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## Editorial

Our present society is particularly growing more complex in the area of interpersonal relationship. The main symptom here is the rising wave of crimes, violence and related deviant behaviours. The seemingly general hostile and unfriendly environment of the majority of Nigerian children may probably explain why the crops of today's youth appear to be grossly discontented disenchanted and undisciplined.

The hope for a healthy, happy, friendly, peaceful and socially competent generation lies in the quality of human and materials environment that surrounds the children. It therefore becomes imperative to seek for ways of creating a more child friendly environment. Globally, attention is now on making the world fit for children. The Early Childhood Association of Nigeria, (ECAN) has been one of the very few committed associations in the vanguard, seeking active ways of tinkering our society to be able to evolve an improved society for the future generations.

ECAN is an NGO dedicated to the improvement of the child's environment to ensure that the child is groomed in an environment that is conducive. The approach has often been to derive relevant actions from guided seminars, workshops and researches.

At its **2nd Annual Conference** therefore, ECAN wants to deduce relevant actions from a conference on "Creating Friendly Environment from the Nigerian pre-school child". ECAN has the pleasure to present to you, the Volume 2 of JECAN containing articles ultimately committed to societal engineering for improvement. The main theme this conference is "**Crating Friendly Environment for the Nigerian Child**" with the following **Sub Themes**:

- The components of a child friendly environment.
- The home environment of the child.
- The child and his socio/political environment.
- Religious environment and the child.
- Socio/economic environment implications for the child.
- The child and the pre-school environment.

- Contents
- Health and safety environment
  - The child and the media environment.
  - Media image and the child.
  - Technology and the Nigerian child.
  - Crimes and violence and the child.
  - Teaching environment of the child.
  - The Nigerian child's perception of the environment.
  - Managing the early childhood education environment.
  - Implementation strategies of a Child Friendly Environment.

### Objectives

- The intention of this ECAN conference is to
- Identify the components of a Child Friendly environment.
- Generate awareness of a Child Friendly environment.
- Identify strategies for initiating a model Child Friendly environment.
- Identify strategies for implementing a model Child Friendly environment.
- Mobilize for Child Care Friendly Policy.

The articles in this issue cover fairly adequately the conference theme and make recommendations aimed at generating greater awareness of child friendly environment for the Nigerian child.

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HOME ENVIRONMENTAL CORRELATES OF  
ALPHABET IDENTIFICATION AND PICTURE  
READING SKILLS AMONG PRE-SCHOOLERS AGED  
3-4 YEARS IN NIGERIA

Odinko Monica N.\*

Early childhood educators, researchers and psychologists tend to share the view that the first five years of life, are very crucial to the intellectual development of the child, considering that half of an adult's mature intelligence is developed from birth to five years, whereas the remaining half is developed from six to seventeen years (Evans, 1998, Federal Ministry of Education (FME 1999), FME 2000, Myers, 2000). It would thus seem that the kind of child care practices that the child is exposed to at home during the formative years would either impede or enhance the child's intellectual development. This, perhaps, made Silvern (1998) to share the view that children under school age should come in contact with literacy related activities first at home, before formal schooling.

Therefore, efforts should be made to ensure that the home is provided with sufficient literacy related materials and activities, (e.g.) reading to the child, talking about prints and picture provision of alphabet books, alphabet block, ABC magnet, story books, television, educational videos like the "sesame street", where they feature letter - learning activities for young children.

It has been found that among the reading skills that are traditionally evaluated on the pre-school children, letter identification/reading appears to be the strongest predictor. Some other early childhood/researchers and evaluators acknowledged that letter names are part of the language that readers and writers use (Combs, 1996) and that knowing letter names leads to an interest in learning the relationship between letters and sound (Slavin, Madden, Karweito, Dolan and Wasik 1994). Reading, on the other hand, is a means of sounding out printed letters, either with or without comprehension (Obinaka 1981, Harris and Sipay, 1971). It could also be conceived as a thinking process aimed at making meaning of symbols (Stanffer, 1979). However, Akporaboro (1981) had identified that there is lack of interest in reading

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\* Odinko Monica N. (Ph.D),

among Nigerians. To him, a majority of the adults are non-reading adults and these may end up rearing non-reading children.

The need to fully develop identification/reading skills among preschoolers has made parents in most organised societies to exert efforts towards providing literacy - related materials and activities in their homes. However, the situation appears not to be the same in "Nigeria considering that the 1999 Multiple Indicator Chester Survey (MICS) data show that nationally, only 18 percent of children aged 3 to 5 years had any form of literacy related activities at home before formal schooling. As a result, most Nigerian children tend to move from home to school with little or no knowledge of any school related activity. This is inspite of the research reports that children who enter school without being exposed to some literacy related activities run a significant risk of starting behind and staying behind (Bush 2002, Armsburster, Bonnier, B. *et al*, 2001).

It is against this background that the present study estimated the extent to which some home environmental variables (home language, educational materials provided at home, who helps the child at home, home location, who does the child live with, number of children in the home, mother's educational qualification, time spent with the child) would exert influence on the literacy level of Nigerian pre-schoolers aged 3-4 years. Specifically, the study sought to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. To what extent would the eight home variables, when taken together, predict pre-schoolers' reading skills (letter reading and identification/picture reading)?
2. What is the relative contribution of the variables to the prediction?

## **Methodology**

### **(a) Sampling Procedure and Sample**

A multi-stage sampling procedure was used in the selection of the subjects. The country made up of 36 states and FCT, Abuja, was stratified into six zones: North-West (NW); North-East (NE); North-Central (NC); South-West (SW); South-East (SE) and South-South (SS). Two states were randomly selected from the states within each zone. Abuja, because of its status as the Federal Capital Territory, was included as a special state. In all, 13 states were used. In each of the selected states, 10 Nursery schools (5 urban and 5 rural) participated in the study. However, only 5

Nursery schools were selected in Abuja. Public and Private' schools were also taken into consideration at the ratio of 2:3. In each of the selected schools, twenty pupils aged 3 to 4 years were randomly selected. The parents of the pupils selected automatically qualified as respondents to the questionnaire. In all, the sample consisted of 2,600 children (1,326 males and 1,274 females) from 130 schools and any of their respective parents or guardians.

### **(b) Instrumentation**

Two valid and reliable instruments developed by the investigator were used to collect data for the study.

1. Home Background Questionnaires (HBQ). This instrument, which is made up of 13 items, was estimated to have reliability indices (test retest; two weeks interval that ranged from 0.92 to 1.0).
2. The Reading Skill Test (RST). The test is made up of two sections, A and B. Section A solicits information on Alphabet Identification/Matching whereas section B covered the aspect of Picture Reading Skills. The pre-test results showed no ambiguities in the instrument and produced a test-retest (two weeks interval reliability estimate of 0.91).

### **(c) Data Collection Procedure**

The instruments were administered into the subjects in the 130 schools in Nigeria. This was carried out by the investigator with the help of 12 trained research assistants. The Reading Skill Test was administered directly to the pupils on their first day in their respective schools in order to ascertain, their literacy levels just before starting their formal education, whereas the parents/relations who brought the pupils to school for admission into Nursery class were made to respond to the Home Background Questionnaire (HBQ).

### **(d) Data Analysis Procedure**

Data analysis involved the use of multiple regression (background solution) to examine the relationship between the variables independent, in the HBQ and the pupil's achievement in the RST (dependent).

## Results

The results show that the use of nine home environmental variables (home language, who helps the child at home, location of the child's home, who does the child live with, educational level of father and mother respective number of children in the family, educational materials available for the child at home, time spent with the child by either the father or the mother, and the occupation of parents) to predict achievement in picture reading and alphabet identification/matching skill test yielded a multiple regression coefficient (R) of 0.829 (adjusted) and multiple regression square ( $R^2$ ) of 0.660 adjusted. The analysis of variance of the multiple regression data yielded an F-ratio of 25.142 (significant at the 0.01 level).

The results also show that the independent variables are associated with the following beta (P) weight: mother's occupation (-.029); language' used at home (.026); who helps the child at home (.492\*); who does the child live with (-.192\*); home location (.250\*); educational materials at home (.182\*); time spent with the child at home by the mother (.218\*); number of children in the family (-.113) and educational qualification of the mother (-.064).

## Discussion

The results of the present study reveal that the nine home environmental factors, when taken together, seem to be effective in predicting the level of Reading Skills acquired by Nigerian pre-schoolers at home. The observed" F-ratio is significant at the 0.01 level, an indication that the effectiveness of a combination of the independent variables in predicting pre-primary school children's ability to undertake picture reading and letter identification/matching could not have occurred by chance. The magnitude of the relationship between the ability level of the pupils and a combination of the independent variables is reflected in the values of the co-efficient of multiple regression (0.829) and multiple R squared (0.660). It may thus be said that about 66% of the total variance in the pupil's ability to read is accounted for by a linear combination of the nine home environmental variables.

As for the extent to which each of the nine independent variables contributed to the prediction, the value of the T-ratio associated with the respective variables indicates that five of the variables contributed significantly to the prediction of the pre-schoolers ability to read. The values of the standardised regression weights associated with these variables indicate that variable 3 (who helps the child at home)

is the most potent contributor, followed by variable 4 (location of the child's home), variable 7 (time spent at home with the child by the mother), variable 6 (educational materials provided for the child at home) and variable 5 (who does the child live with) in that order.

The indication that "who helps the child at home is a significant contributor to the prediction of the child's ability to read seems reasonable when one considers the fact that children are likely to succeed in learning when their families are actively involved (Bush, 2002, Dickinson and Tabors (2001). This motivates the children to take pleasure in learning and to want to learn more. Helping children at home in literacy related activities before formal schooling prepares them to be successful in school and in life. Children need a lot of interaction with parent and significant others at home. Showing enthusiasm on what a child does at home encourages the child and helps to make the child to be proud of his/her achievement. The high influence of who helps the child at home and a child's ability to identify/match letters of the alphabet as well as interprets what the child sees in pictures is also in agreement with Snow, Burns, and Griffins (1998), major findings on "Why Children can't Read", which shows that the seeds of literacy are planted before children enter school Knowledge about letters is a prerequisite for learning to read and that parent and significant others at home must supply the experiences to build this basic knowledge. Research has also shown that a knowledge of letter names early in life leads to an interest in learning the relationship between letters and sounds (Slaving, Madden, Karweito, Dolan and Wasisk 1994).

It is explicable that the location of a child's home (rural/urban) made a significant contribution to the prediction of a child's ability to identify/match letters of the alphabet as well as interpret actions being performed in a picture. This might be so when one considers that social amenities are readily available in the urban locations (e.g. libraries, television, children's parks, books, magazines, billboards, posters where letters are conspicuously displayed). As a result, children whose homes are located in the urban centres are much likely to be exposed to literacy related activities by parents or significant others at home. In addition, the availability of television and other information technology may have contributed to the literacy development of urban pupils. However, children whose homes are situated in the rural locations are likely to be affected by the economic condition of the rural

dwellers which may hinder the provision of learning materials at home by parents or as gifts from relations of the pre-schoolers.

The reported significant influence of time spent with the child by the mother on a child's ability to read is explicable. The data reveal that children whose mothers spent more time with on literacy related activities at home (e.g. reading to the child, teaching the child letters of the alphabet, visiting parks, zoological gardens, libraries, etc) tend to perform better than their counterparts whose mothers do not. This is in agreement with Pestalozzi's view (1951) of the mother as the child's first educator. It also corroborates the views of Liebschner (1985) that women are not only important in their role as parents, but are capable of teaching children, too.

Educational materials available at home made a significant contribution to the prediction of the child's ability to read (in terms of picture reading and letter identification/matching). This is explicable when one considers the fact that children (at this stage in intellectual development) should be encouraged or taught using concrete materials. Thus, such materials which the children can see, feel and play with should be provided by the parents. Moreso, when the result of the present study has shown that a child's ability to identify/match letters of the alphabet as well as interpret pictures correctly could be facilitated by the provision of appropriate concrete materials at home (e.g. alphabet books, alphabet block, ABC Magnet, alphabet rhyme and song books, picture books, magazine, story books etc).

Who the child lives with made significant contribution to the prediction of a child's ability to read. A further examination of the available data in this study reveals that children who live with their mothers only or both parents tend to achieve better than those who live with their fathers only. The result is explicable considering that the environment in which children grow and learn involves the people with whom the children interact. Studies on families have found that the involvement of both parents in the education of their child is very essential to effective schooling and literacy development of the child. However, a review of some research findings on the participation of families in the upbringing of their children revealed that mothers play more prominent role in the intellectual development of their children during the formative years. Synder, Eysers and Barnard (1979) suggested that mothers, rather than fathers, be taught about early learning norms in infants because it is believed that the mothers have more contact hours with the infant. Furthermore, there is

evidence that interaction with mothers is different from interactions with fathers, and that these interactions produce different knowledge and skills. (Lamb, 1976).

On the contrary, the occupation of the mother as well as the educational qualification of the mother made no significant contribution to the ability to identify letters of the alphabet and interpret the actions in a picture before formal schooling. This could be attributed to the fact that at this age level, a mother does not have to be a professional to be able to help a child at home. What tends to matter most at this level is the time, interest and pleasure that one has in creating the awareness in the child at home.

Number of children in the home and home language also made no significant contribution to the prediction of a child's ability to identify/match alphabet and read pictures. This, perhaps, is an indication that in the presence of other more potent home factors, the respective contribution of the two variables to the prediction would be low and not statistically significant.

### Conclusion

The findings of this study provided empirical bases for, educators, child psychologists as well as parents who are interested in improving the cognitive development of Nigerian children during their preschool years to endeavour to take into consideration the importance of all the significant variables in the study: material provision; who helps the child at home; time spent with the child by parents; home location; and who the child lives with. It is hoped that such considerations will be of significant help" in getting the children much more prepared for the formal schools.

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