the rest of their class was voting in school elections). They did not criticize the students’ work and were very helpful. The initial book writing process became a time of “seeing is believing” for both teachers. About halfway into the program, I asked Eva to respond in writing about her impressions of the book writing program by instructing her to “please tell me in detail your first impression, good, bad or indifferent of the book writing program. She wrote:

“At first, I wondered and was not sure whether students could write books on their own because we have never tried this method anywhere before. I thought this was a waste of time for both teachers and students.

This program is bringing out student’s talents in book writing from the start. It helps them to think more about what they are going to write about and to arrange their ideas together to write a book. Book writing will also help students to gain more interest and confidence in writing.”

The P-3 teacher said: “I, as a teacher, am happy with the program because it develops the student's talents which will lead them to get jobs in the future, for example, some of them might become journalists, authors of books. I’m also happy because it keeps the students busy. I’ve also gained more experience and hope to carry it on in the future. I’m learning more about what I did not know in book writing. I couldn’t think that these young students could write books at their age and standard, so this is very
wonderful . . . According to what I see and hear from students, they like the program very much and are eager to continue with it. Whenever we tell them to go to the resource room, they become very excited.”

Although the English teacher was not paid to participate in my study, she became very involved in what was taking place with her students and voluntarily participated in the program. Before initiating the book writing program, she did come to the early morning reading program I was holding in the center and saw how well her students were reading English books. She was amazed and thrilled and became very interested in what I was doing because the books her students would write would be in Luganda and English.

One day when the English teacher was there, one of her students in P3 was not writing. We gave him lots of ideas, but he did not write. Then the English teacher said that he did not know the letters so he could not write. I explained to her that this was not a problem with this program because the student could dictate a story to a teacher, and the teacher could write it for him and teach him to read it. She was not convinced that the student could read his writing if he did not know his letters. (However, I thought he had to have learned some letters or he could not have been in P3 because students must pass exams to get into each level at this school).

I had the translator help the student write a story because she was experienced in doing this with P1 and P2 students in the early morning reading program. She wrote the story he dictated but did not help him to read it. I went over and began reading the Luganda. He recognized the words from his story and helped me to read his story in Luganda. We read it again and again, and then I had his English teacher come over, and the student read the story for her with a few mistakes. She was amazed because he read almost every word (while pointing at the words) without help from pictures for his story. After this incident, the English teacher appeared to get the vision of the potential value of book writing and offered to edit, in class, for the students when they had free time to write.