Sub theme: Rethinking literacy and inclusion

Topic: Parental Inclusion in literacy building

Written and presented by;

Julia K. Singa

Background

In Africa, 48 million youths aged 15-24 are illiterate\(^1\) and 30 million primary aged children are not in school.\(^2\) In my country Uganda, less than half of the children in school are able to read and understand what they read at Primary 6, the males being better than the females. To be exact only 40% of children can read with comprehension at primary six level according to the EMIS data of 2013.\(^3\) It is not a coincidence that of the 159 million children in the world, nearly half of all 3-6 year olds are without access to pre-school learning.\(^4\) It is important to appreciate that pre-school learning does not take place only in the kindergartens. Actual pre-school learning takes place at home. It begins even before a child is born. Reflecting on children’s literacy levels and parental support is critical if children are to develop strong abilities in writing and reading.

Why is literacy building important?

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), literacy is the ability to read and write a short statement about one’s own life. Illiteracy denies people opportunities as their interactions with the civilized world become highly limited and unyielding. Societies with more literate people are able to overcome development challenges and enjoy better livelihoods as opposed to illiterate societies.

The Education For All (EFA) initiative was launched in 1990 to ensure that every citizen in every

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\(^2\) UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data Centre 2012

\(^3\) Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Sports (MoESTS) EMIS data 2013

society benefits from education. Under the Sustainable Development Goals, achieving quality education directly influences every other goal. It contributes to reduction of poverty, promotion of gender equality, reduced child mortality rates and increases concern for the environment.

The former United Nations Secretary General stressed the need for literacy building when he said, “For everyone everywhere, literacy is, along with education in general, a basic human right.” Understanding that literacy provides the foundation for learning and education, the call for literacy building is a great one. The right foundations ought to be laid.

**When does literacy journey begin?**

Every child is ready to get started on their literacy journey when they are still in their mother’s womb. When a baby can recognize or hear sound, they are ready to get started towards literacy. This is because ability to read and write begins with ability to hear and understand. While many parents are quick to get their children to hear and understand, only a few start them on a journey to read and write. Many parents have delegated reading and writing to the schools 100 percent. Many parents think that; my child is still young, Books are expensive or that is the work of teachers. Understanding that a child's literacy journey begins much earlier in life should enable parents appreciate that they have an opportunity to make their literacy building contribution early. Early, before 6-8 hours of school kick in. Early, before boarding school begins. Early, before a school teacher comes into the picture. Early before exams become the motivation for reading.

The opportunity that parents have to contribute to literacy building doesn’t go away quickly. Even when the child begins to go to school, parents can still engage. The call here is to begin the right way. To harness the opportunity at its onset. Children who are exposed to reading and text early in life, usually end up reading faster and better than those who are not. Also children who are exposed to reading early in life find it easier to embrace reading as one of their hobbies or an activity they can do for pleasure.

**Why is parental influence a big deal?**

Parents have been known to teach their children all sorts of things throughout the centuries. From smiling to laughing to potty training, walking and eating, the list could go on forever. Some lessons are taught intentionally but most of them without the knowledge of the teacher. Soon parents discover that their children are basically imitating them. This is because parents are the first
and usually most influential role models of their children.

While every child already has his own nature, the nurturing provided for the child can overrule or support the already existing tendencies due to genetic influences. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart started to learn piano as early as the age of 3 when his father was teaching his elder sister. When his dad realized his interest in music he started him off with the lessons much earlier than his sister who was seven by this time.

Mozart went on to become one of the most significant and influential composers of the classical era of music. Born in 1756, his music is still celebrated today. That’s how long a parent’s influence can last—more than 200 years.

Literacy building is an area that can benefit from the huge influence of parents on their children. Understanding that the home is the first school of any child, every child should be exposed to reading and writing before they join an actual school environment. The first three years before school are an important time for grounding a child with the curiosity for learning.

**Are parents available?**

Children below the age of 5 spend on average 6-8 hours at school. This means that they are practically away from their parents 8-10 hours daily when travel time is factored in. For those children who are in boarding school, the hours they spend away from their parents go beyond 24 to days, weeks and months. One in three families in urban Africa has both parents working full time jobs. In some cities with very high standards of living, some parents work more than one job to make ends meet.

When they are not working, watching TV, catching an evening drink with friends or social media are other big time consumers. By the end of the day, little time is left (if any) to interact with children given this busy schedule. For many children in urban centers, house helps and television are playing the parental role. Parents on average have 3 hours of meaningful interaction with their children daily from Monday to Friday. This figure goes up for parents who don’t work over the weekends. The challenge for many parents is being able to maximize the brief moments they have with their children.

The question of parental availability is therefore a broad one to answer. However every parent has
the opportunity to decide what the answer will be for this question. The responses are expected to vary from family to family. The hope is that each response is carefully chosen to meet the literacy needs of the children as the context of this paper.

Can illiterate parents contribute to literacy building?

While literacy is improving globally, Africa is still the worst performing continent and the only continent where more than half of parents could not help their child with homework because of illiteracy. World Bank data shows that 36% of adults in Sub-Saharan Africa are illiterate, two thirds of these being women. Illiteracy is more in the rural areas than the urban areas.

Should this be accepted as a hindrance to literacy building? Absolutely not. Exposing children to reading early and supporting them during their literacy building process can be done by all parents; literate or illiterate. While the literate parent has an edge in helping their child become literate faster, the illiterate parent can still support their child too. The power behind parental support is very strong because of the power of parents to influence their children. Illiterate parents can utilize the support of teachers, their literate friends and relatives or older children to ensure that their child is on the right track.

What is the rest of the world doing about literacy building?

In places like Israel, Korea, United Kingdom, United States and Australia, literacy levels are above 90%. Exploring the reading culture in these places as one of the initial literacy building blocks is useful to provide perspective. The reading culture globally is falling. However in the West and Europe, parents expose their children to reading at a much earlier age and more often that we do in Africa. In the United Kingdom, only half of pre-school children are being read to daily. In the US, 51% of children said they love or like reading books for fun.

In Uganda, only two percent of children under the age of five live in households with books for children. It is also important to note that child development has not received appropriate research

6 Annual Understanding the Children’s Book Consumer survey from Nielsen Book Research
7 Uganda Child health and development survey report 2016
attention nationally until 2016 when the first Child health and development survey report was produced.

According to a research conducted on 160,000 adults in 31 countries by the Australian National University, sizeable home library of up to 80 books gave teen school leavers skills equivalent to university graduates who didn’t read. The value of preparing children for the future using books at home cannot be underestimated. This requires parental support in identifying and stocking up the necessary books along a child’s life.

**Going beyond ability**

The ability to read and write is the beginning. Many people have ability to run, how many get to win a marathon is a question for another day. Many young men and some young women can play football, only a few become professional footballers. Ability and potential remain dormant until they are utilized. In order to write and write well, one needs to be able to read well and widely. Ability to read is a key foundational skill for learning. Readers are critical thinkers, more self-aware, are self-driven and usually stand out among their peers. All these advantages remain underutilized until one crosses passed ability to a passion for reading. Developing a love for reading is the way to go. There are many things parents can do to develop a love for reading in their children. Following a lot of research into the possibilities, I have come up with the acronym, FAME;

**Friendly:** Children need to see books as friendly items. A child should desire a book not dread it. Given that most children first interact with books at school, they don’t see the importance of reading beyond school grades. If a child doesn’t like school, the love for books is quickly lost as well. When children are exposed to age appropriate books, they find them fascinating, intriguing and a good way to spend their time. This creates a love for reading in addition to an ability to read well.

**Accessible:** In many instances, parents keep the book out of reach of children because they know that they will spoil them. Children in their early years tear books for fun. Scolding them for such actions scares them off. They should be gently taught to care and protect their books. This takes time and parents need to exercise patience in making books a ‘go-to’ item rather than a ‘no-go’ item. Buying books and magazines costs some money but is worth every penny. Organisations that support literacy by giving out books are doing a commendable job in increasing accessibility to books.
Model: Children learn by modeling the people around them. Modeling a reading habit to a child emphasizes to them that books are an important part of life. Many children role model their parents and so reading parents easily groom reading children. This is a step in the right direction.

Engage: Just the same way that parents keep monitoring a child as he/she takes his first steps until when he/she can walk without support, parents need to engage on the reading journey of their children. It may mean asking the teachers how the child is doing, being available to read to the child at home, forming community reading clubs, playing reading games and asking the child to read to you. Staying involved in the literacy journey of your child makes it possible for you to understand how the child is fairing. That way you can be able to provide the much needed support.

Conclusion

The value of parental support in enabling children’s literacy is attention worthy. This paper discusses a number of questions regarding the value of literacy, availability of parents, understanding the beginning of the literacy journey for every child, parental literacy and benchmarking literacy building approaches by parents from the rest of the world. Emphasis is also drawn to the value in building a love for reading beyond the ability to read. As parents support the literacy building of their children, they need constant and consistent reminders on how to do it right.