

# A Phenomenological Analysis of Reading Aloud Culturally Relevant Children's Literature in Nigerian Early Childhood Classrooms

<sup>1</sup>Katrina A. Korb; <sup>2</sup>Janet Eseyin; Joseph Sule; Busayo Adewumi;  
Grace Anikwe & Mary Chukwu

Department of Educational Foundations, University of Jos <sup>1</sup>(katrina.korb@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Early Years Nigeria Initiative

## Abstract

*Culturally-responsive teaching is one manifestation of critical literacy, which is typically applied by reading multicultural literature. The purpose of this study was to examine Nigerian early childhood educators' experiences reading aloud culturally-relevant storybooks. A qualitative phenomenological design was used to tap into participants lived experiences reading aloud culturally relevant storybooks. Twelve educators teaching from Nursery 1 to Primary 2 participated in an open-ended interview. Thematic analysis was used to answer three research questions. The results showed the most important benefits of reading aloud culturally-relevant literature were that pupils were able to relate to the content of the story, pupils learned academic content, pupils developed an interest in reading, and pupils learned important lessons. Participants reported only one challenge to reading aloud culturally-relevant literature, which was difficulty in accessing it. Therefore, reading aloud culturally-relevant literature develops pupils' critical literacy through culturally-responsive teaching.*

**Key words:** Phenomenological Analysis, Reading Aloud, Culturally, Relevant, Literature in Nigerian

## Introduction

Reading is a highly complex activity, including various important aspects, such as, recognizing symbols quickly and accurately, apprehending clearly and with discrimination the meanings implied by the author, reacting to and using the ideas, secured through reading, and integrating them into definite thought and action patterns (Harris, 1981). In other words, reading is the ability to give meaning and understanding to written document.

Read aloud is an instructional practice where teachers, parents and caregivers read text aloud to children. The teacher incorporates variations in pitch, tone, pace, pause, eye contact, questions and comments to produce a fluent and enjoyable delivery (Beauchat et al., 2012). This implies that reading aloud creates opportunity for readers and pupils to share the pleasure of reading, experience the excitement of a good story, and wonder about the world around them (Beauchat et al., 2012).

Korb (2018) stated that children begin to develop interest in reading from birth through observation of their parents, teachers and siblings. Reading aloud as an important instructional practice should begin very early in life starting from infancy (Snow et al., 1998). Even though young children may not be able to read print and may not be considered ready to learn how to read, they are still developing skills that will prepare them to read in future (Korb, 2018). Reading aloud is important because it provides exposure to complex texts before pupils are capable of reading those texts independently, it provides opportunities for active participation and collaboration with peers, it provides opportunity to think and speak at high levels of cognitive thinking, and motivates pupils to want to read (Price & Bradley, 2016).

Furthermore, strong readers are developed through good instruction by their teachers on the specific skills that are necessary for reading (GRAND Reading Study Group, 2002). As such young children who are exposed to

read aloud on a daily and consistent basis are provided with the tools for future literacy and language success. To prepare children for learning to read and to keep them reading as they learn and grow, they should participate in read aloud as this will boost their literacy success and overall educational development. Lack of reading aloud – especially culturally relevant literature – may account for poor reading culture and lack of interest in reading among school children. This affects their educational development and performance generally, as lack of reading success at the pre-school level may affect performance at the primary school level, which is a great concern for educational stakeholders. A scan of literature on school children's performance portrays that almost a quarter of eight grade students do not read well enough to understand important concepts and make simple inferences from text-based materials (National Centre for Statistics, 2015). This shows that parents and teachers need to deliberately teach reading skills in read aloud among school children for an improved performance.

There are many reasons why reading aloud is rarely used as an instructional strategy in Nigerian early childhood classrooms. The main reason is a lack of reading materials, especially culturally-relevant reading materials (Oyetunde et al., 2016). Other reasons include teachers' poor understanding of how children learn to read as well as lack of training in using read aloud to teach reading skills. Furthermore, the timetable in nursery and lower primary levels rarely include time for reading aloud. Reading aloud helps children develop the critical literacy and language skills that they will use in school and throughout their lives. Reading aloud culturally-relevant literature is especially important in developing critical literacy because critical literacy is culturally responsive (Norris et al., 2012). Therefore, reading aloud culturally relevant literature is vital for sustainable reading culture and creating a critically literate society. This phenomenological study takes a qualitative approach to exploring teachers' experiences with having access to culturally relevant literature to read aloud.

### **Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy involves carefully reading, studying, examining or analysing a particular text. Critical literacy has been defined by Anderson and Irvine as "learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations" (1993, p. 82). Critical literacy is a method that equips educators and pupils with a structure that helps to alter inequality (Vasquez, 2014). Critical literacy has contributed immensely to the learning, growth, and development of both educators and young children because it encourages them to think outside the box, look at a text in a different way. Teachers and young learners enjoy critical literacy when they are exposed to developmentally appropriate literature and culturally relevant reading materials. According to Clarke and Whitney, "Through application of critical literacy young children and teachers explore and come to understand and appreciate the similarities and differences that they have and share with each other" (2009, p. 530). Critical literacy encourages interactions or discussions about gender, power; social class, culture, race and religion that are usually presented in books children read or listen to during read aloud (Comber, 2003).

"We can either teach critical literacy as a series of skills, or we can teach it as if words matter" (Powell et al., 2001, p. 780). Lewison and colleagues (2002), found four common dimensions to critical literacy after they reviewed 30 years of professional literature. First, critical literacy can interrupt a common understanding or situation where pupils can gain perspective by understanding the text or situation in a different way. Second, critical literacy empowers pupils to examine multiple viewpoints by being encouraged to think about texts from the perspectives of different characters or from those not represented in the text. It can also help pupils focus on socio-political issues by examining power relationships between and among individuals. Finally, critical literacy affords taking action and promoting social justice by inviting pupils to determine a course of action to bring about change in an inappropriate unequal power relationship.

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Culturally responsive teaching is one manifestation of critical literacy (Norris et al., 2012). Culturally responsive teaching is a way of teaching that values the inclusion of students' cultural backgrounds in all parts of the teaching-learning process (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Culturally responsive teaching infuses the culture of pupils into the school curriculum and makes meaningful connections with community cultures. Gay (2000) defined culturally responsive teaching as making learning activities relevant and effective by using pupils' cultural knowledge and experiences.

Most early childhood classrooms have a culturally diverse student population – especially in urban centres. As a result of this, it is imperative that early childhood classroom embraces this rich diversity and provide experiences that affirm the culture of all students. It is important that early childhood educators seek to educate the whole child and bridge gaps between home, school and community practices by engaging student's cultural knowledge, experiences, practices and perspectives (Gay, 2000). Because literacy is a social process, culturally-responsive teachers bring all pupils into a transformative learning process by using culturally-relevant literacy activities. Mitchell (2019) says that storytelling gives pupils the opportunity to include their culture, heritage, and language into the learning process at school. When teachers integrate pupils' culture into the authentic literacy process such as by including storytelling and reading aloud culturally-relevant literature, pupils find that their culture, heritage, and language have value. When a culturally responsive teacher encourages storytelling in pupils' cultures in the classroom, whether through traditional storytelling or read aloud, they help to merge both the home, school and community together through literacy (Gay, 2000).

### **Culturally Relevant Literature**

In reading instruction, culturally responsive education is typically applied by reading multicultural literature (Bennett et al., 2018). Literature is text materials designed to

inform, teach or just to entertain. Culturally relevant literature connects to a reader's culture, whether through specific intention or not. In other words, it talks about the reader's familiar environment, food, sense of fashion, language, dialect, music and so many other unique identities of the reader. The reader finds a common ground to relate to the material so interest is aroused.

Culturally relevant literatures perform the function of teaching, informing or entertaining by leveraging on the cultural values of the readers where these literatures are used. They could be authored by the natives of the area themselves or foreigners who have studied the culture deeply and have enough in-depth knowledge to be recognized as authorities in a culture that is not traditionally theirs.

### **Objectives of Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine Nigerian early childhood educators' experiences reading aloud culturally-relevant storybooks. This study was part of a larger study that provided early childhood educators (Nursery 1 through Primary 2) with access to one culturally-relevant storybook per week for one academic term. At the end of the term, early childhood educators were asked to describe their experience having better access to culturally-relevant storybooks for reading aloud.

### **The following questions were answered in this study:**

1. What do Nigerian Early Childhood Educators believe are the benefits of reading aloud culturally-relevant literature?
2. What challenges do Nigerian Early Childhood Educators have with reading aloud culturally-relevant literature?
3. What academic concepts do Nigerian Early Childhood Educators believe pupils can learn from reading aloud culturally-relevant literature?

### **Methods**

A qualitative phenomenological design was used for this study to tap into participants lived experiences reading aloud culturally relevant

storybooks. Phenomenological studies are designed to carefully and thoroughly capture and describe how participants make sense of a specific experience (Patton, 2002). This is done through in-depth interviews with people who have directly experienced the phenomenon. Therefore, in-depth interviews were conducted with educators who directly experienced one term of having access to culturally-relevant storybooks for reading aloud.

Participants were 12 educators who taught in an early childhood classroom at different schools, including public and private as well as low-income and high-income schools. Two participants taught Nursery 1, four taught Nursery 2, five taught Nursery 3, and one taught Primary 2. Of those participants, one was a male. They ranged in teaching experience from 1 to 30 years, with a mean of 12 years teaching experience. Five completed NCE/Diploma certificates, whereas seven completed first degrees. Half had completed their training in the field of education, while the other half did not receive formal training in education.

#### Instrumentation and Data Collection.

The study participants were interviewed using open-ended questions. The data for this study was collected as part of a larger interview. This study focused on responses to the question, "Please describe your experiences with having better access to culturally relevant storybooks." Probing questions were used to draw out more information on participants' experiences with reading aloud culturally-relevant storybooks in their classroom.

After learning and engaging with culturally relevant storybooks for one academic term, all

participants were interviewed following an interview protocol. Interviews were conducted and audio recorded for transcription purposes. The interviews with the 12 participants took 10 working days to be completed. Full interviews ranged in length from 14 minutes and 52 seconds to 56 minutes and 19 seconds. The interviews were conducted at the individual schools where the participants taught with the exception of one which was conducted at the participant's apartment. They were conducted between the hours of 8am and 1:30pm. Interviews were then transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

#### Data Analysis and Results

Thematic analysis was used to answer the research questions. After interviews were conducted and transcribed, the responses underwent thematic qualitative content analysis to discover similar patterns, called themes. The themes that were discovered brought to focus the experience the participants had reading aloud culturally relevant story books. In the first reading of the transcripts, the research team identified preliminary themes. These themes were then defined. In the second reading of the transcripts, the research team coded responses for each theme. The research team compared their coding and came to a consensus through discussion.

The first research question asked, what Nigerian Early Childhood Educators believe are the benefits to reading aloud culturally-relevant literature. The themes, definitions of each theme, and number of participants who mentioned each theme are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Nigerian Early Childhood Educators' Beliefs of the Benefits of Reading Aloud Culturally-Relevant Literature.

Theme	Definition	Frequency	Percent
Relate	Pupils are able to relate to the content in the story, or the content is familiar	10	83.33
Academic Content	Pupils learn academic content	6	50.00
Interest	Pupils develop an interest in reading or have fun	5	41.67
Learn	Pupils learn important lessons	5	41.67
Attention	Pupils pays attention during read aloud	4	33.33
Remembers	Pupils remember the story and/or lessons learned from the story	4	33.33
Cultural Identity	Develops pupils' cultural identity	3	25.00
Understand	Pupils are able to better understand the story	3	25.00
Write	Inspires the reader to write stories based on their own experiences	2	16.67

The most frequently perceived benefit of reading aloud culturally-relevant literature is that pupils are able to relate to the content of the story. Because the content is familiar, they are able to make connections between the stories and their experiences. This theme was mentioned by 10 out of the 12 participants. For example, Participant 8 said, "Children were able to relate better to these stories because these are things they see, these are things that we are used to here."

The next most frequently perceived benefit was that pupils are able to learn academic content, which was mentioned by half of the participants. This theme was further explored by the third research question.

Interest and learn were themes tied for the third most frequently perceived benefit of reading aloud culturally-relevant literature, both mentioned by 5 participants. The Interest theme captured both that pupils developed a greater interest in reading and that they enjoyed reading. For example, Participant 3 said, "I got to see a change in their attitude towards reading. They got more excited to read books." The Learn theme captured responses about broader lessons that pupils learned, such as learning that they are special.

Other perceived benefits related to learning included that pupil paid better attention (N=4), they remembered better (N=4), they understood better (N=3), and would be more motivated to write stories (N=2). Another interesting theme was that listening to culturally-relevant stories would develop pupils' cultural identity (N=3). For example, Participant 8 said, "Those stories with a cultural touch you know has really given some of them the chance to like connect very well with their roots...definitely it will help the children have a sense of belonging."

The second research question asked, what challenges Nigerian Early Childhood Educators have with reading aloud culturally-relevant literature. Only one challenge was mentioned by participants: the culturally-relevant storybooks were difficult to access. This was mentioned by 4 (33.33%) of the participants. For example, Participant 12 said, "They [culturally-relevant storybooks] were so unique and

wonderful so I went to the market to see if I could get some of them." The experimenter then asked, "And did you get?" Participant 12 replied, "Honestly, I didn't get the ones that suit the ones [we had access to]."

The third research question asked, what academic concepts Nigerian Early Childhood Educators believe pupils can learn from reading aloud culturally-relevant literature. The following academic concepts were mentioned (in alphabetical order): *animals*, *colours*, knowledge of different *countries*, awareness of different *cultures* (social studies), *numbers and counting*, *print awareness* (including letters and different parts of the book), *reading fluency* (the ability to read words or sentences), and *vocabulary* (the meaning of new words).

### Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine Nigerian early childhood educators' experiences reading aloud culturally-relevant storybooks. The first research question examined Nigerian Early Childhood Educators' beliefs of the benefits of reading aloud culturally-relevant literature. The results showed the most important benefits were that pupils were able to relate to the content of the story, pupils learned academic content, pupils developed an interest in reading, and pupils learned important lessons. These findings were supported by the principle of culturally-responsive teaching that teachers should relate literature to children's culture and what the pupils are familiar with (Ladson, 1994).

The second research question examined challenges that Nigerian Early Childhood Educators had with reading aloud culturally-relevant literature. Participants reported only one challenge, which was difficulty in accessing culturally-relevant literature. Oyetunde and colleagues (2016) also reported that the main reason why reading aloud was rarely used was lack of reading materials, especially culturally-relevant reading materials.

The third research question examined academic concepts that Nigerian early childhood educators believed pupils learned from reading aloud culturally-relevant literature. Participants

reported five academic concepts, including mathematics (counting), social studies (knowledge of cultures), science (animals and colours), and English (vocabulary). Therefore, each of the major academic subjects can be taught in a culturally-responsive manner through reading aloud culturally-relevant storybooks. In addition to being culturally-responsive, reading aloud is also an interesting and playful teaching method.

Through the lens of critical literacy, both pupils and educators were able to explore, understand, and appreciate the similarities and differences in cultures through reading aloud culturally-relevant literature (Clarke & Whitney, 2009). Culturally-responsive teaching is critical literacy (Norris et al., 2012). Therefore, culturally-relevant literature is vital for sustainable educational development in early childhood classrooms in Nigeria. The results of this study found multiple benefits of reading aloud culturally-relevant literature, with the only disadvantage being access.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

This study found Nigerian early childhood educators reported several benefits to reading aloud culturally-relevant literature, including that children can relate to culturally-relevant literature, they can learn academic content, and it develops their skills and interest in reading. The only challenge that Nigerian early childhood educators experienced was difficulty in accessing the culturally-relevant literature. Reading aloud culturally-relevant literature develops pupils' critical literacy through culturally-responsive teaching. Based on the findings and the conclusion, the following recommendations are made:

- Schools should provide varieties of culturally-relevant reading materials for educators. Benefits of having access to culturally-relevant reading materials include learning academic content, nurturing holistic development, enjoyable learning activities, and develops pupils' cultural identity.
- School administrators should make time in their classroom timetable for reading aloud so pupils can reap all of the benefits of reading aloud, especially culturally-relevant literature.
- Authors and publishers should create children's literature that relates to children in their immediate cultural environment to realize the benefits of reading aloud culturally-relevant literature.
- Both pre-service and in-service teacher training programs should create awareness of the importance of reading aloud culturally-relevant literature.
- Early childhood educators should integrate academic content into reading aloud as an interesting, playful, and effective teaching method.
- Educators should encourage pupils to write their own stories based on their own cultural experience.
- Further studies should examine reasons why culturally-relevant literature is hard to access. Furthermore, because reading aloud is rarely on the classroom timetable, further studies should examine school administrators' perception of reading aloud.
- Parents should be encouraged to read aloud culturally-relevant literature to their children in order to further maximize the benefits.

**Note:** The authors sincerely appreciate CODE for their financial support of this project.

### References

- Anderson, G. L., & Irvine, P. (1993). Informing critical literacy with ethnography. In C. Lankshear & P. L. McLaren (Eds.), *Critical literacy: Politics, praxis, and the postmodern* (pp. 81-104). State University of New York Press.
- Beauchat, K. A., Blamey, K. A., & Philippakos, Z. A. (2012). *Effective read-aloud for early*

- literacy: *A teacher's guide for prek-1*. Guilford Press.
- Bennett, S. V., Gunn, A. A., Gayle-Evans, G., Barrera, E. S., & Leung, C. B. (2018). Culturally responsive literacy practices in an early childhood community. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 46, 241-248. 10.1007/s10643-017-0839-9
- Clarke, L. W., & Whitney, E. (2009). Walking in their shoes: Using multiple-perspectives texts as a bridge to critical literacy. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(6), 530-534.
- Comber, B. (2002). Critical literacy: Power and pleasure with language in the early years. *The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 24(3), 168-181.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press.
- Grand Reading Study Group. (2002). *Reading for understanding: Toward a RED program in reading comprehension*. RAND.
- Harris, T. L., & Hodges, R. E. (Eds.). (1981). *A dictionary of reading*. International Reading Association.
- Korb, K. A. (2018). *Celebrating young children: Teaching English in early childhood education: Focus on reading and writing*. Fab Anieh.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dream keepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. Jossey-Bass
- Lewison, M., Flint, A. S., & Van Sluys, K. (2002). Taking on critical literacy: The journey of newcomers and novices. *Language Arts*, 79(5), 382-392
- Mitchell, L. A (2019). *Storytelling in a culturally responsive classroom. Opening minds, shifting Perspectives and transforming imaginations*. Rawman Be Littlefield Publishing.
- National Centre for Education Statistics. (2015). *National assessment of educational progress*. <https://nces.ed.gov/nationasreportcard/>
- Norris, K., Lucas, L., & Prudhoe, C. (2012). Examining critical literacy: Preparing preservice teachers to use critical literacy in the early childhood classroom. *Multicultural Education*, 19, p. 59-62.
- Oyetunde, T. O., Ojo, G., Korb, K. A., & Babudoh, G. (2016). Improving literacy instructional practices in primary schools in Nigeria: Strategies that work. *Literacy Information and Computer Education Journal*, 6, 2323-2328.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Sage Publications.
- Powell, R., Chamber, C. S. & Adams, S. (2001). Saving black mountain: The promise of critical literacy in a multicultural democracy. *The Reading Teacher* 54(8), 772-781
- Price, L. H., & Bradley, B. A. (2016). *Revitalizing read aloud: Interactive talk about books with young children, prek-2*. Teachers College Press.
- Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. National Academy Press.
- Vasquez, V. M. (2014). *Negotiating critical literacies with young children*. Routledge.