

Effects of group work as a teaching strategy on development of reading skills among pre-primary children in Manga Sub-County, Nyamira County, Kenya

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Abstract: Teaching strategies are techniques that teachers use in teaching to ensure that intended concepts are acquired by the learners. One of the teaching strategies used to develop reading skills among pre-primary children is group work. The use of ability grouping, heterogeneous and homogeneous grouping and cooperative group work have been found to improve teaching competencies among pre-primary children. The purpose of this study was to establish the effects of group work as a teaching strategy on development of reading skills among pre-primary children in Manga Sub-County, Nyamira County, Kenya. The target population for the study was 120 pre-primary teachers and 840 pre-primary children. The study used cluster and simple random sampling in obtaining a sample size of 19 schools, 36 pre-primary teachers and 252 pre-primary children. Data was collected by means of questionnaires, reading test and observation checklists. The findings indicated that there was a weak positive correlation ($r=.354$, $n=34$, $p<.05$) between teachers' use of group work as a teaching strategy and pre-primary children's development of reading skills. Findings of this study could help pre-primary teachers to evaluate their instructional practices in the teaching of reading and also help curriculum developers in carrying out in-service training courses.

Keywords: Group work, Pre-primary children, Reading skills, Teaching strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the language skills taught in Kenya is reading. This is generally a complex and active process that involves understanding of written text, developing and deducing meaning appropriately to type of text, situation and purpose (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD, 2013). Currently, many developed and developing nations are geared towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) by 2030 whereby quality Education for all is one of their objectives. However, according to the Human Development Report of 2014, the twenty-first century has brought with it profound challenges to the nature and values of Education in many parts of the world which has led to low literacy levels whereby illiteracy affects 774 million adults aged 15 or older globally (Colker, 2014). On the same note, UNESCO report of 2017 indicates that many nations continue to experience a number of challenges which are perceived to hinder the attainment of the SDG 4 goals. Among some of the challenges which have consistently been cited include low basic reading skills which affect further advancement and progression of students in various learning institutions (Colker, 2014).

Various factors are perceived to influence reading achievement of pre-primary children. More broadly, group work as a teaching strategy is advocated for in the UK and other parts of the world as an effective strategy to curb reading challenges (Ball, 2013). Hence, the current study sought to establish the effects of group work as a teaching strategy on development of reading skills in pre-primary schools.

In USA, Guida et al. (2017) conducted a study to explore the social interactions at the playground where children were presented with a rich learning opportunity and the children's learning outcomes. This was aimed at examining whether there were some kinds of social play which facilitated the development of early competencies. The study established a positive association between group work and children's learning outcomes. Smaller peer groups and longer interactions also demonstrated a positive association with these preschoolers' leaning achievement and literacy competence. There was need for a similar study in Manga Sub-County to compare the findings.

In USA, Bolick and Rogowsky (2016) investigated the relationship between teachers' use of group work and students' academic achievement. This review of the research literature sought to determine the effectiveness of ability grouping on kindergarten through sixth grade students. Specifically, this review examined what ability grouping encompasses and the varying methods for implementing ability grouping at the elementary level. In addition, it investigated the effect of ability grouping on the academic achievement of advanced, on level, and below level elementary students. The review established that teachers' use of group work improved learners' learning, and increasing test scores. The current study looked at the influence of group work in enhancing reading skills among pre-primary children in a developing nation unlike the reviewed study which was done in a developed state.

In Bangladesh, Rahaman (2014) conducted a study on reading comprehension through group work activities. The participants involved in this study were the 8th grade students of a secondary school in Dhaka. The study established that most children were taught in traditional manner, which was based on drills and error correction however those children who were taught by the use of group work were more competent in language skills than those taught using traditional methods. The study therefore established a positive link between teachers' use of classroom group work activity and students' ability to read comprehension. The reviewed study was conducted among secondary school students who were much older than those in pre-primary centres which the present study used.

Despite a strong background in reading being critical for acquiring knowledge and skills, there is a public outcry concerning the dismal reading ability among primary schools in Africa with over 70 percent not able to read at various class levels (Uwezo, 2012). In other countries like Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania (Mainland), Tanzania (Zanzibar), Uganda and Zimbabwe; the standard six pupils lack the basic reading skills they should have acquired at pre-primary centres (SACMEQ III, 2011). In Zambia, standard two pupils were found to be struggling on literacy skills, that is, the average oral reading fluency rate for the local languages ranged from 1.84 to 8.40 words per minute, correct sounds production ranged from 3.68 to 9.63 letters per minute across the local languages, indicating poor foundation at pre-primary school level (Brombacher & King, 2015). However, research has further shown that 50% of reading difficulties can be prevented if children are given effective language development experiences at pre-primary and effective reading instructions in primary grades (Strategic Marketing and Research, 2013).

Further, many scholars have suggested that learning to read English word can be more challenging than in other languages (Machin & Viarengo, 2016; Snow, 2015). Globally, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, 2016) which assessed fourth graders indicated low performance in such countries with grade four learners scoring below average of 1000 from several countries such as Bahrain 446, Belgium (French) scored 497, Chile 494, Egypt 330, Georgia 488, Kuwait 393, Malta 452, Morocco 358, Qatar 442, Saudi Arabia 430, South Africa 320 and United Arab Emirates 450. The percentage of fourth-grade pupils reaching the PIRLS international benchmark of advanced level of 625/1000 in reading were very few (Warner-Griffin, Liu, Tadler, Herget & Dalton, 2017).

Allowing learners to pursue own interest as a strategy to leaning outdoors was emphasized by Imenda (2012) on a study conducted on the promotion and benefits of play in teaching and learning in the Empangeni district school, South Africa. The findings how that 71 percent of the teachers sometimes allowed learners to pursue their own interests during outdoor play while only 19 percent of the teachers always allowed learners to pursue their own interests the study which was associated with gain academically and socially. The study further established that group work was conducted in Manga Sub-County, Kenya. The two study locations are perceived to differ greatly. This therefore led the researcher to establish the effects of group work as a teaching strategy on developing of reading skills among pre-primary children in Manga Sub-County, Nyamira County, Kenya.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

Children learn reading skills while still in pre-primary. Strong foundation in reading skills at an early age is important for later reading. However, the current status in reading is far below the expected average as evidenced by various studies internationally and locally on reading skills among class three learners. Children in class three are unable to read class two story books fluently. Seven out of ten classes one to three pupils cannot recognize letter sounds, join the sounds to form simple words and sentences. Other related studies have dealt with literacy skills, academic performance in Kenya certificate of education or Kenya certificate of secondary education disregarding the age at which reading foundation is set and what reading skills especially at the early age of schooling entails. The ministry of education has ensured that majority of teachers in primary schools are trained, instructional materials are supplied and assessment is done by curriculum support officers. Such provisions call for better performance which has not been realized as per the researches done in class eight and form four performance in language. This leads to many unanswered questions, hence the interest of the researcher in pre-primary level of learning where reading skills are supposed to be developed. The researcher sought to investigate the effects of group work as a teaching strategy on development of reading skills among pre-primary children and its influence in reading readiness.

PURPOSE OF STUDY:

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of teachers' use of group work on development of reading skills among pre-primary children in Manga Sub-County, Nyamira County, Kenya

2. METHODOLOGY SUMMARY ON RESEARCH DESIGN

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. According to Orodho (2005), the design is used in a study that permits the researchers to collect, summarize, present and interpret data for the purpose of clarification of an existing phenomenon. Descriptive survey research design was appropriate for the study in that the researcher was in a mission of educational fact finding within the area of study that covered three educational divisions. The researcher intended to describe the situation as it was on the ground. Also, it is an ideal method for collecting adequate data from the respondents with their natural environment. The study was carried out in public ECDE centres in Manga Sub-County, Nyamira County, Kenya. The other Sub-Counties in Nyamira County include Borabu, Nyamira North, and Masaba North. Of the four Sub-Counties, Manga lags behind with a mean score of 243 marks in KCPE results (2012) while Borabu tops with a mean score of 274 (Manga Sub-County Education Offices, 2012). A statement by Mungai (2013) in Uwezo report of (2013) indicated that seven out of ten classes one to three Kenyan public school pupils cannot read texts within their level. The above factors contributed to the researcher's choice of Manga Sub-County. The target population for the study included 120 ECDE teachers, 840 pre-primary children in all the 63 public schools in the three education divisions. The study used multi-stage sampling procedures which included clustering and simple random sampling. The Sub-County has three educational divisions which formed the three clusters. Each educational zone was different in terms of their number of children and teachers. This made the two sampling methods necessary to ensure adequate representation for each zone. Random sampling was conducted in each zone to pick the schools, children and teachers for the study. After clustering, simple random sampling was conducted in each education zone to pick the pre-primary schools to be included in the sample. Teachers from the selected pre-primary schools formed the study sample. The second step was to conduct simple random sampling from the selected pre-primary schools to get the children to be included in the study sample. The researcher sampled 19 schools out of 63 public schools. This comprised of 30 percent of the targeted pre-primary centres which Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) recommends as suitable for a sample size in a population with less than 10000. The 19 sampled schools had a total of 120 pre-primary teachers and 840 pre-primary children of which 36 teachers and 252 pre-primary children were sampled for the study. Questionnaires were used to collect information on the use of group work as a teaching strategy to develop reading skills. The observation checklist enabled the researcher to assess the children's reading ability when using group work. This was done by recording how many were able to read, how many were average and how many were below average in the reading test which was given to the pre-primary children. This gave the study the quantitative aspect. Data collected was both qualitative and quantitative. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The purpose of descriptive statistics was to enable the researcher to meaningfully describe a distribution of scores or measurements using a few indices (Mugenda and Mugenda 2003). Also, inferential statistics were utilized to establish the predictive association between the independent and dependent variable. Collected data was organized and presented descriptively and inferentially.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF STUDY

The goal of the study was to establish the effects of group work as a teaching strategy on development of reading skills among pre-primary children.

The Reading Achievement Levels

A reading test was administered and scored by the researcher to 252 pre-primary children to establish their reading achievement levels. The pre-primary children were tested on their ability to read the letters sounds, three letter words, pictures of domestic animals, hold books correctly, tell stories about pictures and naming numbers in their correct sequences. The scores of learners in various pre-primary reading skills are summarized in Figure 1 as follows.

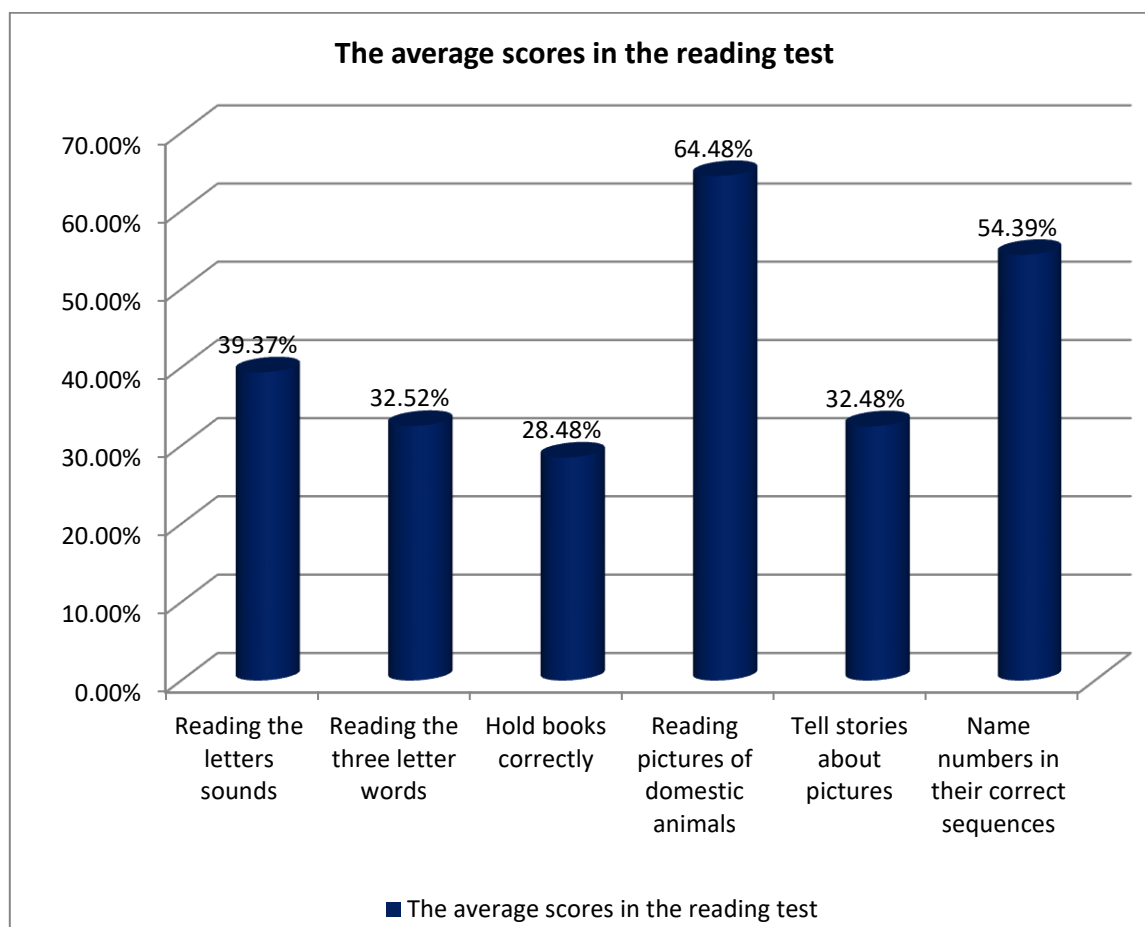


Figure 1: Mean Score of Pre-primary Children in Various Reading Skills

From Figure 1, it was noted that pre-primary children performed slightly above average (50 percent) in reading the pictures of domestic animals and naming numbers in their correct sequences in the reading test that was administered. It was also noted that the pre-primary children had scored very low scores (below 40 percent) in the reading of the letters sounds, three letter words, holding books correctly and telling stories about pictures. Holding the book correctly had recorded the lowest average mark of 28.48 percent. This means that majority of the learners are not able to hold the books correctly. From this finding, it can be concluded that many children had not acquired basic reading skills.

Group Work and Pre-primary Children's Development of Reading Skills

Collected data from the teachers' questionnaires was analyzed to establish the extent pre-primary teachers used group work as a teaching strategy. The teachers' use of group work as a teaching strategy was measured using 7 items. Pre-primary teachers were expected to provide responses in a Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The teachers' responses to various items are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Pre-primary Teachers' Use of group work as a teaching strategy

Item	SA	A	U	D	SD	Total
1 Group work is usually used as a way of improving learners' acquisition of phoneme awareness	7 (20.6%)	5 (14.7%)	5 (14.7%)	10 (29.4%)	7 (20.6%)	34 (100%)
2 Reading groups are usually used as a way of improving learners' acquisition of vocabulary	8 (23.5%)	5 (14.7%)	13 (38.2%)	6 (17.6%)	2 (5.9%)	34 (100%)
3 Group work is usually used to develop learners' ability to read letter sounds	9 (26.5%)	5 (14.7%)	10 (29.4%)	6 (17.6%)	4 (11.8%)	34 (100%)
4 Group work is usually used to develop learners' ability to read three letter words	9 (26.5%)	8 (23.5%)	9 (26.5%)	3 (8.8%)	5 (14.7%)	34 (100%)
5 Group work is usually used to develop learners' ability to hold the book correctly	12 (35.3%)	7 (20.6%)	8 (23.5%)	3 (8.8%)	4 (11.8%)	34 (100%)
6 Group work is used in developing learners' ability to read stories about pictures	10 (29.4%)	8 (23.5%)	10 (29.4%)	1 (2.9%)	5 (14.7%)	34 (100%)
7 Use of group work enhances learners' ability to read pictures of domestic animals	7 (20.6%)	8 (23.5%)	6 (17.6%)	11 (32.4%)	2 (5.9%)	34 (100%)
Average	26.06%	19.31%	25.61%	16.79%	12.20%	34 (100%)

Key: SA-Strongly Agree, A-Agree, U-undecided, D-Disagree, SD -Strongly Disagree.

Source: Survey data (2018)

Results from Table 1, indicate that on average, 26.06% of the pre-primary teachers strongly agreed that they used group work activities in enhancing pre-primary children's reading skills while 19.31% agreed, 25.61% were undecided, 16.79% disagreed and 12.20% strongly disagreed that they used group work activities when teaching reading among pre-primary children. This implies that below half of teachers (45.37%: strongly agree and agree) frequently used group work as a teaching strategy in enhancing the acquisition of reading skills among pre-primary children. Similarly, 35.3% cumulatively strongly agreed and agreed that they used group work as a way of improving their learners' acquisition of phoneme awareness while 14.7% of the teachers were undecided, 29.4% disagreed and 12.20% strongly disagreed that they used group work as a way of improving their learners' acquisition of phoneme awareness.

On pre-primary teachers' use of reading groups as a way of improving their learners' acquisition of vocabulary, 23.5% of the teachers strongly agreed, 14.7% agreed, 38.2% were undecided while 17.6% and 5.9% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively that they used reading groups as a way of improving their learners' acquisition of vocabulary. It was also observed that more than one thirds (41.2%: strongly agreed and agreed) of the pre-primary teachers indicated that they used group work in developing their learners ability to read letter sound, half (50%: strongly agreed and agreed) of the teachers observed that they usually used group work in developing their learners ability to read three letter words while more than half (55.9%: strongly agreed and agreed) of the teachers frequently used group work in developing pre-primary learners' ability to hold the book correctly. Similarly, about half (52.9%: strongly agreed and agreed) of the pre-primary teachers frequently used group work in developing their learners' ability to read stories about pictures while 44.1% (strongly agreed and agreed) of teachers indicated that they used group work in developing learners' ability to read pictures of domestic animals.

The above findings are in contrast with those of Rahaman (2014) in Bangladesh on reading comprehension through group work activities. In his study, it was established that most children were taught in traditional manner, which was based on drills and error correction however very few children were taught by the use of group work. The current research also concluded that teachers' use of group work facilitates children's acquisition of reading skills.

2.2 Relationship between Group Work and Children's Development of Reading Skills

To investigate whether there was any statistical significant relationship between teachers' use of group work as a teaching strategy and pre-primary children's acquisition of reading skills, a Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was computed, with scores on teachers' use of group work as the independent variable and pre-primary children's acquisition of reading skills as the dependent variable. The level of teachers' use of group work was computed from frequency of responses and converted into continuous scale, where high scale ratings implied high perceived level of teachers' use of group work as a teaching strategy. The significant level (p-value) was set at .05. Table 9 shows the correlation analysis results output.

Table 2: correlation between Teachers' use of group work and pre-primary children's development of reading skills

Correlations			
		Use of Group Work Strategies	Reading Achievement Levels of Pre-Primary Children
Use of Group Work Strategies	Pearson Correlation	1	.352*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.041
	N	34	34
Reading Achievement Levels of Pre-Primary Children	Pearson Correlation	.352*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.041	
	N	34	34

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Results from Table 9 shows that there was statistically significant weak positive correlation ($r=.354$, $n=34$, $p<.05$) between teachers' use of group work as teaching strategy and pre-primary children's development of reading skills, with teachers' high frequency of use of group work activities associated with better reading skills among pre-primary children and vice-versa. The above finding is in line with that of Guida, et al (2017) who conducted a study in USA that established a positive association between group work and children's learning outcomes.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The results revealed that on average, less than half (45.36%) of the teachers frequently used group work as a teaching strategy in enhancing pre-primary children's reading skills. The study further established that there was statistically significant weak positive correlation ($r=.354$, $n=34$, $p<.05$) between teachers' use of group work as teaching strategy and pre-primary children's development of reading skills, with teachers' high frequency of use of group work activities associated with better reading skills among pre-primary children and vice-versa. Hence, the low achievement in reading skills remained a major concern in the pre-primary schools in Manga Sub-County.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it was recommended that teachers should embrace the use of group work in order to increase children's reading achievement levels.

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