
PARENTAL INTERACTIONAL SUPPORT: A PARADIGM FOR MEETING READING COMPREHENSION NEEDS OF A CHILD

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Abstract

Parental Interactional Support is needed and expected. Interactional support if harnessed produces high reading comprehension that enables high achievement in all school subjects. Adults, especially parents in the home are the first set of teachers a child is exposed. They are expected to help children feel at home when reading. This paper proposes that parental interactional support can be highly effective to foster reading comprehension since home is the first environment to which a child is born. It is the environment he/she is quite familiar with, feels more at ease in as well as most confident to be his/her real self. It is the most natural milieu a child is surrounded and influenced by. If a child could be given the necessary interactional support by both parents when available, to meet the comprehension needs of the individual child would not be far-fetched. Comprehension needs of the child should be met because statistics have shown that 250 million children in Nigeria can not read. A child that cannot read, can definitely not read to comprehend. This paper takes a look at what parental interactional support entails, why parents do not give interactional support and the need to give interactional support to children in reading comprehension. It also explores the implications of interactional support on meeting the reading comprehension needs of a child. Ways to be used to achieve parental interactional support such as parents giving emotional security, close attachment, personal demonstration through active reading, enabling psychological environment, verbal input, parental scaffolding, and use of mother tongue as well as provision of comfortable reading areas and materials were also considered. Part of the recommendations made were that parents should be available to spend time with their children at home and be ready to be resource persons to the schools.

Keywords: Parents, Interactional support, Environment, Reading comprehension

Introduction

Naturally, a child's first contact as he/she is born is the family. The mother occupies a major role in the life of a child. The child first knows and identifies the mother during the process of bonding. Interaction between the child and the mother thus begins. While the significant others including the father are also identified and attachment created. The child learns his/her first words or language through what the mother especially says to him/her. The child is taught and corrected as occasion demands. In fact, the mother or the father or both becomes the child's first teacher. As the child grows up and begins schooling, the parents often times feel that their duty as a

teacher, to an extent has ended. Parents often times feel that the development of vocabulary and reading as well as comprehending by children is dependent on teachers' input. To a large extent, when a child fails to read and comprehend, the general notion parents have is that the teachers have failed in their duty to inculcate permanent literacy and ability to communicate effectively as stipulated by the National Policy on Education in Nigeria (FGN, 2013). On the contrary, as soon as the child starts schooling the parents' duty at helping the child in his/her academic work has just begun. The parents need to have a sound, solid and mutual relationship with the child's teacher or care-giver. Thus, there is the need for parental interactional support.

Parental interactional support constitutes one of the environmental support a child needs for learning especially reading and comprehending in content areas through critical and reflective thinking, as against direct teaching and verbatim regurgitation of facts (Akande, 2018). According to Kaiser and Hancock (2003), parents are the first and most enduring teachers of their children. In fact, they are the first set of teachers a child is exposed. Right from the first day of life the child begins to be familiar with the faces of both parents especially the mother. In the process of bonding, the child enjoys mothers' physical touch through breast-feeding and body contact for warmth as well as the soothing voice while cooing and lolling to sleep. This act fosters the child's first exposure to language with the mother. The mother needs to speak meaningful words and language to their babies and not the popular meaningless baby talk. This perhaps informs Safwat and Sheikhany (2014) assertion that positive quality of parent-child interactions and increased verbal responsiveness are essential in shaping a child's literacy environment and language development. There is the need to make parents to be aware of the need to support their children's language development and knowing how best they could go about it if they desire high academic achievement for their children in comprehending in all content areas. Children by nature have the ability to acquire a language easily. Language acquisition is natural with children (Akinbote, 2006). Acquiring a language, reading the language and comprehending content read depend largely on teachers' and parents' involvement.

Although there are divergent views about involving parents in the education of their children yet parental role cannot be compromised. Kaiser and Hancock (2003) believe that parents are the first and most enduring teachers of their children. Yet, so many factors are militating against them. These views are as a result of various types of barriers identified as distractions and demands of daily life facing parents (Durisic and Bunjevic, 2017). There are also the problems of emotional burden as a result of low-income, inflexible work hours and language barriers (Ho, 2009). Other identified barriers to parents' unavailability for interactional support are cultural norms, insufficient financial resources and lack of educational attainment (Back, 2010). This is attributed to parents feeling intimidated by the language, the curriculum and the staff resulting to avoiding communicating with the school (Flynn, 2007). William and Sanchez (2011) on their part highlight four basic areas that could serve as barriers to parental involvement that could foster interactional support as time, poverty, lack of access, lack of financial resources and lack of awareness. These barriers hinder parents from playing the necessary roles and make them tend to look up to school for help. According to Glencoe (2006), parents trust the school to help their children succeed in school, behave well in class, do their homework and benefit from the knowledge good education gives. Parental involvement in the 90's and before was perhaps restricted to attending Parents Teachers Association Meetings, being guests at inter-house sports and prize giving days. Communications with parents at that time was limited to report cards and newsletters. But things have changed. Research has established it that parental involvement has

great impact through parental interactional supports parents give to teachers when it comes to the education of their children. Zedan (2012) believe that Parents are the most prominent factors on the lives of their children. Cano, Cape, Cardosa, Miot, Pilogo, Quinio & Marin (2016) note that learners of all groups and levels yield when their supportive parents are implicated in their education.

Similarly, Ceka and Murati (2016) posit that when parents involve themselves in the education process of their children, the outcome is usually a positive and an encouraging one. They also stressed that children are more engaged with their school work, stay in school longer and achieve better learning outcomes. Global Partnership for Education (2018), believes that parents should be actively involved in their children's education and be part of efforts in ensuring that all children receive a quality education. Parents may therefore serve as monitors and supervisors of school learning and activities in a great sense. Nowadays, there are changing roles of parents. The parents want more roles to become involved parents. Parental involvement has increased to knowing what goes on in the school on a daily basis. They want more roles in terms of knowing what happens in the classroom. Parents demand more information about their children's curriculum. Parents also desire to be part of decision-making body concerning happenings in school.

However, it is perhaps most surprising that not all parents care to interact with teachers. Some parents do not care. Some claim not to have time or too busy to have any time to spare. Thus, in schools, as there are the involved parents so also are the unconcerned parents. Children of unconcerned parents are hardly paid any special attention since they know that the parents would not budge if contacted. Whereas involved parents hardly miss open days. Teachers too welcome parents who take interest in their children's education. They give them attention because they know the difference it makes to a child's academic achievement. The implication is that if a parent can create time, as well as be more caring enough to be attentive and willing to be involved in the child's education, the child would excel academically. This shows that it should not be considered a bad idea if all parents are aware of these noble roles. Parents would also find it more rewarding if they seize the opportunity to invest their time to create a lasting impact in their children's academic pursuit specially to improve the children's content area reading. Also, various avenues to publicise this great idea should be explored.

Parental Interactional Support for Comprehension

Parental interactional support for language and reading comprehension entails the use of normal everyday conversation and activities the parents encounter with children as an avenue to foster language development. It involves encouraging activities arrived at as a result of the child's interest to develop into conversation. Parental interactional support involves seizing teachable moments when there is a free flow of interaction between parents and children. When parents serve as models of new language and consequently speak it right may contribute to comprehension. This therefore, expands the child's utterances. Ability to comprehend may also be done through giving meaningful communicative feedback to the child whenever there is an attempt to speak. Learning to read as well as being fluent in reading comes when parents do the extra things such as giving more time, being persistent and being more conscious at developing reading ability in children to enhance comprehension. This is because every success in school starts with the ability to read (Akinbote & Akande, 2017).

A parent that will give interactional support needs to be available. Some parents may not be available when children need them. This is because they have to look for ways of meeting basic needs first. The per capital income of an average parent is low. Meeting the lowest basic needs of children according to Maslow's theory of hierarchical needs is perhaps the most important. When the basic needs of food, clothing and shelter is met, and children feel most satisfied then children can learn. The challenge most parents face is meeting these basic needs are enormous. There is the bite of financial hardships most parents go through to provide the basic needs for their children, this perhaps is a hindrance to giving successful parental support. Most parents do jobs that take them away from home. Hence, this does not actually give room for parents to engage in interactional support to read to or with their children. In the typical traditional setting, parents are expected to spend quality time with their children at home. It is at this time that parents may greatly impact or influence their children reading ability. In Nigeria there are instances where both parents are working either as public workers, business men and women or petty traders struggling to make ends meet. Hence children are kept in day-care centres, or made to stay for after-school. Children thus stay in school from seven o'clock in the morning till six o'clock in the evening before parents starts picking them. The parents, the child and everyone are tired and ready to sleep; definitely, there can be no interaction for that day talk less of having reading time. This scenario is the regular occurrence in most homes nowadays. Durisic and Bunijevic (2017) stated that today's parents are often preoccupied with the distractions and demands of daily life than to focus on the education of their children. This idea as since summed up by Snow, Burns, Griffin (1998) as family risk factors which could either be shared genetic or shared environmental factors have not changed. These factors include family history of reading problems, home literacy environment, verbal interaction, language other than English, non-standard dialect, and family-based socio-economic status (SES) which is noted to contribute to the problems of teaching reading skills to children.

Having adequate and balanced diet is a serious issue in most homes. This is due to the socio-economic factors in Nigeria, where there is a high rate of poverty and parents cannot provide the basic needs of food, cloth and shelter and children tend to suffer hunger almost on a daily basis (Akande, 2016). Research has established it that balanced nutrition is important to ensure endurance, physical growth, cognitive development and productivity (Opoola, Adebisi and Ibegbu, 2016). Senbanjo, Osokoya, Odusanya and Njokanma (2011) found that nutrition is considered as a pressing problem which affects children's ability to learn and consequently causes them to perform at a lower level in school. It was established by Duyar and Pelin (2010) that under-nutrition has become a major public health challenge because it affects academic school achievement. Also, improving the quality of pupils diet leads to pupils having the strength to engage in more task often, increases test score in Math and reading exercises as well as increase school attendance (Healthy Food Choices in School (2019). This assertion places much premium on mother's role as a vessel that must prepare quality food for their children. Mothers may not be available to cook the needed meal on a daily basis. Children are therefore left to eat junk foods; which they prefer anyway, although this is not good for their health since it can result to health problems such as obesity, as well as low level of cognition. High level of cognition and comprehension and are products of high level of balanced nutrition.

Language barrier (non-use of mother tongue) stands to be a major problem parents encounter in their bid to get involved in their children's school activities. For families whose first language is not the English language have difficulty in communicating with the school (Lafaele,

2011). The lack of good communication skills to contribute to discussions at meetings may hinder them from making major contribution even if they have a better idea. This may ultimately reduce their participation to demonstrable actions such as attendance in school events and maybe reading to one's child (Jeynes, 2013). At home their defects may not be obvious for everyone to see and they may not be ashamed. At school, parents whom members of staff perceived as being uneducated feel intimidated in the school environment Timberly, Baker, Gwendolyn & Russell (2016). This may make the teachers to relate differently and sometimes give uneducated parents less recognition.

Parents negative experiences in schools either as a child themselves or previously with older children, as well as parents' level of education, lead to feelings of inability to help their children academically (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). They stressed further that the attitude of teachers and school personnel towards families can also be a possible barrier to high level of involvement by parents. Hoover-Dempsey (2011) posit that parents are most likely to be motivated and be involved when they have confidence that they have some degree of control and influence over their child's learning. They usually have the feeling of welcome.

Research Findings on the Importance of Reading Comprehension

Research has established it that reading comprehension play an important role in content area reading of school children. It is indeed saddening that most children have not been able to achieve the needed reading competence. The Global Education First Initiative (2013) report on Nigeria has it that there are 250 million children who cannot read. UNESCO (2014) EFA Monitoring Report established that 125 million children globally have not acquired functional literacy or numeracy after spending at least four years in school because they cannot read a complete sentence. World Development Report (2018) declared that only half or fewer of Primary school completes can read. This shows that quite a number of public primary school pupils had not acquired the needed literacy skills or the ability to read and write proficiently (Akande and Okoroafor, 2019). Also, research has found that three out of five pupils; that is 60% who have completed primary four and 44% of pupils who have completed primary six are not able to read a complete sentence in English Language or their preferred language (Global Education First Initiative, 2013). Akande (2018) stressed that many products of public primary schools can neither read nor write in their own native language and more importantly in English Language. The inability to read may have irredeemable effect on the child's education with fatal consequences maybe for life. This has been corroborated by research findings of Alliance for Excellent Education Report (2011) that pupils who perform poorly on reading achievement test are 20 times more likely to drop out of school than those who performs well. The implication is that, without comprehension pupils may not perform well in content area reading since all schools' subjects are taught in the English language. Ezeokoli and Fasan (2013) declared that of all the skills essential for the language learners reading is crucial to academic success. Reading forms the basis for all other areas of learning (Akande and Okoroafor, 2019). Indeed, reading it a major concern for schools today (Nelson, 2010, Akande, 2018). Ability to read and comprehend is solely dependent on development of good reading skills.

Ways to Achieve Parental Interactional Support

Oduolowu (2011) stated that development is a combination of several factors which are; biological structures, mental abilities, social skills, emotions and personality traits. Also, Akande,

(2016) pointed out that care is an active feeding process that promotes healthy growth and development. The different ways to achieve interactional support are thus stated.

Good Nutrition and Adequate Health Services

Nutrition is a vital component of human life, health and brain development through the entire life span. Asmare, Taddele, Berihun & Fasil (2018). Also, balanced nutrition is essential for endurance, physical growth, cognitive development and productivity. Opoola, Adebisi & Ibegbu. (2016). These indicate that without good and adequate nutrition plus care, a child may not function to his/her full potential in school. Nutrition is considered a pressing problem that affects the ability of children to learn and causes them to perform at a lower level in school (Senbanjo, Osokoya, Odusanya & Njokanma 2011). Undernutrition is a major public health challenge which seriously affect academic school achievements (Duyar and Pelin, 2010). Poor feeding practices are associated with stunted growth and impaired brain development (Senbanjo et al, 2011). Improving the quality of pupils' diet therefore leads to pupils being on task more often, increase Maths test score, possibly increases reading test scores and increases attention (Healthy Food Choices in School, 2019). It was also noted that with better nutrition, pupils are better able to learn, have fewer absence and their behaviour improves. Thus, improved nutrition has the potential to possibly influence pupils' academic performance as well as their behaviour. Good nutrition thus remains a prerequisite to high intelligence. Good nutrition cannot just evolve, it comes about when parents are particularly available to plan, watch and monitor the type of foods their children eat. This shows that parents care.

Being healthy entails good feeding and adequate medical attention. Therefore, parents need to make sure a child does not leave home in the morning to go to school without eating. A child that eats in the morning is able to give maximum concentration in class. When a child has been well fed from babyhood, he/she would have developed physical stamina to withstand the rigours of schooling. Early medical attention when a child is ill also ensures physical fitness. Thus, parents must keep close watch on their children to notice when they need medical attention. It is better to seek for medical help rather than engaging in self-medication. Quick medical intervention helps early recovery. A healthy child may easily gain comprehension while in class than unhealthy child. This aids cognitive development which according to Oduolowu (2011) involves how children think, view their world, use what they learn through how they play and live with their families every day. Cognitive development therefore involves the way they think, the way they reason and their problem-solving ability. Thus, high cognitive ability is therefore a product of good cognitive development which arises from attention, care and parental interaction. Thus, the level of attention and care a child is given determines the level of parental interaction a child has and the kind of environment the child develops in. Good nutrition and adequate health services thus becomes an interactional support to aid children's cognition.

Friendly or Stimulating Environment

Friendly environments foster happiness in a child. Parents giving emotional security as well as love create confidence in a child. A confident child freely expresses his mind. Asks questions that bothers his mind. Understands every explanation offered in class and at home. A friendly home does not follow the traditional belief that a child should be seen and not heard. The home environment from which a child develops may make or mar comprehension ability of a child.

Frequent Communication

Parents need to develop enabling psychological environment. It should be a home where children are happy to be who they are. It must be an environment where children contribute their own verbal input. This environment allows them to have a voice. Children must be seen and heard in the home. Safwat and Sheikhany (2014) stated that positive quality of parents' children's interactions and increased verbal responsiveness are essential in shaping a child's literacy environment and language development. Parents must strive to create an ideal and friendly environment where communication is robust rather than poor.

Close Attachment

Parents should create time to be with their children through having discussions on various topics. It could also be achieved through asking for children's opinions on different issues that may arise in the relationship with siblings, parents and significant others. Such issues may be social or political. This brings bond between the parents and the children. Love is also able to be freely expressed. Umek, Podlesek & Fekonja (2005) noted that quality of verbal interactions between a parent and a child during reading and playtime stimulates the child's language development, improves his/her vocabulary skills and reading comprehension as well as school readiness.

Read Aloud

Parents should also have personal demonstration through active reading. Parents can develop the love for reading in their children when they see them read. They as such become role models. They can read to their children. They should also invest in buying different books on different genres of literature and different topics for their children. Parents should create reading sessions in the evenings whereby all children with their siblings read together. Parental scaffolding reading encourages he interest and love to read. This could be achieved by either of the parents; father or mother starting to read and then giving the children opportunity to continue reading. Lyon (2000) and Akande (2018) found in their studies that children tend to benefit significantly from having their parents read to them. This is in line with the discovery that learning to read begins far before children enter formal schooling and that children who have stimulating literacy experiences from birth onward have an edge in vocabulary development, understanding the goals of reading, and developing an awareness of print and literacy concepts.

Educational Implications of Parental Interactional Support

Parental interactional support has some educational implications which are that teachers should try as much as possible not to communicate to parents only when their children misbehave. Teachers should also know that it is important that parents should also know when their children behave well too. This will encourage the parents to be more responsive to those areas where they need to pay attention. This means that teachers should make their comments positive. Also, teachers should expose parents to the curriculum. They should make the curriculum understandable to parents, be specific about the areas in which the child is having problems; as well as make specific suggestions about what parents can do to solve the problem. Above all, reports to parents should be more personal about each child so that the parents may really see that teachers are giving personal attention to their children.

Conclusion

It is quite obvious that parents and teachers have the same goal in mind which is to produce high achieving pupils. Therefore, it is important for parents to be ready to interact with teachers of their children and become better partners in progress. In the same vein, parents should give good nutrition and adequate health services to their children when the need arises. Parents should also create a friendly or stimulating environment for them where frequent communication builds close attachment that will give them room to have read aloud times for them without force or cajoling but have naturally developed the interest in reading that will produce critical thinking and enhance comprehension.

Recommendations

From the foregoing therefore, for parental interactions to be fruitful, parents and teachers should see each other as partners in progress. Teachers and school management should endeavour to communicate to the parents when their pupils do well and not only when their children misbehave. Parents should be willing to come in as resources persons when they are called upon. Parents should also spend quality time with their children at home. Parents should also make use of mother tongue at home to communicate so as to foster good comprehension. Provision of comfortable reading areas and materials should not be compromised. Parents should create time to spend with their children to share ideas and discuss on various topics of interest.

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