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## **TAKE HOME READ-ALoud PROJECTS: A FOUNDATION FOR HIGHER ORDER ENGAGEMENT AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AMONG ECD LEARNERS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose of the Study:** The study was purposed to assess the extent to which take-home reading aloud projects promote Early Childhood Development (ECD) children's higher order engagement and literacy development.

**Research Methodology:** The study followed a phenomenological approach, which emphasizes understanding experiences from the participants' perspectives (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Interviews, observations, documentary reviews and audio-visual methods and techniques were adopted in data collection. For that matter, data was analyzed qualitatively and reported accordingly.

**Findings and Discussions:** Key findings revealed that children, whose reading background had been recorded before the project, were observed after the 12 weeks and indicated improvement in reading fluency (speed and accuracy), interpretation of text and comprehension.

In addition, children improved in their communication skills, relationships with their parents, being more independent thinkers than before, exhibiting improvement in observation skills, exhibiting love for reading materials, showing interest in reading, and concentration as well as positive discipline in handling reading materials; being able to return and borrow more books from the school library.

**Conclusion:** The study results were used to conclude that home reading aloud projects contribute to improving children's comprehension skills, which are crucial for children's future academic success.

**Recommendations:** schools should assign parents the role of listening and reading to their children as a strategic collaboration endeavor to improve children's comprehension.

**Keywords:** *Questions of Lower, Higher Level, Thinking Skills and Read-Aloud Stories*

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## INTRODUCTION

The historical background of assessing the impact of engaging children in questions of lower to higher-level thinking skills through read-aloud stories reveals a rich tapestry (needlepoint) of educational research across various countries. In the United States, for example, early studies in the mid-20th century by educational psychologists like Benjamin Bloom, who developed Bloom's Taxonomy, laid the groundwork for understanding cognitive skill development through progressive questioning. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, educational reforms and studies in the 1960s and 1970s emphasized the importance of interactive reading and critical thinking in primary education. More recently, countries like Australia and Canada have conducted extensive research on this topic. For example, Australian studies have focused on the role of read-aloud in improving literacy and critical thinking skills in ECD. In Canada, researchers have explored how interactive read-aloud can support diverse linguistic and cognitive development among young learners. These studies collectively highlight the global recognition of read-aloud as a powerful tool for enhancing children's cognitive skills through structured questioning (Smith and Brown, 2015).

The above historical background, therefore, justifies assessing the impact of engaging children in questions of lower to higher-level thinking skills through read-aloud stories as crucial for understanding cognitive development and educational outcomes. This approach leverages the interactive nature of read-aloud sessions to stimulate various cognitive processes. By progressively posing questions that range from basic recall to more complex analysis and synthesis, educators can foster critical thinking, comprehension and inferential skills in children. This method not only enhances literacy but also encourages children to think deeply and critically about the content, promoting more robust intellectual growth. Research indicates that such interactive and tiered questioning can significantly improve children's ability to understand and engage with texts, thereby supporting their overall academic development (Peterson and French, 2008).

As a result, the importance of reading to young children and its impact on their cognitive and language development cannot be underestimated. This paper defines key concepts like Bloom's Taxonomy, Early Childhood Development (ECD), comprehension, and various types of variables. The paper, then delves into the benefits of reading aloud to children, explaining how it enhances cognitive skills, provides background knowledge about the world and how children make sense of their experiences. It cites research showing that reading stimulates brain cell activity and

strengthens neural connections in young children, contributing to their overall cognitive development and perception of their environment.

The paper further emphasizes the role of reading in language acquisition and academic success. Reading aloud to children from infancy helps develop their literacy, communication and social skills. -It exposes children to more formal and descriptive language found in books, which differs from everyday speech. Further, the paper highlights how early reading experiences correlate with brain activation in areas related to visual imagery and language comprehension. At the same time, , it stresses that children who have stronger language skills upon entering kindergarten are better prepared for reading and academic success, with a higher likelihood of graduating from high school. The write-up underscores the importance of the one-on-one interaction between parent and child during reading-aloud sessions, which fosters listening skills and attention span, as crucial factors for future academic achievement in the life of a growing child.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Children face numerous challenges in reading, including limited exposure to books, speech and hearing problems, as well as poor phonemic awareness with comprehension being the most significant hurdle. This encompasses difficulties in understanding words, phrases and connecting ideas in passages, as well as maintaining focus while reading. Studies show that approximately 85% of children diagnosed with learning difficulties primarily struggle with reading and related language skills. Comprehension and retention require high-level cognitive abilities, such as memory and the ability to group and retrieve related ideas. This study aimed to investigate the impact of engaging children in oral questions ranging from lower to higher-level thinking skills through read-aloud stories. The research sought to determine differences between children who were routinely read to and answered low and high order questions and those who were not exposed to the same experiences, the effects of post-story questioning on comprehension and retention, the application of story content to personal experiences, changes in children's responses when questions were introduced and the impact on parent-child relationships. The arrangement involved teachers, parents and children working together in the process of assessing the outcome of read-aloud stories in preparing lifelong learners through structured read-aloud home-project, where children read stories and answered questions to enhance comprehension and memory retention.

Purpose: The study was purposed to assess how the innovative approach- of take-home reading-aloud projects involving low and high order questions would enhance children's cognitive, social and interactive skills. Replicable best practices and successful models would be recommended for use in different educational settings.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The study was intended to:-

- i. Examine the difference between the children that were routinely read to stories and those that were not.
- ii. Assess whether engaging in oral questions about the story after reading it improves the children's comprehension and retention, the ability to recall and summarise what was read.
- iii. Assess whether children apply the content of the text read to them into their personal experiences.
- iv. Examine whether there is a stronger relationship between parent and child for those - who engaged in take-home read-aloud project than those who did not.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Reading to children has long been considered an essential practice for promoting language development, cognitive skills and emotional bonding. This literature review examines the differences between children who were routinely read to stories by their parents and those who were not, exploring the impacts on various developmental domains. Studies consistently highlight significant benefits in language acquisition, academic performance, and social-emotional development for children who experience regular story reading.

Available literature, therefore, reveals the importance of early reading and its impact on children's cognitive development. It begins by outlining five essential early reading skills identified by the University of Michigan namely; phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, reading comprehension and fluency. It also emphasizes that while children may not fully engage with all these skills in infancy, early exposure to reading sets the foundation for future success (PBS, 2023). In agreement, there is also literature which highlights the work of Trelease (2013), who asserts that reading aloud to children enhances literacy skills, vocabulary development and overall

academic success, while also strengthening the emotional bond between parent and child. Previous studies still note that reading aloud can provide opportunities for meaningful discussions and enhance critical thinking skills (Facione, Facione & Giancarlo, 2000).

Relatedly, some scholars shed light on the broader benefits of reading to young children in that regular reading time can improve concentration and discipline, as children learn to sit still and focus for longer periods (Jim and Cyndi, 2019; Corneal, 2023). In addition, the role of reading to stimulate imagination and creativity, allowing children to explore new worlds and ideas beyond their immediate experiences has been reported on by some researchers and scholars (Mayer, 2002). Furthermore, some studies have reported on how reading aloud can cultivate a lifelong love of reading by associating books with pleasure and excitement (Jim, 2019). Available previous study findings also make a connection between reading and pleasure which is crucial for success later in life, as it fosters a commitment to lifelong learning. It also mentions that combining critical reading skills with reading aloud can be particularly beneficial for developing critical thinking skills (Facione et al., 2000). The major gap in the previous studies, however, is being silent about the deliberate initiative of parents' involvement in the take home-read aloud projects, which this current study clearly does.

In another development, it is important to note that several studies have demonstrated that children who are routinely read to exhibit superior vocabulary and language skills compared to their peers who are not. For instance, Mol et al. (2008) conducted a meta-analysis revealing that early exposure to reading aloud significantly enhances children's receptive and expressive vocabulary. Similarly, Raikes et al. (2006) found that frequent shared reading interactions are positively correlated with advanced language comprehension and production abilities in young children. The major gap in those previous studies however, is the fact that those studies were conducted outside Uganda some years back but this current study is conducted in Uganda.

In addition, it is reported that the importance of asking questions during and after reading sessions explains how questions can range from basic recall to more complex, higher-order thinking skills (Taylor, 2023). Similar studies make reference to Bloom's Taxonomy, a framework for organizing educational goals, which includes six levels of questioning namely; remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating (Bloom, 1956). It also goes ahead to highlight that this taxonomy was later revised to make it more relevant to 21st-century learners, adding

"creating" as a new level and removing "synthesizing" (Anderson & Krathwohl 2000). Available information also emphasizes that by asking progressively more difficult questions, children can expand their thinking and perspective on a subject (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). It also notes that incorporating thought-provoking questions into instruction and assessment can enhance learners' critical thinking skills and promote meaningful learning experiences (Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001). The gap in the previous studies is failure to specify the age brackets of children and also being silent on the ECD component which this current study clearly does.

Furthermore, reading to children has been linked to enhanced cognitive development and academic achievement. In agreement, Bus, van IJzendoorn, and Pellegrini (1995) found that children who engage in regular reading sessions with their parents score higher on cognitive assessments and exhibit better problem-solving skills. Similarly, a study by Mendelsohn et al. (2001) indicated that children exposed to routine reading performed better academically, particularly in reading and mathematics, during their early school years. At the same time, it is reported that the practice of reading to children fosters a strong emotional bond between parents and children. In agreement, studies by Karrass et al. (2005) highlight that shared reading experiences promote secure attachment and emotional security. This bonding time also provides children with models for emotional regulation and empathy, as they encounter various characters and situations in stories. Surprisingly, the mentioned foregoing scholars and researchers provided experiences outside Uganda, a gap to which the current study takes advantage of.

Similarly, previous research indicates that engaging children in questions about a story after reading significantly enhances their comprehension, retention, recall, and summarization abilities. When children are prompted to discuss and reflect on the story's content, they are more likely to internalize and understand the material. This active engagement not only reinforces memory but also aids in developing critical thinking and analytical skills. In agreement, according to a study by Kendeou et al. (2005), asking post-reading questions helps children to make connections, infer meanings and remember key details, thereby, improving their overall reading comprehension and retention. This process encourages deeper cognitive processing, which is essential for long-term learning and effective summarization of the text.

Emphatically, available literature is used by scholars to report that children's ability to apply the content of a text to their personal experiences is a crucial aspect of their cognitive and emotional

development. Available research also shows that when children relate story content to their own lives, they enhance their understanding and retention of the material. This personal connection fosters a deeper engagement with the text, making the reading experience more meaningful and memorable. According to Fountas and Pinnell (2018), children who draw parallels between their experiences and the narrative are better able to grasp complex themes, develop empathy and improve their critical thinking skills. This reflective process not only aids in comprehension but also encourages children to explore and articulate their thoughts and feelings, thereby, enriching their overall learning experience. The time scope for the previous studies however, makes this current study appropriate.

Finally, some scholars have observed that there is cognitive development among young children in relation to their ability to engage with different levels of questioning. It notes that most 3-year-olds are primarily concrete thinkers, focusing on what is physically present. However, by age 4, children begin to develop more abstract thinking skills (Tomasello et al., 1999). The previous studies reveal that while younger children may struggle with more complex questions, the process of engaging with higher-level thinking through reading and questioning is valuable for their cognitive development. Overall, available literature presents a comprehensive view of how reading aloud and structured questioning can significantly contribute to a child's intellectual and emotional growth, drawing on a wide range of research and expert opinions in the field of early childhood education and cognitive development. The major gap however, remains the geographical scope which this study fills in appropriately.

More still, some scholars have also reported that children who are routinely read to, exhibit better social skills and behavioral outcomes. In agreement, a study by Duursma, Augustyn, and Zuckerman (2008) found that those children are more likely to engage in pro-social behaviors and exhibit fewer behavioral problems. The interactive nature of shared reading helps children develop social understanding and cooperation skills. The glaring gap is that those mentioned foregoing studies are silent about the deliberate and planned involvement of the parent, thence, making this current study relevant.

According to EarlyMoments.com, reading comprehension is associated with "a stronger self-discipline, longer attention span and better memory retention" (Corneal, 2023). In a related development, reading aloud also stimulates imagination and creativity, allowing children to



explore new worlds and ideas (Mayer, 2002). Furthermore, it cultivates a lifelong love of reading by associating books with pleasure (Jim, 2019). This connection between reading and pleasure is crucial for success later in life, as it encourages lifelong learning. For that matter, reading aloud presents books as valuable and exciting experiences, motivating children to read independently. Mayer (2002) argues that reading aloud is "truly the single-most important activity for building meaningful understanding and skills essential for reading success."

On the other hand, the importance of questioning during and after reading sessions is also highlighted by previous scholars and researchers. Basic recall questions serve as a foundation for children to answer higher-order questions (Taylor, 2023). Similarly, Whitehurst & Lonigan (1998) observed that asking more complicated questions helps preschoolers become self-directed thinkers. In agreement, incorporating thought-provoking questions into instruction and assessment can enhance learners' critical thinking skills (Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001). As questions become more difficult at each level, they require deeper thinking, allowing children to expand their perspectives (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

Available literature also addresses the cognitive development of young children in relation to their ability to engage with different levels of questioning. This progression in cognitive development underscores the importance of adapting questioning techniques to suit the child's developmental stage while still encouraging growth in critical thinking and comprehension skills.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The Phenomenological approach was found suitable for exploring the lived experiences of children in ECD settings (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This methodology helps to uncover the subjective experiences and meanings that children attribute to their engagement in literacy development activities. By focusing on individual perceptions and personal meanings, phenomenological research provides deeper insights into the cognitive and emotional processes that underpin higher-order engagement and literacy development in young children (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Alase, 2017).

Therefore, this study was undertaken from Bereans Early Years Foundation School, Manyangwa in Wakiso District, on (10) ten children ranging from the age of 4 years to 8years old whose reading background had been observed and recorded before. The parents of the 10 children were the



primary respondents while the teachers observed and recorded the changes in the children. The stratification of the 10 children included 6 children between 5-6 years and then 4 children between 6-7 years. Alongside the selected 10 children, there was also a group of 9 children who participated in the assessment but had not been involved before in the take home read-aloud projects, making an overall total of 19 children. The population was purposively selected to deliberately target persons who possessed the required attributes.

Consequently, the researchers conducted one-on-one and group face-to-face interview sessions to gather detailed and in-depth information from participants. At the same time, direct observation was done on participants in their natural settings to collect data on behaviors, interactions and environments. In addition, documentary analysis was conducted on existing records which included readers, children's assessment results, reports and official records relevant to the research study. Furthermore, audio-visual materials in form of photographs, videos and audio recordings were used to complement and enhance collected data. Lastly, data was analyzed qualitatively using themes and subthemes and reported accordingly as found out without any manipulations (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

### **Positionality and Impartiality**

The aspect of positionality in this research was well observed and handled in that one of the researchers from the team who worked with the same organization remained impartial at all levels of the study to ensure credibility and integrity of the research process and findings as asserted by (Drake, and Heath, 2011).

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The study was purposed to assess the impact of engaging children into lower and higher order questions to find out their levels of comprehension through read-aloud stories for development of their literacy and cognitive competences. A set of 10 books was given to the children each child subscribing to one book at a time. The books that were given to the children were 10 different titles that made 4 rounds; each child was able to read at least 4 different titles out of the 10. The books were then exchanged making sure that the set each child was able to engage with was not less than 4 books for the period of twelve weeks. The overall effort of the findings focused on the specific objectives of this study as indicated in the preliminary pages of this paper.

Key findings revealed that after engaging with the same set of questions applied in different contexts, at the end of the 12 weeks the teachers read a book to the 19 children and 12 were able to comfortably recall and sequence the events of the book page by page while 7 were able to recall parts of the story with prompts to about 50% of the whole story in terms of concrete thinking processes. In addition, out of the 19 children, 12 were able to make suggestions on problem-solving skills from concrete to abstract relationship of different variables. As a result, competences which were demonstrated included children being able to say, ‘the branch broke off because many birds sat on it.’ Among the 12 children 10 had participated in the take home read-aloud projects. At the same time, out of the 19, 10 children were able to reconstruct stories and give better alternatives and most of these children in this category were also identified as frequent borrowers of the school library books. Just like some previous scholars and researchers observed before about children’s frequent exposure to reading materials playing a very significant role in language development and communication skills in terms of significant enhancement on children’s receptive and expressive vocabulary (Mol et al., 2008).

Going forward, the findings further indicated that children were observed to improve on their respect for reading materials, shared reading, handling of reading materials, communication skills, relationship with their parents and also being more independent thinkers than before. The same results also indicated children improving on their observation skills and concentration as well as positive discipline skills. At the same time, teachers also observed that the children were able to return and borrow more books following results of the study. The creativity skills of the children were also seen in their ability to read aloud and express themselves with very good oratory skills in line with the findings of some previous scholars and researchers concerning children’s creative and critical thinking skills (Fountas and Pinnell, 2018),

Basing on the results of this study still, through applying Bloom’s Taxonomy levels of questioning, majority of the four-year-olds and some three-year-olds were reported to have understood abstract concepts comprising the higher levels of questioning, such as analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Even though not all preschoolers understood these concepts, teachers could still use Bloom’s Taxonomy to ask preschoolers higher-level questions. The results were in line with some scholars in terms of helping children to become self-directed thinkers (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). The researchers of this study are fully aware that children develop at different rates and may provide

surprising answers as they go along. These results, therefore, call for teachers and caregivers being patient with learners. Through on-going observations and assessment, effective teachers keep track of each child's activities and skills. They plan their questions to match a child's current level and encourage them to make progress.

, Likewise, the study findings underscore the potential of take-home reading-aloud projects to significantly enhance literacy and cognitive development among ECD learners. By engaging with books at home, children are exposed to a rich language environment that extends beyond the classroom. This continuous exposure helps in solidifying their understanding of narrative structures and improves their ability to recall and sequence events, a foundational skill for reading comprehension.

In addition, the ability of children to recall and sequence events with ease suggests that repeated exposure to structured reading activities can improve memory and comprehension skills. According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, children in the preoperational stage (typically ages 2 to 7) are beginning to develop memory and imagination, which are crucial for understanding and processing stories (Piaget, 1952). The improvement in the children's recall abilities indicates that take-home reading-aloud projects can effectively support this stage of cognitive development.

Furthermore, results also reported children's improvement in thinking skills than before as a result of applying high-order questions after the story. In agreement with the assertions of some prominent scholars, the ability of the children to make suggestions on problem-solving skills indicates a transition from concrete to abstract thinking. Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) suggests that children learn best when they are guided through tasks slightly above their current level of competence. In this study, results indicated that take-home reading-aloud projects provided an opportunity for such guided learning, allowing children to develop problem-solving skills by relating story events to real-life situations and abstract concepts.

### **Implications for Practice**

The results of this study have several implications for educational practice. First, educators should consider integrating take-home reading projects into their literacy programs to reinforce classroom

learning and promote higher-order thinking skills. These projects can be tailored to include books that challenge children to think critically and creatively about the given content.

Second, parents should be encouraged to actively participate in their children's reading activities at home. Parental involvement has been shown to have a positive impact on children's literacy development (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). By reading with their children and engaging them in discussions about the stories, parents can further enhance the cognitive benefits of take-home reading-aloud projects.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, engaging children in questions about lower to higher level thinking skills through read-aloud stories can provide valuable insights into effective literacy instruction as well as strategies for promoting deeper comprehension and critical thinking among learners of early years. Specifically, during read-aloud sessions, engaging children in questions that promote higher-level thinking skills can provide numerous benefits. These may include increased reading engagement and motivation, improved vocabulary development and a greater enjoyment of literature. Reading aloud to children is also believed to be critical for their development, with long-term benefits in their literacy skills development, imagination, and emotional well-being (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

Basing on the overall results of the study, therefore, ECD is a critical phase in a child's educational journey, laying the groundwork for future academic success and lifelong learning. One innovative approach to enhancing literacy and cognitive skills among young learners is the implementation of take-home reading-aloud projects. These projects not only engage children in reading activities outside the classroom but also foster higher-order thinking skills, as evidenced by the results of this study.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study demonstrates that reading aloud to children and engaging them with questions of higher-order yield significant benefits across various aspects of development. Cognitive growth and language skills can be effectively nurtured in both home and classroom environments through story reading. For that matter, read-aloud sessions enhance comprehension and retention abilities, crucial for academic success and should be considered for policy implementation. The study

revealed a strengthened bond between parents and children through routine reading, suggesting that governments and partners should provide age-appropriate home-based reading materials.

In addition, reading-aloud improves listening skills, concentration and positive discipline among children, particularly ECD learners. Extension activities associated with reading-aloud fostered increased creativity and imagination, contributing to a lifelong love for reading and preparing children for successful adult lives. These findings underscore the importance of incorporating regular read-aloud sessions and associated activities into both home and educational settings.

Further recommendations include; Integrating Take-Home Reading-Aloud Projects into ECD Curriculum: Schools and early learning centers should incorporate structured take-home reading projects as a core component of the ECD curriculum. These projects should be designed to align with classroom learning objectives that cater for different reading levels.

Engaging Parents and Caregivers: the need to encourage active involvement and participation of parents and caregivers in the take-home reading projects. Provide them with guidance on how to effectively support their children's reading activities at home, including tips for reading aloud and asking questions that promote critical thinking.

At the same time, the need for providing a variety of reading materials: there is need to ensure availability of a diverse range of reading materials to cater for different interests and reading levels of children. This can include storybooks, picture books, and interactive e-books. There is need to regularly update the reading materials to keep children engaged and motivated.

Incorporating interactive and Multimedia Elements: it is important to utilize multimedia tools and interactive elements such as audio books, educational apps, and online resources to make reading more engaging. Interactive elements can help children better understand the stories and concepts being presented.

Regular Monitoring and Feedback: there is need to implement a system for regular monitoring and assessment of children's progress in reading. To provide constructive feedback to both children and parents to help improve reading skills and address any challenges that may arise.

Promoting Higher-Order Thinking Skills: it is imperative to design take-home reading projects that include activities to foster higher-order thinking skills. These can include questions that

encourage analysis, evaluation, and creation, as well as activities that promote problem-solving and critical thinking.

**Creating a Supportive and Enabling Reading Environment:** it is important to encourage parents to create a dedicated reading space at home that is quiet, comfortable and free from distractions. A positive and supportive reading environment can significantly enhance children's engagement and learning outcomes.

**Facilitating Peer Interaction and Sharing:** there is great need to organise activities where children can share their reading experiences with peers. This can include book-sharing sessions, group discussions, and storytelling activities. Peer interaction can motivate children and provide opportunities for collaborative learning.

**Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for Educators:** there is need to provide training and professional development to teachers and other stakeholders. This can include workshops on selecting appropriate reading materials, engaging parents, and using technology to enhance reading experiences.

**Evaluating and Refining the Programme:** it is crucial to continuously evaluate the effectiveness of the take-home reading-aloud projects and make necessary adjustments based on feedback from children, parents and educators. Use data from assessments to refine the programme and ensure it meets the evolving needs of young learners, being cognizant of the dynamic world.

Finally, implementing the suggested recommendations ensures that educators and caregivers can create a comprehensive and supportive framework for early childhood literacy development, ensuring that learners of early years have the foundational skills needed for future academic success and lifelong learning.

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