

Reading Research among Children

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Abstract: *The paper centers on the place of reading research among children. It outlines the suitable research techniques that could be employed in order to elicit useful information from children as pertains to their preferences as well as difficulties in reading. This in view of the fact that diagnostic research is a cardinal prerequisite for writing wholesome books for children. The paper provides a detailed examination of the various techniques and how they can be applied for maximum results. The techniques examined include: Personal Interviews, Group Discussions, Conferencing, Use of Questionnaire, Reading and Related Assessments, Diagnostic Procedures e.g. Miscue Analysis, Cloze Procedures, Get acquainted Interviews and Self-Reports. Expert use of the above techniques can guarantee good results in eliciting useful information from children, which can go a long way in providing a healthy reading diet for them.*

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1. Methodological Approaches To Reading Research Among Children Introduction

Children are people whose minds and bodies have not yet matured in various definable ways. They are developing readers in terms of experience of life and books; they have not reached the theoretical plateau upon which mature readers can be said to operate in mature understanding. Children's books for that matter do not fit easily into the patriarchal world of literacy and cultural values. Children's literature is a truly democratic phenomenon: everyone feels that they have a voice; the negative one is that the criticism and management of the text is pulled and influenced in many directions in a way no other literature is. Children's books should be educational or influential in some way: it cannot help but reflect an ideology and by extension, didacticism. Children's writers are in a position of singular responsibility in transmitting cultural values rather than simply telling a story. Children's books are an important tool in reading education and are thus prey to a whole area of educational and psychological influences that other literatures escape. Children's literature is also defined by its audience in a way that other literatures tend not to be, as enjoyment is paramount.

Writing for children can only be done by somebody having a great deal of the child in his/her own outlook and sensibilities. The imagination of the author must be a child's imagination and yet maturely consistent. Authors ought to respect children, their reading capabilities and the efforts of those who write and illustrate for them. They ought to realize in fiction, children's innermost dreams and offer subversive, satisfying and sometimes comic solutions to their nightmares. They should create a world where the core of the text is concerned with play and where the pleasure of the text is foremost i.e. the works must give much latitude to amusement.

Children's literature more than most literatures is more susceptible of control at all stages of its production. There are three principal human beings between a story and the child: The Writer, The Editor and the Adult who makes the book available to the child. If the adult can dictate to the editor and the editor commandeers the author, then where is the child? How do authors write books that provide a benign

world hypotheses; the assertion that the world is after all despite the cruelty, greed, materialism, suffering and injustice a good place to be? That there is a moral order, a moral pattern, which we transgress at our cost? How does the story teller guide the child to the land of wonder and delight, of mystery and awareness, of acceptance or rejection of all that life can offer? What kind of stories and characters appeal to children most?

These questions must be seriously considered since literature for children concerns a segment of society in which everyone has some vested interests. Furthermore, the image people have of themselves and their relationship to the universe is conceived during their most formative years, when their character is still malleable.

2. The Place of Research in Children's Literature

The first and most cardinal prerequisite for writing good wholesome books for children is to carry out intensive study and investigation into their preferences, dislikes and the problems that they encounter. What strategies can be used to get the relevant information? What appropriate research tools could be used? How do researchers penetrate into the world of children without arousing fear and suspicion?

The aims of doing research among children are three-fold:

- Enable authors of children's books to produce wholesome books suitable for children at all levels-age and school levels.
- Help teachers and parents to extend the proficiency of average readers in ways which could be expected to lead them eventually to become effective and habitual readers. This in view of the fact that learning to read is a developmental process extending from infancy to adulthood and that its closely linked with other languages arts e.g. Speaking and writing.
- Guide adults on how to choose relevant and enjoyable books for children to read.

The Researcher

Whether the researcher is a writer, a teacher or a parent, he or she must exhibit the following traits in order to extract any useful information from children: Fondness for children,

compassion, patience, confidence, sense of humor, commitment and personal desire to see children develop in the right direction. Environment is also very crucial. The Researcher must create a comfortable setting, free from distractions, with attractive sitting arrangements. Whatever research strategies used, the Researcher must set the right mood, ask relevant questions and make personal, encouraging comments. In addition to the above, the researcher should in any interaction with the children maintain eye contact, use a normal speaking voice, mimic sounds, vary pace, accept interruptions and maintain interest- seen in the children's laughter, stillness and expressions.

The Research Strategies

The following methods have been found useful in extracting information relevant for writing good children's books, for helping teachers and parents in selecting relevant and suitable books for children and how best to boost their reading proficiency: Personal Interviews, Group Discussions, Personal Conversations with individual children(Conferencing),Use of Questionnaire, Reading and Related Assessments which include selection of a test, Phonic testing devices and Standardized Reading tests and Tests of General Intelligence (i.e. Diagnostic Procedures Miscue Analysis and Cloze Procedures).

Personal Interviews

This seems to be the most fruitful line of inquiry. It is a method where children are randomly selected and research carried out in an informal, friendly manner. The research takes the form of informal discussions in which questions are rephrased if necessary. It should be emphasized that the children are not being tested but that the interviewer is interested in their views.

The interviews can be tape-recorded to enable the interviewer concentrate on the child without making notes. The interviewer can have fifteen questions about children's reading and the reading done by their families, before probing their views on reading difficulties and their ideas on the purpose of reading. A Researcher could use the following sample of questions:

- Do you like reading or not? Why?
- Do you think you are a good reader? What makes you think that?
- Do you prefer to read quietly to yourself or do you read aloud to someone else?
- Do you read a lot at home?
- What kind of books do you read?
- Where do you get the books from?
- Do the people at home read much?
- What sort of books do they read?
- What made you choose this book? Is it a difficult book?
- Why or how is the book hard?
- Show me a difficult word. What makes it hard?
- When you are reading by yourself, if you come to a word you don't know, what do you do about it?
- Do you think children should learn how to read? Why or why not?
- Why do you think grown-ups need to be able to read?

In early 2012, a research based on children's reading preferences was carried out by the Writer. Questions similar

to the above were directed at a sample of fifty children from Amalemba Primary School and Kakamega Primary School in Kakamega County (both boys and girls and aged between nine and ten years).The results found are summarized below:

- Out of fifty children, thirty two said they liked reading easy, interesting and useful books
- Thirty eight preferred to read by themselves. This is important in aiming towards helping children to work themselves into books.
- Thirty three read more at home than at school
- A good number got books from the public libraries or bought their own. This indicates a need for schools to stock libraries with more books.
- Thirty one said their self-chosen book was harder than their reading book. The implication for teachers' part in assisting children get suitable books is obvious.
- Twenty seven emphasized hard/long words as making the book difficult and the difficult words they discussed were multi-syllable words with abstract qualities.
- Thirty five out of the fifty indicated that they asked adults to explain difficult words.
- When asked about purpose of reading books, twenty three gave to add to further learning and to help with spelling and writing and only three gave pleasure as a purpose. This shows that teachers and parents should be concerned about children's lack of emphasis on reading for enjoyment.

Group Discussions

Here the Researcher needs to listen to the child's ideas on reading, interests, attitudes and difficulties. These discussions provide diagnostic pointers which could be of great value. The discussions should be informal and the researcher must show interest in the children's views.

Personal Conversations with Individual Children (Conferencing)

Personal conversations with individual children could be based on a few questions used in the interviews or they might develop along more diagnostic lines in what is described as conferences with the children. From one reading period per week, set aside solely for four or five individual interviews or conferences would mean that each child in the class would have the researcher's or teacher's individual and uninterrupted attention at least once a term. Those in need of more help could have more frequent conferences. Conferences stimulate children because they do the work; they teach, solve problems and answer questions. This method also helps children choose topics and makes the learning task fun. It makes use of novelty and familiarity and it gives children frequent opportunities to respond through questions and answers and short assignments on demonstration of skills. Through such conferences the Researcher can gain information that would assist in making appropriate reading material for children as well as information that aid children to improve their reading.

Questionnaire

Supervision of the task of completing the questionnaire at the end of the school is undertaken by the Researcher. It relates to children's own records of books they have read during the year. Each child has to have beside him/her a record of 'Books I Have Read' or 'Books I Have Read By Myself'. The

Researcher begins by reading aloud to the kids while they followed them on their own questionnaire papers and to make sure that everyone understands the task. The children must not be helped with their written answers. Possible questions that could be included in the questionnaire include the following:

- Which books titles did you like best? What did you like about it?
- What kind (type) of books do you like best?
- Which books didn't you like very much? What did you not like about it?

The earlier mentioned research carried out by the writer yielded the following results when a questionnaire was administered to the same fifty children:

Reasons for Liking Particular Book Titles

<i>Reason</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
Attractive Title	30	23
Interesting	16	14
Exciting	11	04
Educational	16	06
Fairy Tales	04	21
Animals	03	08
Character Identification	08	09
Other Eg Poetry	12	16

It is clear from the above that most children preferred humorous books and boys preferred educational books while girls liked fairy tales.

General Book Preferences

<i>Type</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
Humorous	11	13
Adventure	29	21
Factual	31	07
Fairy TaleSS	02	13
Animals	02	06
Shorts Stories	09	18
Other(Specify)	16	22

Humorous and adventure books as can be seen top the list. This has great implications for researchers, authors of children's books and parents.

Reasons for Disliking Particular Books

<i>Reason</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
Boring/Repetitive	26	18
Easy/Babyish	33	27
Hard/Long Words	25	29
Other (E.G Small Print)	16	26

The above research provided useful information concerning children's reading g patterns. The methods discussed above when used by any researcher do indicate that valuable information on children's ideas about books can be gained if:

- A written questionnaire is undertaken by the whole class perhaps once year.

Children are encouraged to record their comments on books for others to read.

- Teachers arranged group discussions which would draw on children's general views on books and personal judgments of particular books while helping them to crystallize their own ideas and express them more fluently orally.

- There are a good supply of such books in both class and school libraries [i.e. amusing and adventure books]
- Teachers ensured that the children's free choice of books operated within a framework of books which the teacher knows are within the children's capabilities.

The results of the above methods of research would also answer the following important questions:

- Do children's criticisms reflect an inadequate supply of books within the school which cater for their expanding interests and widely dispersed reading abilities, insufficient access to the books or lack of adequate guidance in choosing books for personal reading?
- Would a simple system of grading books according to their levels of readability eliminate some of children's criticisms about the books they have read being too hard or too babyish?
- What would be the most satisfactory methods of grouping books so that those children who prefer adventure or folk tales could locate them?

Could children's views on the sort of books they like and dislike with particular reference to existing gaps in the provision of available books be elicited and acted on at the time when new books are about to be purchased or borrowed from a library service? In other words, could children of these ages be given a greater measure of responsibility for choosing appropriate replenishments for the collection of books from which they make their personal selections?

3. Reading and Related Assessments

This is another research strategy that is a pointer to children's capabilities, needs and difficulties. This strategy includes:

1. A slight vocabulary of basic words.
2. The ability to define the meaning of words.
3. Phonic skills-a new diagnostic test.
4. Standardized tests which consist of wide-span reading test and coloured progressive matrices.

In (1) above, children are asked to read aloud about 200 key words while the researcher records the number of errors made. In considering key words in isolation, the emphasis on immediate recognition inevitably centered on the child's ability to pronounce individual words, as it's only the flow of speech or text which eventually clothes these words with real meaning.

In (2) there is this recognition of the basic truth that there is a high correlation between children's knowledge of word meanings and their reading ability. The researcher could use the Crichton Vocabulary Scale. It's basically one of oral definitions and consists of two lists of isolated words arranged in order of difficulty. It is individually administered .The tests simply ask the child to explain in his or her own words the meaning of each word in turn. The child progresses through each list until he is able to go no Furth. Below is a sample test:

Researcher : Do you know what 'vanish' means?
 Child : When something vanishes
 Researcher: Yes, so what does vanish mean?
 Child : You can't see it.
 Researcher: What about the word rage?
 Child : When you are very angry.

Researcher: What about the meaning of 'cool'?

Child : It's the opposite of 'hot'. When you are just hot, but not too hot.

Researcher : What about the word 'echo'?

Child :I was walking one day and there were some hills in the background and I shouted and I heard an echo because my voice bounced back to me.

Researcher : Now Tim, I would like you to attempt the meaning of 'release'.

Child : Well, if a man had been in prison for fifteen years and the time had come for him to be released, they'd just let him go. He's a free man again.

In (3) the Researcher engages in an extensive investigation into the phonetic strengths and weaknesses of the average reader in their own classes. The areas of investigation are the children's mastery of the sounds of the letters of the alphabet and of various letter combinations and phonic rules as well as the feasibility of utilizing nonsense words as a diagnostic phonic testing device. The test can expose areas in which a child is confident and highlight those areas in which his knowledge is either doubtful or non-existent. These latter areas could then form part of the basis of a teacher's forward teaching plans for the child in question. Children's mastery of the phonic skills is assessed by the following tests:

- The common sounds of the letters of the alphabet in the different positions in words which they usually occupy
- Blending sounds together in simple three letter words
- Combining together in a word pattern, two and three syllables
- Phonic rules to which there are a few exceptions e.g. pronunciation of ee,ing or ph.
- Rules which although they have certain exceptions, are nevertheless in fairly common use e.g. the rule that a silent e at the end of a monosyllabic word such as 'cake' often causes the preceding vowel to have its long sound(i.e. the vowel a).

Standardized Tests require a child to complete each of a given number of sentences and always having the last word omitted by choosing one of the five words listed and underlined at the end of each sentence.

An example of a test of General Intelligence is the Coloured Progressive Matrices. It's a pattern perception test and is intended to indicate a child's present capacity for intellectual capacity irrespective of his/her acquired knowledge. It's a standardized test and the results are expressed as percentiles accompanied by classification into five grades of intellectual ability. Research findings from the above tests could have obvious implications for all concerned with children's development. The actual errors made by each child in the Key Words to Literacy could be noted and arrangements made for practice and constant review till children have not the slightest hesitation in recognizing every word. This will lead to fluency in reading. Concerning word meanings, teachers, researchers and parents could be forced to increase the activities which extend children's vocabulary. This would greatly benefit children with poor verbal fluency. Teachers could also collect and use new and exciting words which will lead to improving children's spoken and written language. Standardized reading tests provide a measure of the teacher's achievement in relation to the expected development.

4. Diagnostic Procedures

There are other diagnostic procedures that can be administered to children. These help in observing methods by which children overcome their 'fixed' obstacles.

The Miscue Analysis

Here a fairly difficult passage is selected for oral reading to tax the child's decoding skills. A tape recorder (one cassette per child) is set up and the child is asked to read the passage in the following terms:

"I would like you to read the story for me.I am not going to help you on the hard words unless you are really stuck. The story is about....(Give brief contextual information).We are going to tape-record your reading, so please say your name onto the tape". The miscues are then coded on to a script of the passage according to the following keys:

Non-Response: Teacher had to supply word finally

Hesitation: Pause before word which was eventually supplied by the child.

Repetition: Repetition of word or phrase

Substitution : Substitution of one word by another

Reversal: reversal of word or phrase. Count reversal of whole line as one reversal

Omission: Word of original omitted in reading/word inserted not present in original

Self-correction: Any of the above miscues may be subsequently corrected by reader. This will count both as miscue and self-correction. The above information can then be put in a grid, for example:

Non-Response Hesitation Repetition Substitution Reversal Omission Self-correction.

5. The Cloze Procedure

This is a technique based on the human tendency to complete an incomplete pattern or sequence. Thus if a word is omitted from a sentence, the reader attempts to supply the word to complete the meaning. The cloze experiment is devised in order to find out how far children are successful when forced into using syntactical and semantic clues. Deletions in cloze procedures can be made on a regular basis of every 5th, 7th or 10th word, depending on the age of the child. The younger the kids, the further apart the deletion intervals. Cloze procedures force children to use contextual clues. It should be noted that functionally correct answers can yield as much information as exactly correct responses. The experiment is best used on group organized basis where discussion among children can precede the completions. They may thus become aware of different ways of reasoning to reach a common goal and vocabulary may be extended through shared experience. The Researcher could also encourage increased reflection-the core of understanding by discussing with an individual group why certain words were suggested. Children may be helped towards an awareness of the variety of language used in different types of writing. For example, in scientific texts, original words are used while in imaginative writing, more open-ended responses are acceptable. Both miscue analysis and cloze procedure stem from the same theory of reading-the belief that children should be using all levels of language, even in the early

stages of learning to read, and that they can be given structured help in doing so.

Assessing Interests by Observing Children's Play

Another effective method of getting information from children is by observing their play and interacting with them and in small groups. Through their play a researcher can get the following information:

- What things or play elements give them the most pleasure
- Common themes highlighted in their play
- What values are admired and emphasized
- Type of language they use

Get Acquainted Interviews

Here, the researcher has a child ask a peer question about himself/herself e.g. favorite music, books, T.V programs e.t.c. The responses are then recorded and shared with others in the same group.

Self-Reports

These can either take the form of stories or pictures. The children are asked to focus on a theme as they write or draw. For example, a group of children could be given a topic such as 'My Favorite Books' or 'Why I Like Reading'. The children are then invited to share their stories and pictures with the class. Importantly, the Researcher must celebrate and appreciate the children's diversity. The children could also be encouraged to display stories and pictures on a bulletin board or wall.

6. Conclusion

All the methods described above are valuable strategies of gaining information from children concerning their reading and writing skills. The diagnostic approaches are a pointer to the difficulties encountered and the structuring of therapeutic measures. It should be noted that some important factors such as age, school level and gender must be put into consideration when selecting the samples. In all the methods, the creating of a good, friendly atmosphere is paramount if the children are to freely give information.

In summary, the key research methods discussed in this paper entail the following:

- Children reading aloud a few pages from a self-chosen book
- Discussions with the children of the books, reasons why they were chosen, the child's particular interests and hobbies related to books and how he/she sets about finding books which interest him or her.
- The children's comprehension of what they are reading-not just mere reading
- Checking whether or not they recognize the first 200 key words to literacy.
- Administering diagnostic tests of their phonic competencies.
- Vocabulary extension in the context of their reading.
- Carrying out miscue analysis of the errors they make in oral reading with a view to discovering the strategies they are using
- Encouraging the children to use their knowledge of the meaning of words, the sense of phrases and sentences and the normal grammatical structure of the English prose to

provide cues to words or phrases they don't recognize.

- Keeping notes, records, tape recordings of the sessions and thereby gradually building up a comprehensive file of their reading and it's progress.
- Examining and discovering with the children the record of books they have read in the preceding few weeks and comments, reviews they may have written.
- Employing of acquaintance strategies and personal interviews both of which are valuable strategies of gaining valuable information from children.

No author can write a good children's book without carrying out intensive research on children's likes and dislikes. The carrying out of research or the lack of it is behind the presence of good and bad children's books'. A good children's book must be simple, written within the child's theoretical plateau, must be interesting and must transmit moral and cultural values to the children. Research is therefore a prerequisite to producing good and relevant literature for children. Research is also a useful tool whose results guide teachers and parents on how best to assist children develop a reading culture that will lead to reading and writing proficiency. The results of a well carried out research can also guide adults on how to choose relevant books for their children.

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