Reading is Not a Laughing Matter:

Nigerian Teachers' Beliefs about Literacy Development

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Abstract

This study examined teachers' literacy development beliefs in the following areas: emergent literacy, oral language, meaningful reading, and skill drills. Two samples of Nigerians, 42 practicing teachers and 171 pre-service teachers, completed a questionnaire about their literacy development beliefs. Nigerian teachers have some accurate beliefs and other inaccurate beliefs regarding early literacy development. Participants understood the importance of oral language to literacy development and that literacy development begins at a young age. However, participants were unfamiliar with specific emergent literacy skills. They also believed that drilling students in reading skills is more effective than meaningful reading experiences. Teacher training programs must be modified to include greater emphasis on literacy development and more authentic literature for Nigerian children should be produced.

Introduction

A major goal for countries across Africa is to increase literacy rates (Richmond, Robinson, & Sachs-Israel, 2008). Considerable effort has been dedicated to improving adult literacy across Africa, emphasized by the Education for All goals. However, the development of African children's literacy skills has been largely overlooked (Perry, 2008) despite the fact that research is clear that early experiences with literature have significant implications on future literacy skills and reading attitudes (Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; International Reading Association [IRA], 1999; IRA & National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 1998; Morrow & Young, 1997). This neglect likely results from the assumption that children will develop literacy skills through formal education. However, a large proportion of African children complete school without functional literacy skills (UNESCO, 2006). Educationalists must reconsider the importance of early literacy development for African children.

One of the most important factors that determines how well children learn is the classroom teacher's knowledge and teaching skills (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000). A competent teacher is necessary for building a successful literacy program (Mazzoni & Gambrell, 2003). A solid understanding of literacy development is a prerequisite to using effective teaching practices that foster early literacy skills and attitudes. Indeed, the best protection against illiteracy is quality instruction from a knowledgeable and effective teacher (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Research over the past few decades has provided substantial evidence about the importance of three aspects of literacy development. First, children begin to learn to read very early in life (Snow et al., 1998), a concept called *emergent literacy.* Second, a strong foundation in oral language is a prerequisite to learning to read (Roskos, Tabors, & Lenhart, 2009). Finally, reading meaningful, authentic texts promotes greater interest in learning to read and better literacy achievement (Fisher, Flood, & Lapp, 2003). However, teachers in the United States often have outdated and inaccurate beliefs of literacy development, mistakenly focusing on intensive drills on isolated reading skills (IRA & NAEYC, 1998). These beliefs are likely to be even more pronounced in African countries where little research is actively conducted in the field of literacy development. Therefore, this research study will focus on teachers' beliefs of literacy development in four areas: emergent literacy, oral language, reading meaningful texts (referred to as "meaningful reading" throughout the rest of the paper), and drills on isolated reading skills (referred to as "skill drills").

Early in the 20th century, educationalists believed that reading instruction was only effective when children were naturally mature enough – at approximately six years of age (Morrow & Asbury, 2003). According to this belief, no literacy instruction would be effective until children were mentally ready to decode text. However, educators now understand that literacy development begins when children are still quite young through exposure to social literacy activities (IRA & NAEYC, 1998). Formally, emergent literacy consists of skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are developed before conventional forms of reading (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Emergent literacy skills include developing an interest in reading, learning about print concepts such as reading text from left to right, and acquiring book-handling skills (Tompkins, 2011), as well as identifying letters of the alphabet and acquiring language skills such as vocabulary and telling narratives (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Primary school teachers must have a good understanding of these emergent literacy skills to lay an effective foundation for literacy development.

Early oral language skills are also foundational in literacy development as they have a significant relationship with subsequent reading achievement (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Best practices for improving young children's oral language include songs, rhymes, and word play; storytelling; circle time; and dramatic play (Roskos et al., 2009). Songs, rhymes, and word play help children develop phonological awareness, meaning that they can identify the individual sounds within each word. Listening to stories helps children develop an understanding of narrative, as well as improves their vocabularies. During circle time, children sit in a circle to discuss relevant issues such as the daily class schedule, the weather, and current events. Individual children can share news that is important to them. These discussions also help build vocabulary, as well as help children learn the syntax, or grammatical structure of the language. Finally, dramatic play gives children an opportunity to practice their language skills. To summarize, oral language skills that are important for early literacy development include phonology, syntax, semantics, and the pragmatics of language usage (Tompkins, 2011).

Finally, research has provided overwhelming evidence that reading high quality, meaningful literature with young children promotes literacy development (Bus, et al., 1995; IRA & NAEYC, 1998; Morrow & Asbury, 2003; Snow et al., 1998). Frequent voluntary reading of extra-curricular books relates to better literacy skills (Campbell, Donahue, Reese, & Phillips, 1996; IRA, 1999), even for young children in sub-Saharan Africa (Agak, 1995, as cited in Commeyras & Inyega, 2007). Specifically, reading storybooks promotes vocabulary, even for students who are learning to read in their second language (Verhallen & Bus, 2010).

Reading authentic materials with young children also fosters interest in reading (Morrow & Asbury, 2003).

Virtually no literacy experts would downplay the importance of reading meaningful texts. However, every time that I have told my Nigerian education students that young children should be read to every day, both undergraduate and postgraduate students roar with laughter. This research study was conducted as a result of this experience. Why do Nigerian students in the field of education find the proposition of daily reading with young children to be humorous? If education students do not understand the importance of reading meaningful texts, a core principle in early literacy development, then it is quite likely that they have a very poor overall understanding of literacy development. Indeed, there is little empirical understanding of teachers' knowledge of literacy development (Cunningham, Zibulsky, Stanovich, & Stanovich, 2009). Because of the importance of knowledgeable teachers, particularly in the field of literacy, this study will examine teachers' beliefs in regards to emergent literacy, oral language, meaningful reading, and skill drills.

Research questions

The purpose of teacher training is to prepare individuals to become high quality teachers. Therefore, teachers with higher levels of education should have a more advanced understanding of literacy development than the pre-service teachers who are just beginning their formal teacher training programs. The first research question examined whether educational level has a significant effect on teachers' beliefs of literacy development. Second, it would also be expected that more experienced teachers would have a better understanding of literacy development, so the second research question asked if there is a significant effect of teaching experience on teachers' beliefs of literacy development.

Participants were asked to indicate their agreement to statements about the four areas of literacy development previously identified: emergent literacy, oral language, meaningful reading, and skill drills. An accurate understanding of literacy development based on research would include strong agreement with statements in regards to emergent literacy, oral language, and meaningful reading as well as low agreement with statements on skill drills. The third research question asked if there were significant differences in the mean scores on these four literacy development variables.

The fourth research question examined teachers' beliefs in regards to emergent literacy in greater detail. Participants were asked force-choice questions about whether their beliefs of literacy development aligned with an outdated maturational perspective or an empirically supported emergent literacy perspective. In addition to the forced-choice

questions, an open-ended question asked participants to list reading skills that children can learn at a young age.

The final research question examined teachers' beliefs in regards to meaningful reading in greater detail. Again, participants were asked forced-choice questions about whether their beliefs of literacy development aligned with learning to read in the context of meaningful, authentic books or with drills on reading-related skills. In addition to the forced-choice questions, two open-ended questions were related to the barriers that Nigerian teachers face in using meaningful reading materials in the classroom.

Methods

Participants

All participants selected for this study resided in the middle-belt of Nigeria. Two samples were obtained. The first sample included 42 practicing teachers. These teachers attended a four-week in-service training workshop on general teaching skills that culminated in earning a certificate from a university. (The workshop was unrelated to literacy development.) In this sample, 83% taught at government schools and 7% taught at private schools (10% did not respond). In terms of qualification, 41% earned a National Certificate of Education (the basic qualification for teaching at primary school), 27% completed a university bachelor's degree, and 31% earned a postgraduate degree. The mean number of years taught was 10.6 years (SD=6.2 years).

The second sample consisted of 171 pre-service teachers who were in their first year of teacher training at the university. Three different questionnaires, one of which was the questionnaire for this study, were randomly distributed as course credit to the 550 students enrolled a general education course. Because students randomly received different questionnaires, the participants in this study represent a random selection of all students enrolled in this course. Of the pre-service teachers, 13% taught before attending university, with an average of 2.7 years of teaching experience (SD=3.80 years). The gender and age of the two samples are described in Table 1.

Instrument

All participants completed a questionnaire to assess their beliefs of literacy development in the following four areas: emergent literacy, oral language, meaningful reading, and skill drills. In the questionnaire, participants were asked to think about how young children in nursery and the first three primary grades initially learn to read. In the first section, participants were asked to indicate their agreement to 18 statements on their literacy development beliefs on a six-point Likert scale. Three statements assessed emergent literacy,

Table 1. Demographics of the Samples.

	Teachers (N=42)	Pre-Service (N=171)
Gender		
Male	48%	51%
Female	36%	46%
No Response	17%	3%
Mean Age (in years)	38.44 (7.87)	22.58 (2.61)

six assessed oral language, four for meaningful reading, and five for skill drills. An example emergent literacy item was “Before entering school, a child can learn reading skills like letters and awareness of books.” An example oral language item was “Parents can help a young child learn to read by talking to them and asking questions.” An example meaningful reading item was “Teachers should give pupils class time to read books that are not part of the curriculum.” An example skill drills item was “Children learn to read best by doing drills on identifying letters and words.”

The second section of the questionnaire focused more in depth on participants’ beliefs toward emergent literacy and meaningful reading. Two opposing methods of teaching literacy were described and participants were asked to indicate which strategy they felt would be most effective for teaching pupils how to read. Three items focused on an emergent perspective of literacy versus a maturation perspective and three additional items focused on meaningful reading verses skill drills perspective. An example question for meaningful reading was, “If you have ten minutes of extra class time, would it be better to: A) read a storybook out loud or B) recite vocabulary words and their definitions.”

The questionnaire also asked three open-ended questions. In regards to emergent literacy, participants were asked to list a few skills that children can learn before entering school. In regards to reading, participants were asked to indicate whether they read stories out loud to their class and whether they give their pupils time to silently read books that are not part of the curriculum. (Pre-service teachers were asked whether teachers *should* read out loud and allow time for silent reading.) After each question, participants could tick five reasons why they might not read aloud or allow pupils to silently read. These five reasons

were based on responses of pilot study data. Participants were also given space to indicate other reasons.

Procedure

For the teacher sample, the questionnaire was distributed on the second day of the last week of the in-service training. Teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire and return it by the end of the week. The questionnaire was given to pre-service teachers for course credit. At the end of a class session, the instructor gave directions for the questionnaire and class representatives distributed the questionnaire to the students. The questionnaires were returned to the instructor within three weeks.

Results

Mean Differences in Literacy Development Beliefs

The first research question examined whether educational level has a significant effect on teachers' beliefs of literacy development. To this end, participants were classified according to their educational qualifications. At the lowest level was the pre-service teacher sample with education students who were in the first year of their formal teacher training. Next, teachers in the sample who attended the in-service training were divided into three categories: those with a National Certificate in Education (a three year program that qualifies to teach primary school), a bachelor's degree in education, and a post-graduate diploma or degree. Mean scores of agreement to the four literacy development variables (emergent literacy, oral language, meaningful reading, and skill drills) were entered as dependent variables into four separate one-way ANOVAs. None of the ANOVAs were significant ($F(3,209) = 1.07$, 0.21, 0.79, and 0.74 respectively). Contrary to expectation, education did not have a significant impact on teachers' beliefs of literacy development. Teachers who have higher educational degrees have the same beliefs of literacy development as individuals who are just beginning their educational training.

The second research question asked if there was a significant effect of teaching experience on teachers' beliefs of literacy development. For the in-service teacher sample, four separate correlations were calculated between years of teaching experience and the four literacy development beliefs variables. There were no significant correlations between years of teaching experience and beliefs of literacy development ($r = -.20$, -.04, -.06, and -.07; $t(39) = -1.27$, -0.25, -0.35, and -0.46 for oral language, emergent literacy, meaningful reading, and skill drills respectively). Therefore, there is no significant relationship between teaching experience and literacy beliefs for the practicing teachers.

Of the students in the pre-service teaching sample, 13% indicated that they had previous teaching experience. Four separate t-tests were calculated with teaching experience (yes or no) as the independent variable and each of the four reading belief variables as dependent variables. None of the t-tests were significant ($t(160) = -0.37$, 1.25, 0.22, and 0.74 for oral language, emergent literacy, meaningful reading, and skill drills respectively), indicating no effect of teaching experience on pre-service teachers' beliefs of literacy development.

The third research question asked if there were significant differences in the mean scores on the four literacy development variables. Mean scores for agreement toward the four literacy development belief variables were entered into a one-way, repeated measures ANOVA. A significant difference between beliefs was found ($F(3,636) = 83.99$, $p < .0001$). Follow-up analyses compared the mean scores using Tukey's HSD ($\alpha < .05$). Oral language and skill drills had the highest average agreement with no significant differences between them (see Figure 1 for mean scores). Emergent literacy was significantly lower than both oral language and skill drills and meaningful reading was significantly lower than the other three variables. In other words, participants had the strongest agreement with statements regarding skill drills, that children learn to read most effectively by doing drills on reading skills, and oral language, that children need to have good oral language skills before they can learn to read. Participants had the lowest agreement with statements regarding meaningful reading, so they had low agreement that teachers should allow for reading meaningful texts that are not part of the curriculum to foster literacy development.

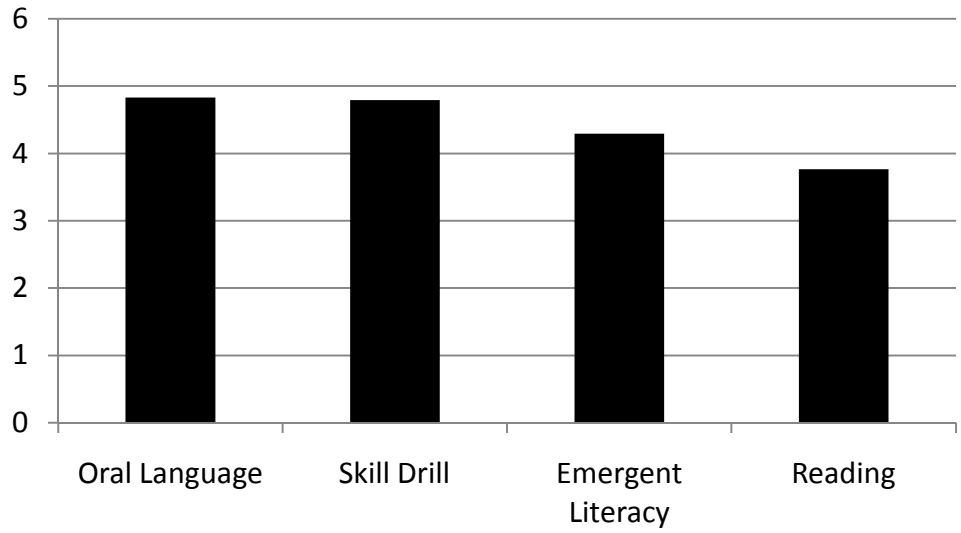

Figure 1. Mean agreement with literacy beliefs on a six-point Likert scale.

Emergent Literacy

The fourth research question asked what teachers believe about emergent literacy. Three questions in the forced choice section of the questionnaire asked teachers about their beliefs of emergent literacy. Two of these questions asked whether children can learn beginning literacy skills at a young age or whether children can only learn to read when they are mature enough. Both pre-service and in-service teachers similarly believed in an emergent literacy perspective (81.6% of the combined samples agreeing that children can learn reading skills before "entering formal schooling" and 91.1% agreed before "mature enough"). However, participants were not clear on the specific literacy skills that children can learn before entering formal schooling. Indeed, on the third emergent literacy forced-choice item, most participants believed that reading books out loud will only benefit children who are mature enough to learn how to read (73.1%).

An open-ended question asked teachers to list reading skills that children can learn at a young age. Six emergent literacy skills commonly cited in the literature include vocabulary, print concepts, alphabet, phonemic awareness, familiarity with narratives, and interest in reading. Figure 2 lists the frequency with which participants listed skills related to these six aspects of emergent literacy. Participants were well informed about the importance of learning the alphabet. However, participants were largely unaware of the other five key emergent literacy skills. Indeed, the terminology of the other five emergent literacy skills was never used, indicating low familiarity even among those who were counted as identifying these skills. Most of the responses categorized as *vocabulary* included "identify object" or "identify animals," *print concepts* were mostly "be aware of book," *phonemic awareness* was typically "assign letters to words" (as in A is Apple), *familiarity with narratives* was "tell stories," and *interest in reading* was "reading attitude."

Many of the most frequently listed "reading skills" had marginal relevance to emergent literacy development, as can be seen from Figure 3. The second most frequently listed reading skill – after knowing the alphabet – was knowledge of numbers, or knowing how to count. Identifying colors was also listed by a number of pre-service teachers. Indeed, one participant even indicated that knowledge of states and capitals as a pre-reading skill! Other skills related to reading, but rarely identified as emergent literacy skills in the research literature, included pronunciation of words and letters, sight words, speaking, listening, and reciting poems.

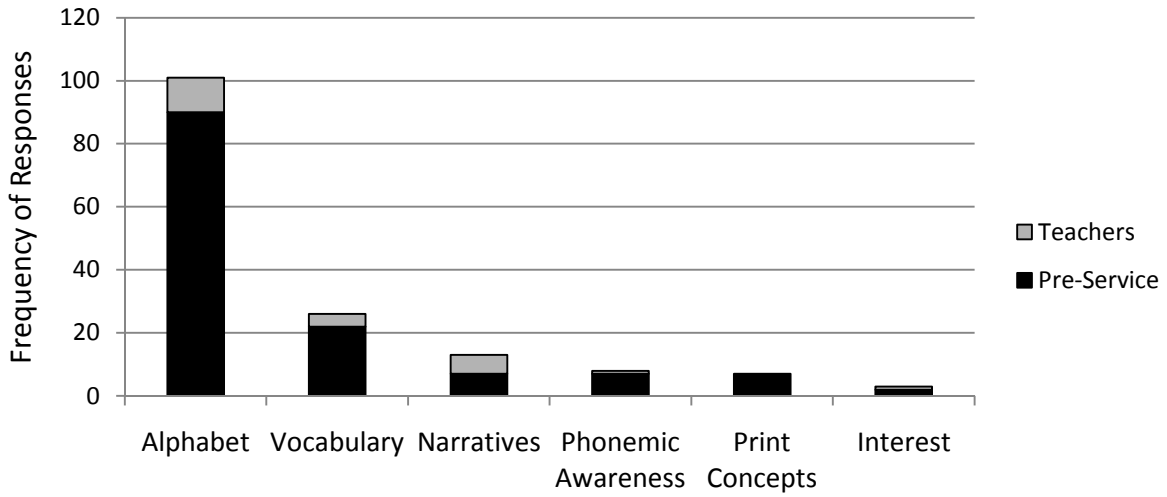

Figure 2. Frequency of emergent literacy skills listed by participants.

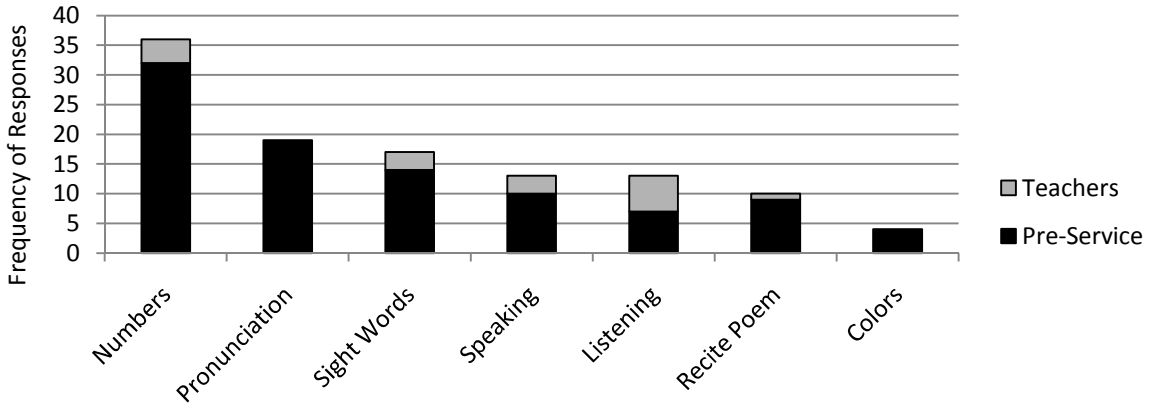

Figure 3. Frequency of other skills listed as emergent literacy skills.

Meaningful Reading

The final research question examined participants' beliefs of meaningful reading in greater detail. Three questions in the forced-choice section inquired about meaningful reading. Approximately half of both pre-service teachers and practicing teachers believed in the effectiveness of reading meaningful texts. With both samples combined, 52.6% stated that most class time should be spent giving children time to practice reading various texts while 47.4% stated that this time was best spent teaching reading skills. Likewise, 58.6% agreed that an extra 10 minutes of class time would be best spent reading a storybook aloud while the remaining 41.4% believed this time would be better spent reciting vocabulary words and their definitions. However, the remaining question had substantial differences between the

two samples. Only 31.0% of the practicing teachers believed that the best way for children to learn to read is for children to practice reading meaningful books. The remaining 69.0% believed that the best way for children to learn to read is to be drilled on the skills necessary for reading. On the other hand, the pre-service teachers were equally divided on this question (50.3% for meaningful reading and 49.7% for skill drills).

Participants were also asked whether a teacher should read stories out loud to their class. Both samples were in favor of reading aloud (79.4%). When asked to tick reasons why teachers might not read out loud, the two biggest reasons were that there were no reading materials available (48.8%) and there was no class time available to read out loud (42.3%). On the other hand, the majority of the teachers believed that teachers should *not* give their pupils time to silently read books that are not part of the curriculum (54.1% for pre-service teachers and 62.2% for practicing teachers). The two reasons most frequently ticked for not giving students time to silently read also included no class time available for silent reading (50.2%) and no reading materials available (43.2%). The next most frequent reason was that silent reading does not help children learn how to read (39.9%), and that students are not interested in silently reading (33.8%). Frequently cited open-ended responses included that not all children can read well enough to silently read (N=11), children might not understand what they are reading if they read silently (N=11), children might fall asleep (N=8), children might not know how to pronounce the words that are silently read (N=5), the teacher will not be able to assess reading levels (N=5), and the teacher cannot correct pronunciation mistakes (N=4).

Discussion

This study found that Nigerian teachers have a mix of beliefs regarding early literacy development, some accurate beliefs and other inaccurate beliefs. The teachers sampled in this study were accurate in their agreement about the importance of oral language. Indeed, with the lack of materials often available for early childhood educators in Nigerian classrooms, instruction focused on oral language may be one of the most successful and cost-effective ways of improving early literacy skills. The four instructional strategies previously mentioned – songs, rhymes, and word play; storytelling; circle time; and dramatic play (Roskos et al., 2009) – are relatively easily to implement and require few instructional materials. However, agreeing to the importance of oral language in literacy development is different from having the expertise to effectively teach oral language skills. Additional research needs to be conducted to determine how well early childhood education teachers use instructional strategies that promote oral language in the classroom. Particularly in Africa where high

quality reading materials are oftentimes scarce, early childhood teachers need to be well trained in teaching strategies that foster oral language.

Likewise, Nigerian teachers accurately reported that children can learn emergent literacy skills at a young age. However, teachers did not have a clear understanding of important emergent literacy skills except for the alphabet. In order to effectively teach emergent literacy skills, early childhood teachers must know which skills lay the foundation for literacy acquisition. Both pre-service and practicing teachers need to be educated about the importance of expanding young children's vocabulary, engaging in storytelling activities to improve children's familiarity with narratives, helping children identify the sounds within words, understanding the basic concepts of print, and developing an interest in reading. In addition to simply knowing these skills, teachers also need to be trained in instructional strategies that effectively foster these skills. That teachers do not know key emergent literacy skills is likely an issue of poor teacher training. Teacher training programs should provide better instruction about the emergent literacy skills that children can develop before formally learning how to decode text.

Nigerian teachers are also quite unaware of the importance of reading meaningful texts to children. Specifically, teachers did not believe that children should be read to before they can read themselves. Furthermore, teachers indicated that children should not have opportunities to silently read meaningful books in the classroom. Part of the reason why teachers did not have accurate beliefs about meaningful reading is likely a lack of available, relevant picture books. The author visited the major bookstores in the state's capital city and could only find a handful of picture books written for beginning readers, and all of those books were produced in the United Kingdom. Teachers could not possibly understand the importance of reading meaningful texts if these texts do not exist. Therefore, literacy experts in Nigeria should focus on developing culturally-relevant and appealing picture books for beginning readers. Nigerians have a wealth of oral tales that are both engaging and provide valuable life lessons. These oral tales should be restructured into picture books for young children to promote early literacy.

However, a lack of reading materials is not the only potential reason why teachers reported that meaningful reading is not important for literacy development. A surprising number of teachers indicated that silently reading does not help children learn how to read and that young children are not interested in silently reading. This also reflects a poor understanding of literacy development and must be rectified through effective teacher training. Furthermore, teachers indicated that they do not have time to engage in instructional

activities that are not part of the curriculum. Therefore, curriculum writers must provide meaningful and interesting texts in their materials.

Many of the sampled teachers believed that drills on reading skills were more effective in teaching literacy than experience in reading authentic books. Indeed, best practices in literacy instruction dictate a balanced approach with both direct instruction of reading skills and experience reading authentic books (Tompkins, 2011). However, few literacy experts would advocate using the rote drills that many of these teachers appear to be using in their classroom. Instead, direct instruction of reading skills is typically most effective when taught in the context of reading authentic books, such as explicit instruction of unfamiliar vocabulary words in the literature that the student is reading (Morrow & Asbury, 2003). Teacher training programs and in-service professional development workshops need to provide instruction in using a balanced approach to literacy instruction and present effective modeling of successful literacy instruction (Powell, Diamond, Burchinal, & Koehler, 2010).

The National Reading Panel (2000) highlighted that literacy is a composite of the following five key skills: phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Based on the current study, a tentative conclusion can be made that the Nigerian teachers sampled in this study have a unidimensional perspective on literacy development, whereby literacy consists only in the ability to pronounce words in text. For example, 80.3% of the sample indicated agreement to the statement, “Children who can successfully read words will understand what they read.” Furthermore, many teachers identified the reading skills of identifying sight words and pronunciation of words but did not identify other reading skills such as comprehension and phonics. Few teachers also identified the skills of vocabulary and phonological awareness. Teacher training also needs to expand teachers’ beliefs of literacy development to include a multidimensional perspective whereby skilled literacy includes multiple skills.

One of the surprising outcomes of this study was that participants’ level of education had no effect on beliefs of literacy development: teachers with a post-graduate degree had the same beliefs of literacy development as students who are just beginning their teacher training programs. This finding provides strong evidence that teacher training programs are not effectively instructing education students in the domain of literacy development. For young children to successfully learn how to read, their teachers must have a solid understanding of literacy development. For teachers to have a solid understanding of literacy development, their teacher training programs must provide effective instruction about these topics. Indeed,

other researchers have concluded that professional development is desperately needed in Africa to increase teachers' knowledge about literacy development and skills in teaching early literacy (e.g., Nguyen, Wu, & Gillis, 2005).

Conclusion

The Nigerian teachers sampled in this study generally had outdated beliefs about literacy development, focusing more on drills of isolated reading skills than on authentic reading experiences with meaningful literature. Two significant changes must be made to improve the literacy development of young children in Nigeria. First, teacher training programs must improve the quality of instruction for pre-service teachers, particularly in the domain of literacy development. In-service professional development workshops need to be conducted to improve practicing teachers' knowledge and skills. Teachers must have a better understanding about emergent literacy skills, the skills necessary for children to be competent readers, instructional practices for fostering oral language skills, and the importance of reading meaningful texts. Research shows that effective teacher education results in better literacy among students (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Second, authentic, meaningful, and appealing picture books must be developed and produced for beginning readers in Nigeria. Without meaningful texts, young children will not have the opportunity to practice their reading skills. Furthermore, children cannot develop an interest in learning how to read and understand the relevance of reading if they are not exposed to interesting and meaningful literature. Curriculum developers must also improve the quality of literature in the textbooks produced for young children.

Literacy is a fundamental human right (UNESCO, 2006). However, learning how to read is a difficult endeavor that requires competent instructors. This study provided evidence that primary school teachers in Nigeria need additional professional development to improve their beliefs about literacy development so they can be more effective literacy instructors. Only competent, well trained teachers will help Nigeria's children develop a high level of literacy that is necessary for being effective in today's world.

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