

Literacy Cooperatives: Sharing Culturally-Relevant Literacy Materials and Best Practices amongst Early Childhood Educators in Nigeria

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Background

Repeated Interactive Read Aloud is an evidence-based literacy strategy that has been found to increase children's reading comprehension skills. However, this strategy is rarely used in Nigerian early childhood classrooms due to lack of available storybooks and training on the role of reading aloud in literacy development. In Nigeria, a common approach for overcoming the challenge of scarce resources is a cooperative, which is a democratically controlled organization where members voluntarily contribute assets to meet specific needs. This solution of a cooperative can be applied to the challenges of scarce reading materials and the need for contextually-relevant teacher training in Repeated Interactive Read Aloud. This project originated the concept of a Literacy Cooperative in two phases. In the first phase, a Literacy Cooperative was piloted and its feasibility and perceived impact were evaluated based primarily on focus group discussions. In the second phase, the impact of participating in a Literacy Cooperative on teachers' knowledge and literacy instructional strategies as well as pupils' reading motivation were evaluated. In the main study, three Literacy Cooperatives met every other week for two academic terms (totaling 12 meetings) to rotate culturally-relevant storybooks and receive training on using Repeated Interactive Read Alouds for improving reading skills.

Literacy Cooperatives

Cooperatives are democratically controlled organizations whereby members voluntarily contribute assets to meet specific needs. Typically, cooperative members also meet regularly to learn about and discuss topics of shared interest. The contextually-relevant practice of a cooperative can be applied to the education sector to overcome the challenge of scarce reading materials and the need for contextually-relevant teacher training in repeated interactive read alouds. The purpose of a Literacy Cooperative is to empower teachers to use reading aloud as an effective tool for literacy instruction. The Literacy Cooperative did this by providing educators with both the materials (storybooks) and training needed for reading aloud to achieve the positive reading outcomes identified in the research literature described above.

In our study, each Literacy Cooperative typically included 11 educators and one Literacy Coach, totaling a group of 12. Members in the Literacy Cooperative met every other Friday for about 90 minutes. Each Literacy Cooperative received two culturally-relevant storybooks per member of the group (e.g., a group of 12 would have 24 storybooks). At the first meeting, each member received two books. The storybooks were then rotated at subsequent meetings, enabling each member to get two different storybooks every two weeks. Because the Literacy Cooperative met every other week, this enabled each member to read aloud one different storybook per week for the duration of the Literacy Cooperative.



The following activities occurred at each meeting.

- Peer mentoring, where members discussed how they used read aloud in their classroom in the past two weeks, and group members provided assistance and feedback to each teacher as needed.
- Direct instruction by the Literacy Coach on using repeated interactive read alouds to teach reading skills. A handout was provided each week to supplement the direct instruction.
- Practicals, where members were paired to plan how to implement the direct instruction provided by the Literacy Coach. For example, in the week where members learned about teaching vocabulary, each pair chose one storybook, selected three vocabulary words to teach in that storybook, and planned how the vocabulary instruction would proceed.
- Demonstration, whereby one member did a read aloud based on the plan made during the practical. The member then received feedback on their read aloud.
- Rotate storybooks so each member received two different books.



In the first phase of the study where we were piloting the concept of a Literacy Cooperative, we formed one Literacy Cooperative of 12 early childhood educators ranging from Nursery 1 (three-year-olds) to Primary 2 (seven-year-olds). This Literacy Cooperative

only met for one term, totaling six meetings. (As a result, not all of the topics above were taught.)

From the pilot study, we found that it was best to group educators according to the level they taught so that the storybooks were matched to the pupils' developmental level. In the main study, we formed three Literacy Cooperatives based on the class/grade that the teacher taught. One Literacy Cooperative included teachers of Nursery 1 (3 years) and Nursery 2 (4 years), another Literacy Cooperative included teachers from Nursery 3 (kindergarten/5 years) and Primary 1 (first grade), and a third had teachers from Primary 2 and 3. For the main study, each Literacy Cooperative met every other week for two academic terms; totaling twelve meetings.

Research Process

The effectiveness of Literacy Cooperatives was evaluated based on teachers' knowledge of best practices in literacy instruction and literacy instructional practices as well as pupils' reading motivation. In the main study, pre-treatment and post-treatment interviews were conducted with participating educators (n=32) on their knowledge of and use of literacy instructional strategies as well as their pupils' reading motivation. Pupils' reading motivation was assessed by questionnaires for the older pupils (Nursery 3 to Primary 3) and one-on-one interviews with younger pupils (Nursery 1 and 2).

Summary of Findings

First, we were interested in how much access participating educators had to storybooks. When asked at pre-treatment what types of literacy materials they had access to in their classroom or school, almost all of the participants in this study first reported English textbooks. When probed about whether they had access to storybooks, 72% said yes. Of these, many said something similar to one participant who said that they had storybooks, but "very, very, very few."

The study found that participating in a Literacy Cooperative was effective in improving teachers' knowledge of best practices in literacy instruction and literacy instructional practices. The evidence on the impact of Literacy Cooperatives on pupils' reading motivation was mixed, with results of the interview with young pupils demonstrating significant improvement at post-treatment but not on the questionnaire with older pupils. However, all participating teachers believed that pupils' reading motivation increased through their involvement in the Literacy Cooperative.

One of the most interesting unanticipated findings our pilot study was that almost all of the teachers read aloud the storybooks to more than just the pupils in their classroom. Therefore, in the main study, we added a question to the interview schedule: In the Literacy Cooperative, you had access to culturally-relevant storybooks to read to the pupils in your class. Were those storybooks regularly read to any children outside of your class? Thirty out of 32 teachers reported that they regularly read the storybooks to children outside of their class. Indeed, a further 1,653 pupils in the teachers' networks were regularly read aloud to using the culturally-relevant storybooks provided by the Literacy Cooperative.

We also asked participants to evaluate the effectiveness of the Literacy Cooperative. When asked of the overall quality of the Literacy Cooperative, 75% rated it as Excellent (5 on a 5-point scale). The remaining participants rated it as Good (4 on the scale). An open-ended item on the questionnaire asked, "What is the most important thing you have learned during your participation in the Literacy Cooperative?" Here are some highlights of their responses.

- “First of all, I want to thank this cooperative for giving me this great opportunity. It has really been a very good and interesting program. It gives me great joy to see my pupils performing so well and boosting their interest for learning.”
- “I have learned how very important and effective read aloud is...It helps these learners to become better readers as they grow.”
- “Teaching and developing comprehension strategies through read alouds. (Never knew this could be achieved through read alouds.)”
- “How to teach my pupils how to read using the different skills in read aloud”
- “The better way of reading aloud is not just to passively read aloud to pupils but to get the pupils involved for better comprehension”
- “It has made me a better teacher.”
- “Read aloud is not just reading a story for the fun of it. Children learn a lot of skills that will help them in their learning in life.”

Another open-ended item asked, “What do you think is the most important benefit to your pupils that has resulted from your participation in the Literacy Cooperative?” Here are some highlights of their responses.

- “They are more motivated to read.”
- “Those [pupils] that have little or no interest in reading have interest in reading because it’s fun.”
- “The pupils in my class love books.”
- “The pupils like reading storybooks now so it increase their reading habits.”
- “Improved the vocabulary of my pupils as they use some of the new words explained from a reading passage during read aloud in the class.”
- “It has really built my learners’ comprehension skills.”
- “They’ve learnt to take their time to read, understand, and read fluently (comprehension).”
- “It has helped my pupils to be active learners and...likewise morals from the stories”
- “It has broadened my learners’ imagination. My pupils now reason and think out of the box.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research study found that Literacy Cooperatives are a beneficial strategy for improving literacy instruction via early childhood educators’ knowledge of best practices in literacy instruction and literacy instructional practices. Literacy Cooperatives are a powerful way for improving children’s access to culturally relevant literature, not just for the pupils in the classrooms of the participating teachers, but also for other children within the participating teacher’s network at school and in the community.