

# Caregivers' Role Definition and Practices in the Stimulation of Children's Emergent Reading Development in Ruiru, Kenya

\*Gladwell Wambiri

School of Education, Kenyatta University, P.O. Box 43844 - 00100, Nairobi, Kenya

E-mail: gnwambiris2000@yahoo.com

## Abstract

Emergent reading refers to the reading related developments that occur before formal reading instruction. Although research on this concept exists in other countries, It is a relatively new concept in Kenya and for this reason has not received much attention in research. Recent studies in Kenya are consistently reporting poor reading achievements among children in primary school. These studies show that most of the reading difficulties begin from early childhood years and continue impacting on children's reading attainment in their later school years. This implies that there is need to establish issues surrounding reading development from children's early years. The study from which this paper draws investigated the current status of caregiver perceptions and practices with 30 to 42 months old children around print. The study found that caregivers largely lacked knowledge about children's emergent reading development and their role in it. Caregivers' perceptions about their role in children's emergent reading development were largely negative. These findings implied that children are receiving little or no stimulation to enhance their early reading development. Consequently, they may start preschool with little or no interest and motivation to read. This may explain the reading difficulties that recent research has reported. Important recommendations arising from the study include the need to sensitize caregivers' and to help them redefine their role in children's emergent reading development are the key recommendations discussed in this paper.

**Key words:** Emergent reading, Stimulation, Children, Caregivers, Role Definition

## 1. Introduction

Learning to read is a developmental process that begins in infancy. Young children's experiences with adults around print materials during the formative years determine children's interest and later success in reading (Clay, 1966). Research recently, is highlighting the need for adult stimulation to enhance children's emergent reading development (Wambiri, 2007). During the formative years children develop certain reading related behaviours generally termed as "emergent reading", that are essential for successive reading attainment (Clay, 1966, 1975; Sulzby & Teale, 1986). The kind of reading environment a child is brought up in influences his or her attitude towards reading which in turn can be a strong influence on their motivation to read (Ramsburg, 1998; Wambiri, 2007). According to these studies, a child that is brought up in a low literacy environment or one that is not reading-friendly often develops a negative attitude towards reading and is more likely to experience difficulties in learning to read than their counterparts. The seemingly simple task associated with beginning formal reading instruction can be problematic for the child who enters preschool with meagre or inappropriate literacy experiences. This is because learning to read is a complex process that requires the existence of appropriate conditions and supportive strategies that enhance the development of necessary skills and attitudes. Research conducted internationally in the recent past has shown that adults play a crucial role in children's emergent reading development before the onset of formal reading instruction (Lomax, 1976; Anbar, 1984; Sulzby & Teale, 1986; Vukelich, 1994). The kinds of social literacy environment in addition to physical environment that children are brought up in influence their attitudes towards and interest in reading (Wambiri, 2007). These in turn influence their motivation and later reading success.

In Kenya, much attention has been given to reading developments during formal schooling (Bali, Arasa, Wambiri & Runo, 2008; K.I.E, 1999). However, little emphasis has been given to early reading related development and the role of adults in this development. Emergent reading is a relatively new concept in Kenya. Considering the importance of reading, there is a need to explore family practices that impact on children's emergent reading development. If these practices are not investigated, adults may not stimulate their children's emergent reading development. Consequently, children may join preschools disadvantaged and this may impact on their later success in reading.

Caregivers' perceptions about their role in stimulating children's reading development are critical in understanding their stimulation practices. Studies on caregivers' perceptions on stimulating children's reading development have not focused on caregivers' role definition. Caregivers' understanding of their own roles in any aspect of children's education and development is crucial in family involvement practices. It is an important link between their individual behaviours and the child's development (Moreno & Lopez 1999).

A family that is aware of and understands and accepts its role in a particular aspect of the child's development is likely to be more involved than a family that doesn't. Studies by Sigel (1985) and Meighan (1989) showed that parents who believed that they had a role to play in the education of their children were more actively involved than those who did not. Studies by Sigel (1985), Schaefer and Edgerton (1985) and Meighan (1989), have reported that parents who believed that they should be involved in their children's education were more likely to be involved than parents who did not accept this role definition. A study by Koech(2009) found that parents' lack of involvement in children's education is partly due to lack of awareness of the importance of their involvement. Often families are not aware of their role in children's development particularly in the development of reading. One reason for this is the lack of training programs that provide parents with awareness of their role in reading development.

If children are to be given a head start in reading, this should begin during the formative stage of the child's reading development. In Kenya, recent research has reported noteworthy concerns about children's reading development. Bali, et al (2007), for instance, in a study on reading levels of primary school children reported that the children's reading levels are alarmingly low. Majority of the children in this study were reading at a level two or three years below the expected reading levels for their grade. Of particular concern were primary standard two children who could not read syllables and three letter words that a child is expected to be able to read by the end of preschool. Teachers further reported a general lack of interest in reading by these children. Furthermore, according to the teachers in this study, these children carry on with their reading difficulties till it becomes a chasm that the teachers find difficult to deal with, particularly given the large class sizes that are characteristic of primary schools in Kenya following the implementation of free education. Other studies (UWEZO, 2010; The National Assessment System for Monitoring Learner Achievement (NASMLA), 2010) have also reported poor reading achievements in Kenyan schools. These studies also point to general lack of interest in reading among pupils and students in Kenya.

The need to enable children develop interest in reading at the earliest opportunity is imperative. Interest in reading is a major benefit acquired in early childhood. According to Morrow (1983) children who interact with parents, siblings and other caregivers in appropriate ways during infancy and toddler hood are widely reported to have interest in reading and to be more successful readers later in life. Wambiri (2007) also found that reported that children whose caregivers had interest in books tended to have significantly higher interest in books than those whose caregivers had little or no interest.

Lack of interest in reading can be a key hindrance to success in reading. Reading being a key mode of transmission of knowledge, consequently, is an important factor in the realisation of the Millennium Development Goal of ensuring provision of quality education and achievement of Kenya Vision 2030 that aims to improve literacy and quality of education. Providing a good start in reading, requires strong foundation of reading before entry to formal reading instruction. There are barriers, however, to be addressed if the much needed caregiver involvement in stimulating emergent reading development is going to be realised. Uwezo (2010) partly attributed the poor reading habits to inadequate parental involvement in children's reading development. According to Morrow (1983), children who receive reading stimulation before formal reading instruction grow up with an interest in reading and become more successful readers in later years. Studies in Kenya have not investigated parent and other caregivers' perceptions about stimulating reading development in the early years. This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do caregivers define their role in stimulating children's emergent reading development?
2. What is the relationship between caregivers' role definition and the extent to which they stimulate children's emergent reading development?

Specifically, the paper will focus on caregivers behaviours and strategies with children around print materials(CBS) comprising of two categories of behaviours and strategies with print; Caregivers direct behaviours and strategies (CDBS) and caregivers' indirect behaviours and strategies (CIBS).

## 2. Methodology

This study was conducted in Thika district in Central Kenya. The area of study is semi-urban. The Kikuyu community predominantly occupy this area. It consists of people who differ in socio-economic status, profession and education level. Thika district was selected because the researcher was linguistically and culturally familiar with the population. Having prior knowledge about the people being studied and familiarity with their routines and rituals facilitated entry as well as rapport. This familiarity enabled the researcher to make a way into the households, intermingle with them and also understand the verbal and non-verbal interactions going on in the households and the complex processes within these interactions. The target population in this study was caregivers of 30 to 42 months old children. This age group was selected because most of them had not yet started formal reading instruction. The children in this study were not enrolled in any kind of institutionalised day care centre. Some of the caregivers were parents, relatives or hired child minders. The caregiver who took care of the child for the larger proportion of time and who had been with the child for at least a month was studied. This was done to ensure that the caregiver and the child were familiar with each other so that the caregiver could be able to provide accurate information sought for in the study.

Multistage sampling procedures were used to select the sample. Thika district was randomly selected from two districts (Thika and Kiambu) that the researcher was culturally and linguistically accustomed to. Thika District consists of five divisions (Kakuzi, Gatanga, Gatundu, Kamwangi and Ruiru). Ruiru division was randomly selected. It has two locations (Ruiru and Juja). Ruiru location was then randomly selected. It consists of four sub locations (Ruiru, Kiu, Mugutha and Theta). Two of these (Mugutha and Ruiru) were randomly selected. Households potentially having 30 to 42 months old children at the time of the study were identified with the help of the area chief and sub chief's office. Information about households was obtained from the results of the 1999 population census statistics, the most recent by the time of the study. Questionnaires were distributed to a total of 157 caregivers were given questionnaires for study out of whom 133 returned the filled up questionnaires. This study employed a descriptive research design. A survey was conducted of the households in the study. Caregivers were provided with questionnaires that sought different kinds of information including; caregivers role definition, caregivers level of education and caregivers behaviours and strategies with children around print.

The researcher sought permission to conduct research from the Ministry of Education. She informed the area chief and sub-chief about her intentions to carry out research in their area and sought their approval. Data was collected with the help of One of the research assistants was a final year postgraduate student at the university. She was identified because of her experience in research with families. The other two were clerks at the area District Officers office and were in charge of the two locations under study during the 1999 census exercise. They had extensive knowledge of the geographical area. They helped the researcher and other research assistant to locate the households identified for study. The researcher and the research assistant cum postgraduate student did the administration of the research while the other two mainly helped in the geography of the area.

Before the onset of the data collection the researcher had three meetings with the research assistants. During these meetings she trained the research assistants on their expected roles and duties in the research. She also sought their cooperation in order to ensure that the data collection process occurred efficiently. As a group they outlined the roles they would play in the data collection process. They role played the research situation to enhance consistency and enhanced inter-rata reliability of their distribution of the survey.

The researchers and research assistants went out in two groups. One group comprised of the researcher and one of the clerks and the other comprised of the postgraduate student and the other clerk. The researcher and postgraduate student research assistant were in charge of the actual data collection. Each group of researchers visited their allocated respective households. They introduced themselves and established rapport with the household members. They told them that they were researchers with the aim of studying certain family practices relating to children. They informed the parent(s) or guardian of the child that their household had been randomly identified for this study. They further explained the kind of information they needed, assuring them that all the information would be treated confidential. The parent(s)/guardian were informed that some of the information sought in the research would be provided by them and the other by the child's main caregiver. The researchers explained that this information was specifically for purposes of understanding the experiences of the child before entry to preschool. The researcher/ research assistant requested for the parent(s) cooperation and permission while assuring them once again that information provided by each household would be treated with high level of confidence.

Caregiver role definition (CRD) was measured using a researcher developed questionnaire (see appendix A).

This consisted of structured items concerning caregivers' perceptions about their role in children's emergent reading development. These items consisted of a number of alternatives on a 5-Point Likert scale and the respondent was required to indicate one of the alternatives as his or her response. The respondent was supposed to indicate whether he or she strongly agreed, agreed, was not sure, disagreed or strongly disagreed. For affirmative statements strongly agreed was scored five, agreed four, not sure three, disagreed two and strongly disagreed was scored one. For negative statements, strongly agreed was scored one, agreed was scored two, not sure was scored three, disagreed was scored four and strongly disagreed five.

A caregivers' behaviours checklist (see appendix B) was used to measure caregivers' behaviours and strategies with children around print. This consisted of a list of expected caregiver behaviours and strategies. The caregiver was supposed to indicate how often he/she had performed each behaviour on the list with the child within the last one month. There were four possible frequency choices namely; consistently, moderately, rarely and never. Caregiver behaviours and strategies were scored according to whether they were appropriate or inappropriate. Appropriate behaviours are those that have a positive impact on children's emergent reading development. Inappropriate caregiver behaviours and strategies are those that have a negative impact on children's emergent reading development. Appropriate behaviours and strategies were given a score of three for consistent, two for moderate, one for rarely and zero for never. Inappropriate behaviours and strategies were given a score of zero for never, minus one

(-1) for rarely, minus two (-2) for moderately and minus three (-3) for consistently. Three caregiver scores emerged for each caregiver: Caregiver direct Behaviour Score (CDBS), Caregiver Indirect Behaviour Score (CIBS), and Caregiver Total Behaviour score (CTBS). CDBS was obtained by adding the scores for all the direct behaviours and strategies. CIBS was obtained by adding all the scores for the indirect behaviours and strategies and the CTBS was obtained by adding the scores for all the behaviours and strategies for each caregiver.

### 3. Analysis and findings

#### 3.1 Proportions of caregivers by role definition

The proportions of caregivers having positive and negative role definitions were calculated. The following table shows the proportions obtained.

**Table 1: Frequencies and Percentages of Caregivers by Role Definition (CRD)**

Role Definition	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Negative	98	73.7	73.7
Positive	35	26.3	100.0
Total	133	100	100.0

As the figures indicate about 74% of the 133 caregivers surveyed had a negative role definition score. Thus, majority of the caregivers in this study did not realize that they have a part to play in their children's reading related development. Most of them held this view because they did not, in the first instance, know that children's reading related experiences are important before the child goes to school. Majority (74%) of those with a negative role definition stated that the teacher should be the first person to deal with the child around the reading related experiences. Consequently, those caregivers reported doing little or nothing to enhance their children's emergent reading. Only 25.6 percent of the parents had a positive role definition. This group of parents would be expected to be involved in their children's emergent reading development. However, this was not always so. 12% of them reported not doing anything by purpose to help their children's reading related development because they did not know what to do.

#### 3.2 Caregivers' Role Definitions and Caregivers' Behaviours and Strategies with children around Print.

In order to establish if there was a relationship between caregivers' role definitions and the caregivers' behaviours and strategies with children around print, Spearman correlation coefficients were calculated. These

are presented in Table 2.

### Relationship between CRD and CTBS

**Table 2: Spearman's Correlation Coefficients for CRD and CTBS Scores**

			role defination	TOBESC
Spearman's rho	role defination	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.756**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	23	23
	TOBESC	Correlation Coefficient	.756**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	23	23

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

A correlation coefficient of 0.756 was obtained. This was significant at .01 level of significance. There was a significant positive relationship between Caregivers' Total Behaviour and Strategies Scores and Caregivers Role Definition Scores. As caregivers' role definition became positive, the frequencies of their behaviours and strategies with print increased.

### Relationship between CRD and CDBS Scores

A correlation coefficient of 0.757 was obtained.

**Table 3: Correlation Coefficients for Caregivers' Role Definition and Caregivers Direct Behaviours and strategies scores**

			role defination	caregiver direct behavior score
Spearman's rho	role defination	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.757**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	23	23
	caregiver direct behavior score	Correlation Coefficient	.757**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	23	23

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

This was significant at .01 level of significance. There was a significant positive relationship between caregivers' role definition and caregivers' direct behaviours with print. Caregivers direct behaviours and strategies scores increases as their role definition became positive.

### Relationship between CRD and CIBS Scores

Results for the spearman correlations between CRD and CIBS are shown in Table 4. The correlation coefficient

obtained (0.665) was significant at .01 level.

**Table 4: Correlation coefficients for Relationship between Caregivers’**

Role		Definition and Caregivers’ Indirect Behaviour Scores		
Correlations				
			role defination	caregiver indirect behavior score
Spearman's rho	role defination	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.665**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.001
		N	23	23
	caregiver indirect behavior score	Correlation Coefficient	.665**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.
		N	23	23

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

There was a significant positive relationship between Caregivers’ Indirect Behaviour and Strategies Scores and Caregivers’ Role Definitions. As caregivers’ role definition increased their indirect behaviours scores also increased.

#### 4. Discussion

CRD is a measure of caregivers’ perceptions about their role in children’s emergent reading development. Caregivers’ overall involvement with children around print materials increased as their role definition increased. The more the caregiver viewed himself or herself as having a role to play in the child’s reading development, the more likely he/she was to be involved with the child around materials with print. Caregivers’ possibility to use print based and non-print based behaviours and strategies also increased with an increase in their role definition. These results suggest that there is a strong relationship between caregivers’ role definition and their behaviours with children around print.

Caregivers’ who believed that they had a role to play in their children’s reading related development were more likely to stimulate this development than others. When a caregiver viewed him or her as having a part to play in the child’s reading related development, he or she was more likely to use direct as well as indirect behaviours and strategies to stimulate the child’s reading related development. These findings indicate that the extent of caregiver interaction with children around print was higher for caregivers who viewed themselves as having a role to play in their children’s reading related development than for those who did not accept this view.

Studies by Sigel (1985), Meighan (1989) and Koech (2009) support these findings. In these studies parents who believed they had a role to play in their children’s education were more actively involved in it than parents who did not accept this role definition. In the current study, majority (74%) of the caregivers did not perceive themselves as having a role to play in their children’s emergent reading development. According to Smith (1990), people act very frequently with their beliefs and feelings. If a person has a given belief then it is likely to affects his or her way of acting, which in turn affects his or her actions like it were actually true. A caregiver, therefore, who believes that he or she does not have a role to play in stimulating a child’s reading related development is likely to act in that conviction. This suggests that caregivers who have a right perception about their role in children’s emergent reading development could make deliberate efforts to stimulate them around print materials. Consequently they may intentionally and purposely get involved.

Caregivers’ negative perception about their role in children’s emergent reading development could be attributed to their lack of awareness about early reading-related developments. Various studies have shown that caregivers are not in many cases aware that their involvement could enhance children’s development. In a study by Ndani (2008) parent’s lack of involvement in children’s education was found to be partly due to lack of awareness of

the importance of their involvement. Ngugi (2006) also reported that parents in Nairobi did not know that it was important to stimulate their children's development of olfactory perception. Consequently these children's olfactory perceptual development was considerably delayed. Majority of the caregivers in the current study reported that the teacher should be the first person to be involved in the child's reading related developments. In addition they believed that children have nothing to do with reading before preschool. All the caregivers in the multiple case studies had confessed that they did not know for sure how and what to do with children around print materials. This suggests that caregivers lack awareness about emergent reading development.

The negative perception about caregivers, role in children's emergent reading development was held by majority (74%) of caregivers irrespective of their level of education. Koech (2009) reported similar findings. He found that parents and teachers largely lacked awareness about the importance of parent involvement in children's education. Consequently, both the teachers and parents did not do much to strengthen parent-teacher partnership in preschool education.

These findings suggest something very important: that there is a general lack of basic knowledge about children's development and the importance of different categories of caregivers in this development. In the current study caregivers, irrespective of their level of education, were not aware of their respective roles in children's emergent reading development. The study by Koech (2009) also reported that lack of knowledge about the role of caregivers in children's education affected parents within all levels of education. This suggests that there is a gap in caregivers' knowledge about children's development, the needs of this development and their role in this development.

## **5. Implications and recommendations**

### **5.1 Implications**

Caregivers largely lack knowledge about children's emergent reading development. They are not aware of their role in this development. Infants and toddlers are taken care of by caregivers with little or no knowledge about children's development and the needs of this development. Children are, therefore not receiving adequate stimulation. This implies that these children may join preschool without a strong literacy foundation. Those in charge of preschools need to prepare to address and compensate for this shortcoming so that children's literacy development is not negatively impacted further.

Literacy is not strongly incorporated into children's daily experiences at home. Caregivers need to include in their interactions with children, activities relating to print and print materials. This concern cannot be addressed effectively until the negative role definitions and underlying lack of knowledge of caregivers is dealt with through third channel and other parent education programmes.

### **5.2 Recommendations**

Various recommendations for various categories of stakeholders arose.

#### **Recommendations for Policy makers**

Relevant ministries should provide policy guidelines and standards on various issues. The ministry of gender and children's affairs should clearly spell out specific roles of caregivers including stimulation with standards established for institutions and others who will care for infants and young children. Relevant policies should be put in place to support provision of basic education for potential caregivers in secondary schools and tertiary level. This could be offered as a limited course such as the former General Paper in the previous A-level. The course could have topics relating to care and stimulation of infants and young children.

#### **Recommendations for Further research**

This paper is based on an explorative study that focused on only one community in one region in Kenya. There is need for more intensive research to establish the variations that exist in caregiver-child interactions around print

across cultural and socioeconomic groups. It is necessary to conduct research on various modes of training programmes that are in place locally and internationally, and ways of adapting them to achieve the required objectives in Kenya. Universities and other research bodies could address this emerging research area. In addition feasibility studies should be conducted to identify specific grass root requirements for effective implementation of developed programmes.

## 6. Conclusion

The findings of this study have brought out important implications for caregivers' involvement in children's emergent reading development. Caregivers' perceptions about stimulating children's emergent reading development are largely negative. As such, they are not stimulating this important aspect of children's development as they ought to. Reading being a very important instrument in the Kenyan school system requires more attention at the emergent reading level to ensure children's interest and success later. To do this caregivers need to be empowered to redefine their role definition and make use of the opportunities to enhance children's reading related developments at this crucial but otherwise neglected stage of reading development.

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Gladwell Wambiri is a lecturer at the Department of Early Childhood Studies in Kenyatta University. She has a PhD in Early Childhood Education from Kenyatta University. She has done research in Language and Literacy Studies. She has also authored children’s language books, Guidelines for Early Childhood language teachers and co-authored a research method and evaluation in Early Childhood book. Gladwell has wide experience in teaching early childhood programmes. In 2012 she participated as a Visiting Scholar in the International Masters in Early Childhood Care and Education (IMEC) at Oslo and Akhersus University in Norway.