ENHANCING READING ABILITIES IN A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: INSIGHTS FROM UGANDA'S ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This study examines the strategies of enhancing reading abilities among elementary school learners. Focusing on primary schools in Kayunga district, it employs qualitative research methods and a case study design involving nine schools. Through literature review, observations, interviews, document analysis, and focused group discussions, the study explores the causes of poor reading abilities, teaching models, and effective strategies for enhancing reading skills. The findings underscore factors such as limited access to suitable reading materials, insufficient parental support, and cultural mismatches in content. Teaching models identified include the bottom-up, top-down, and interactive approaches. The study suggests strategies like developing engaging non-textbook reading materials, establishing readers' clubs, and incorporating localized content. It recommends redesigning the national curriculum to prioritize reading engagement, assessing reading skills, ensuring consistent reading activities, effective supervision, parental involvement, and creating conducive reading environments. The research underscores the importance of targeted strategies, pedagogical innovation, and collaborative efforts to address the challenge of subpar reading abilities among primary school learners in Kayunga district.

Keywords: Reading skills enhancement, Primary school education, Learner performance, Curriculum development

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji strategi peningkatan kemampuan membaca pada peserta didik sekolah dasar. Berfokus pada sekolah dasar di Kabupaten Kayunga, penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif dan desain studi kasus yang melibatkan sembilan sekolah. Melalui tinjauan literatur, observasi, wawancara, analisis dokumen, dan diskusi kelompok terfokus, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi penyebab buruknya kemampuan membaca, model pengajaran, dan strategi efektif untuk meningkatkan keterampilan membaca. Temuan ini menggarisbawahi faktor-faktor seperti terbatasnya akses terhadap bahan bacaan yang sesuai, kurangnya dukungan orang tua, dan ketidaksesuaian budaya dalam hal konten. Model pengajaran yang diidentifikasi meliputi pendekatan bottom-up, top-down, dan interaktif. Studi ini menyarankan strategi seperti mengembangkan bahan bacaan non-buku teks yang menarik, membentuk klub pembaca, dan memasukkan konten lokal. Laporan ini merekomendasikan perancangan ulang kurikulum nasional untuk memprioritaskan keterlibatan membaca, menilai keterampilan membaca, memastikan kegiatan membaca yang konsisten, pengawasan yang efektif, keterlibatan orang tua, dan menciptakan lingkungan membaca yang kondusif. Penelitian ini menggarisbawahi pentingnya strategi yang ditargetkan, inovasi pedagogi, dan upaya kolaboratif untuk mengatasi tantangan kemampuan membaca di bawah standar di kalangan pelajar sekolah dasar di Kabupaten Kayunga..

Kata kunci: Peningkatan Keterampilan Membaca, Pendidikan Sekolah Dasar, Kinerja Peserta Didik, Kurikulum perkembangan

INTRODUCTION

Within developing nations, illiteracy remains a pressing issue, with over half the populations of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia lacking basic literacy skills (Hugo et al., 2005; Abadzi, 2008). While reading is often an everyday task, it is a critical skill for effective learning, unlike innate speech ability. Competence in reading empowers individuals to navigate various life tasks. However, illiteracy poses challenges to even routine activities. Mastery of reading is crucial, particularly in an Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) system, as inadequate reading skills could hinder learning success (Nel & Nel, 2005; Wanzek et al., 2007). Learners struggling with early reading might face academic setbacks and higher dropout risks.

The research drew its theoretical foundation from John Flavell's metacognitive theory of reading. Marie Clay's emergent literacy theory, in contrast, posits that children don't follow a predetermined sequence of skills prior to learning to read. This theory highlights the behaviors exhibited by young children as they embark on reading and writing, emphasizing the interconnection of language, speaking, listening, reading, writing, and viewing. Clay's theory underscores the significance of factors such as print motivation, awareness, oral language, and interest for successful reading.

Oberholzer (2005) underscores reading's pivotal role in a child's academic and lifelong success. Struggling with reading in the early school years often leaves learners feeling discouraged, potentially leading to school dropout (Vaughn et al., 2007). Lovett, Steinbach & Fritters (2000) define reading inability as the failure to acquire rapid, context-independent word identification skills. Shaywitz & Shaywitz (2004) further emphasize that this inability can impede even intelligent, motivated children from achieving accurate and fluent reading.

In this study, "reading inability" pertains to a lack of expected reading development, considering normal sensory and intellectual attributes. Reading ability encompasses cognitive skills used when engaging with texts, including tracking, decoding, and fluency. Assessing reading through both oral and silent readings determines proficiency levels. Students who read autonomously demonstrate superior reading comprehension, verbal fluency, and general knowledge, thus enhancing their learning outcomes. The chosen theoretical frameworks guide the study towards understanding and addressing the complexities of reading abilities among pupils.

In the Nazigo Sub-county of Uganda, a recurring issue exists concerning learners' struggles with reading, leading to their premature exit from school, often by the sixth grade. Some schools even necessitate additional Saturday classes to compensate for the shortfall in reading skills. Localized concerns about this problem surface in various forums. At the school level, intermediate educators lay blame on the government for inadequate provision of essential reading materials. A gathering of Kayunga primary school headteachers and Quality Assurance representatives in Nateta Area in 2018 revealed their confusion and uncertainty about effective reading instruction. Observation of learners in Kayunga highlights difficulties in differentiating visually similar letter shapes (e.g., b/d) and perceiving the auditory distinctions between their corresponding sounds (e.g., b vs. d).

Reading is a crucial skill essential for academic progress and societal participation. Inability to read creates substantial barriers, undermining individuals' prospects (Nel & Hugo, 2012; Schmidt et al., 2002; Vaughn et al., 2007). Many struggle with confusion over letters and words, hindering meaning comprehension and skill development (Johnson et al., 2013; Martin & Carvalho, 2008). Recognizing the far-reaching consequences of literacy deficiencies, this study aimed to identify methods for enhancing reading abilities among primary school pupils in Kayunga district.

This study aimed to uncover strategies for improving reading skills within Kayunga's primary schools. The primary objective was to enhance the reading abilities of Kayunga district's primary school pupils. Specific objectives included identifying causes of reading difficulties, analyzing teaching models and approaches, and establishing strategies to improve reading abilities.

The study addressed the following research questions: What are the causes of reading difficulties in Kayunga's primary schools? How are reading models, methods, and approaches employed in these schools? What strategies can effectively enhance pupils' reading abilities?

Focus was on Kayunga district's primary schools, the study probed into causes, models, methods, approaches, and strategies for enhancing reading abilities. With nine selected primary schools, the investigation targeted the education system followed by these institutions.

This research offers valuable insights into guiding pupils' reading underpinning efforts to enhance reading abilities in primary schools in Kayunga district. The aim is to raise awareness among both pupils and educators, emphasizing reading's significance and fostering a love for it. Additionally, this study will serve as a foundational resource for future researchers exploring the same issue, offering comprehensive literature on reading abilities in Kayunga district's primary schools.

Study Limitations included respondents' confusion between non-textbook reading materials and textbooks necessitated extensive clarification, consuming research time. Financial constraints hindered data analysis, compilation, and presentation. Inaccessibility of certain areas delayed data collection. The study exclusively focused on primary schools in Kayunga district. However, efforts were dedicated to clarifying distinctions among respondents regarding reading materials. Measures were taken to secure funding for the research process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading ability as a concept

Reading is a methodical process, involving the sequential interpretation of letters and words. It operates as an automatic information processing procedure, involving the decoding of words and their combination for sentence comprehension. As a linguistic endeavor, reading involves active language use. It's a transactional undertaking, wherein readers imbue the text with meaning and construct personal understanding in dialogue with the author. This active search for meaning is intertwined with thought and language, shaped by cultural norms (Davenport, 2002).

Oberholzer (2005) regards reading as a foundational life skill pivotal to academic and lifelong success. Johnson et al., 2013) equate "reading inability" with "reading problems," addressing both mechanical reading skills and comprehension challenges. Learning at school heavily relies

on reading competence, posing a challenge for many learners in Kayunga district. Oberholzer (2005) supports early monitoring of a child's reading ability even before formal education, preventing potential issues.

General insights on reading in schools internationally

Global reading difficulties are attributed to language barriers and restricted database access (Bean, 2004). The International Educational Achievement study notes that 40% of fourth graders face challenges in basic narrative text reading, and these struggles are more pronounced among black and Hispanic students (Temple et al., 2005).

In the United States, Mathes, Torgesen, and Mor (as cited in Hugo et al., 2005) highlight substantial reading problems among 40% of children. The US Department of Education reports over 40% of fourth and eighth graders failing to read at a basic level. In the USA, Britain, and New Zealand, prevalence rates of reading difficulties range from 13% to 17%, persisting despite early interventions (Torgessen, 2000).

The US National Assessment of Educational Progress underscores alarming reading levels, particularly among low-income students. Early reading skills predict later performance (Lonigan et al., 2012). Vaughn et al. (2007) asserts that unresolved early reading difficulties can lead to long-term issues.

In the context of Africa, including Uganda, evident in low exam scores and poor pass rates, reading is in crisis. Despite educational reforms, learners' inability to read outside school adversely impacts their language and academic performance. Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) data links failures to inadequate reading skills (Nalusiba, 2010). The reading issue is profound, causing problems for learners pursuing tertiary education due to poor reading and English proficiency (Howie et al., 2008).

The Ugandan education system has witnessed various reforms, yet learners' reading habits remain limited, affecting their overall academic performance (Nalusiba, 2010). UNEB's exam data illustrates widespread reading failure among candidates (Nalusiba, 2010).

Causal Factors in Reading Difficulties

The issue of reading difficulties is influenced by a multitude of factors across the globe. Numerous academic studies consistently indicate a significant link between socio-economic backgrounds and academic performance (Taylor, Freisch, & Shindler, 2008). Researchers like Davin and Van Staden (2005) identify neurological, systematic, socio-economic, and language factors as contributors to reading difficulties.

Despite years of research aiming to ensure proficient reading for all children, the rate of reading failure remains high, posing a major concern for educators in both general and special education. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress, 32% of fourth graders and 24% of eighth graders perform at below basic levels, indicating inadequate interpretation skills even for simple texts.

Reading models

Different reading models shape instructional methods, with three prominent ones prevailing: The Bottom-up Model (Text-based Model) (Norton, 2007), underscores instructing letter-sound links and word decoding, prioritizing word patterns over grasping extensive texts. This

model centers on the text, focusing on letter-sound associations before immediate meaning. It highlights sub-skills nurturing intricate reading, guiding readers from text to meaning. This is often called a synthetic technique, constructing meaning through letters, sounds, and syllables (Landsberg et al., 2005).

The Top-down Model which highlights holistic reading, emphasizing learners' interaction with authentic texts to derive meaning. Reader-oriented, it draws from pre-existing knowledge to comprehend material, concentrating on whole words and sentences without phonetic analysis. Norton (2007) terms it concept-driven, where readers construe text based on prior understanding. Learners identify whole words visually, termed the whole language approach, incorporating methods like the language experience approach (Landsberg et al., 2005).

The Interactive Model amalgamates text-driven and concept-driven aspects. It emphasizes sound recognition, sound-symbol connections, and reading comprehension. Readers shift focus between decoding text and comprehending it based on prior knowledge. This approach melds top-down and bottom-up strategies, leveraging strengths for adept reading. As skills advance, focus shifts toward reading comprehension and less on word recognition (Norton, 2007). However, Brown (2021) suggests these models may not universally align with individual dispositions. For instance, if a child lacks interest in learning, these models might not effectively address the matter. Additionally, group dynamics, where dominant individuals stifle others, could impede effective model application.

Effective Reading Instruction Models

Part of the teacher's challenge is to know which model of instruction to choose for particular educational purposes. Reading is a complex process for a child to be able to read proficiently, they master some 5 key components: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. This study focuses on four models that relate to teaching reading.

Direct Teaching, which underscores structured lessons where new information presentation is followed by learner practice and teacher feedback (Sadker & Sadker 2005). The teacher assumes a leadership role, structuring the classroom and content for clear academic focus. This approach aids initial learning stages, especially for complex information. Multi-sensory experiences coupled with systematic instruction can benefit learners with reading difficulties, enhancing their fundamental language skills (Temple & Crawford, 2012).

Cooperative learning which involves small heterogeneous groups working collaboratively, relying on one another to achieve shared goals (Sadker &Sadker 2005). Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory supports this approach, emphasizing learning as a social process (Vygotsky, 1978). Skilled individuals provide "scaffolding" to support complex skill development. This approach cultivates teamwork, where rewards are earned based on overall group performance. Methods for Teaching Reading: Diverse authors emphasize that teaching reading should align with learners' academic needs, as there's no one-size-fits-all approach (Darrel, 2005; Norton, 2007). Carefully designed instruction aids at-risk learners in reaching grade-level expectations (Russell & Santoro, 2006). Effective methods are essential to address reading difficulties that may arise from poor teaching techniques.

Comprehension instruction guides students in actively engaging with text for meaning. Phonemic awareness, recognizing and manipulating sounds in words, and phonics, associating sounds with symbols, form the basis of reading skills (Nel et al., 2012). Fluency is improved

through guided oral reading, while vocabulary instruction enhances word usage and language production. Successful reading hinges on comprehension.

METHODS

The study employed a qualitative research approach, rooted in the social sciences, to explore human behaviors (Mouton, 2005; Creswell, 2008). This approach seeks an objective understanding of social reality through collaborative efforts (Creswell, 2008). Social science research involves systematically investigating social phenomena guided by theory and hypotheses, generating words rather than numerical data.
This approach focuses on understanding subjective realities from an insider's perspective draws conclusions directly from data, considering its construction within context rather than reflecting objective reality (Creswell, 2008).

Research Design: A case study design was chosen, as it aligns with the contemporary issue under investigation. It involves empirical inquiry into a phenomenon's real-life context using multiple sources of evidence (Cresswell, 2007). The study employed an instrumental case study, focusing on reading abilities of elementary school students in Kayunga District, Uganda.

Population and Sampling: Primary schools in Kayunga District were targeted. Participants included teachers, head teachers, and pupils. A purposive non-probability sampling strategy (Thanh & Thanh, 2015) was used, selecting participants suitable for the study's context. The sample comprised 30 students chosen from 3 types of primary schools: government-aided, private, and religious schools. This distribution included 10 students from each category as indicated in Table 1. Additionally, one reading teacher and one headteacher was selected from each participating school. A total of fourty eight participants were used in the study.

Table 1. Distribution of sampled population per category of participants

Category of school	No. of head teachers	No. of teachers	No. of students
Government aided	3	3	10
Private owned schools	3	3	10
Religious based schools	3	3	10
Totals	9	9	30

All the 48 intended participants from the nine schools engaged in the study, resulting in a 100% response rate. The interviewees consisted of students, head teachers, and reading teachers from these primary schools. Their interviews revolved around reading practices, encountered challenges, and suggested strategies for enhancing pupil reading abilities. The students interviewed, ranging from Grade Six to Grade Seven, were chosen based on academic performance, with a minimum of three students selected from each school.

A higher proportion of female participants compared to males was observed, as indicated in Table 2. Roughly 56% of the respondents were female, while 44% were male. This distribution was explained by the significant presence of girls in nearly all participating schools.

Table 2. Respondents by gender

Gender	No. of respondents	Response rate
Female	27	56%
Male	21	44%
Total	48	100%

Data Collection: Observations, interviews, document analysis, and focus group discussions were used. Observations involved unstructured data collection through firsthand observation of pupils' reading activities (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Cresswell, 2007). Semi-structured interviews facilitated detailed exploration of participants' beliefs and experiences. Document analysis examined teaching materials like schemes of work and assessment tools. Focus group discussions (Dilshad & Latif, 2013) promoted open discussion, brainstorming, and analytical dialogue among participants. The role of the discussion moderator was assumed by the researcher (Thanh & Thanh, 2015).

Data Analysis
Qualitative data analysis involves organizing data into categories and identifying patterns (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). It's an iterative process integrated into all research phases. The process is often represented as a spiral, with the researcher moving in circles to gain insights. The researcher organized data into folders, developed tables, and transcribed interviews. Reading and analyzing transcriptions, jotting ideas, labeling audio recordings, and converting them into text data were parts of the process.

Coding involved dividing data into segments, labeling with codes, looking for redundancy, and forming themes. Codes captured various topics like context, perspectives, processes, and relationships. Codes were then grouped into themes, aggregating similar codes to form major ideas. This process reduced the initial number of codes to manageable themes.
Credibility and Trustworthiness strategies to ensure credibility included prolonged engagement, using multiple data sources, and triangulation. The researcher obtained findings from participants, using verbatim quotes, and an audio recorder for accuracy.

Ethical Considerations encompassed protection of participants from harm, informed consent, privacy, and honesty were observed. Pseudonyms were used for privacy, and the researcher was honest in reporting findings. Informed consent forms were used to confirm participants' willingness to engage. To enhance trustworthiness, the researcher used triangulation of data collection methods and participants, checked findings with participants, and provided verbatim quotes (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2006). Ethical considerations involved respecting participants' rights, ensuring privacy, and maintaining honesty in reporting findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Causal issues in reading inabilities

The primary aim of Objective one was to identify the underlying causes of reading difficulties among primary school pupils in Kayunga district. The outcomes illustrated that these issues are multifaceted, given the participants' differing perspectives on the matter. To delve into these triggers, the study scrutinized the frequency of reading, school-based reading routines, the availability of reading materials, and factors driving students to engage with books. Employing interviews, the investigation unearthed that reading habits were largely consistent across the various schools examined.

In the interview responses, a recurring theme emerged concerning the inadequacy of reading materials, particularly in terms of quantity, across many schools and classes. School principals voiced concerns over the insufficiency in variety and volume of reading materials, an issue compounded by rising student numbers. One head teacher from School 03 conveyed, *"...few reading materials are provided by the government for leisure reading. When the class size is large, it becomes a significant challenge for each pupil to access reading opportunities."* In certain instances, pupils from government-aided schools echoed similar sentiments, expressing that the scarcity of books hindered their access to reading materials.

A teacher from School 06, reflecting on the situation, commented, *"...due to the limited reading materials, we can't distribute them to all pupils due to the overwhelming class sizes that surpass the available books."* Notably, reading is a sequential process, as Davenport (2002) elucidates, progressing letter by letter and word by word. Consequently, the inadequacy of reading materials disrupts this sequential approach, rendering learners unable to follow the text closely and contributing to reading difficulties.

Lack of Awareness: Pupils and teachers echoed similar sentiments regarding the scarcity of reading materials. Many schools had policies that prohibited students from borrowing books for home reading, leaving pupils unsure about the sufficiency of available materials. This was particularly evident in government-aided schools, where pupils expressed, *"We are not aware that our school has non-textbook reading materials because our teachers do not give us an opportunity to read them in class."* The lack of awareness among pupils indicated that teachers rarely engaged them with these materials. Some participants, however, believed that this was more pronounced in privately owned schools. Notably, awareness is essential for readiness; unaware pupils are unprepared to engage with materials.

Inaccessibility to Reading Materials: Teachers and pupils revealed that accessing reading materials within schools was challenging due to various management practices, including locking up books and imposing strict usage restrictions. Infrastructure constraints, such as inadequate space and a lack of trained librarians, also hindered accessibility. Some government-aided school headteachers emphasized that, despite an increased number of reading materials, pupils struggled to access them due to withholding by headteachers and teachers. An on-site visit confirmed that materials were often locked away.

Library Space: The researcher observed that storage practices affected accessibility. Books stored in boxes in headteachers' offices or general storage spaces hindered pupils' and teachers' ability to retrieve materials. Even in schools with accessible libraries, seating space was

limited, and pupils reported that library teachers prevented them from taking books home due to fears of loss or damage.

Weak Parental Support: Teacher interviews highlighted parental support as a factor in pupils' reluctance to read. Many parents did not dedicate time to reading with their children or encourage borrowing from school due to concerns over book loss and associated costs.

Inappropriate Reading Materials: Teachers noted the presence of inappropriate reading materials, including adult-themed magazines and war books, which they deemed unsuitable due to language, content, cultural relevance, and moral influence. Some suggested a need for more balanced resource allocation in Uganda, addressing both textbooks and non-textbook reading materials.

Unsupportive Regulatory Guides: While the government provided non-textbook reading materials, certain schools did not allow students to borrow them for home use. Some teachers attributed this to a reduced emphasis on reading in the national curriculum, which discouraged effective teaching of the subject. This underscored the need for a dedicated reading syllabus. According to Sadker & Sadker (2005), a significant number of educators hold the belief that students possess distinct preferred learning modalities. For instance, some students excel in visual learning, absorbing information through sight, while others thrive in auditory learning, processing information through hearing.

Cultural Irrelevance of Reading Materials: A teacher's observation about culturally irrelevant materials resonated, as foreign-authored content often did not align with pupils' backgrounds and environments. Such materials presented unfamiliar concepts, hindering engagement. Prominent researchers Verhoeven and Snow (2001) emphasized the importance of books reflecting children's lives to encourage active reading.

Approaches of reading instruction in elementary schools

Objective two of the study aimed to explore the diverse models, methods, and approaches employed for teaching reading in primary schools within Kayunga district. The findings highlighted the wide array of teaching models, methods, and approaches used, as participants held varying perspectives on these aspects in their respective schools.

Interactive Teaching Approach Among the 18 interviewees, 11 educators disclosed their utilization of the interactive teaching approach during reading lessons. They underscored the integral components of this instructional method, including feedback, students' autonomy, collaborative learning, problem-solving, and reflection. Respondent 02 accentuated that this approach contributes to a comprehensive understanding of texts, encompassing vocabulary usage and overarching themes.

A respondent from school coded 04 pointed out that the interactive reading model strives to augment reading relevance by involving students in selecting their reading materials, thereby enhancing their reading proficiency. Respondent 09 highlighted the approach's capacity to integrate existing knowledge with reading, with pupils using their awareness of current events to enhance their reading skills. However, Gillies (2004) indicated that this approach might not suit every student's personality, potentially hindering diverse ideas within group dynamics.

Top-Down Reading Approach of the 18 interviewees, 2 participants acknowledged adopting the top-down teaching approach in their reading lessons. This strategy emphasizes the reader's

role in contributing to the text, asserting that reading is rooted in meaning and progresses from whole to part, often referred to as the concept-driven model. It prioritizes meaningful activities over mere word recognition, focusing on sentences, paragraphs, and entire passages.

Respondent 12 highlighted the advantages of the top-down approach, enabling the comprehension of complex texts through the activation of high-level cognitive schemas. This method incorporates prior knowledge and reader expectations, fostering comprehension and enhancing reading skills. Another respondent from school coded 09 underscored that this approach empowers students to apply background knowledge and expectations to effectively interpret texts, promoting understanding and enthusiasm for reading.

Bottom-Up Teaching Model Five respondents acknowledged their use of the bottom-up teaching model, which centers on the written text itself. This method asserts that reading follows a sequential process that builds meaning from text, moving from component to whole. Readers identify letter features, link letters to recognize spelling patterns, combine patterns to identify words, and progress to higher levels of processing.

Respondent 13 justified employing the bottom-up model to impart foundational skills, establishing a robust phonics foundation before advancing to vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension mastery. Another respondent from school coded 01 emphasized that this model adopts a multisensory approach, integrating visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements for effective phonics learning.

However, Norton (2007) contends that the bottom-up model might underestimate the impact of higher-level processing on lower-level processing and overlook students' use of language knowledge to shape text expectations.

Overview of Reading Models Reading models encompass pedagogical frameworks for reading instruction. The top-down model emphasizes students' backgrounds and interests to cultivate their reading enthusiasm. In contrast, the bottom-up model emphasizes direct instruction, particularly phonics teaching to foster reading development. The interactive model, widely utilized, integrates components of both top-down and bottom-up methods. Educators using this approach acknowledge the significance of foundational skills while valuing students' reading preferences and personal choices in selecting reading materials.

Strategies for Enhancing Reading Abilities in Kayunga District

The third research inquiry aimed to identify strategies for enhancing reading proficiency within Kayunga District. Given the diversity of reading practices across the selected schools, it is imperative for pupils to engage actively in reading. However, numerous hindrances deter them from integrating reading into their lives. The researcher employed interviews to gather insights from participants on how schools, the Ministry of Education (MOES), teachers, parents, and District Education Officers (DEOs) could develop effective strategies to foster student engagement in reading. Their suggestions encompassed providing students with informative and captivating Non-Textbook Reading Materials (NTBRMs), establishing readers' clubs, promoting storytelling, generating localized reading materials, incorporating scheduled reading and library lessons, offering incentives to students and educators, and designing interactive spaces in the school environment.

***Promotion of Educative and Engaging NTBRMs*:** Creating compelling narratives can make reading a pleasurable experience, which is pivotal for children as they learn to read and cultivate a reading culture. Through interviews, it became evident that pupils possess preferences regarding the types of materials they find appealing to read. A teacher from School coded 06 highlighted that among pupils, the storybook *"Gulu Gulu Goes to School"* gained exceptional popularity due to its captivating illustrations and easily comprehensible language. Additionally, some pupils from School 03 expressed enjoyment in reading materials that they perceived as educational, citing the newsletter "Straight Talk" as an example. This shared sentiment underscores the pivotal role of preferred reading materials in shaping pupils' interests and, consequently, their reading preferences. Scholars like Gillet et al. (2004) emphasize that allowing students to choose their reading materials can significantly motivate them to read. This poses a challenge for schools to be more inclusive in their selection of NTBRMs to ignite pupils' curiosity and motivation for reading. This suggests that when students have access to a diverse range of materials, their motivation for reading is likely to be enhanced.

***Formation of Readers' Clubs*:** The establishment of readers' clubs within schools was revealed as a motivating factor for pupils to read. Engaging in these clubs allows students to share their varied experiences based on the information materials they have consumed. Insights from teachers indicated that interactions within readers' clubs foster a deeper understanding of texts, as evidenced by experiences such as "Minds across Africa." This model encourages collaborative learning, where students learn from one another, leading to enhanced comprehension.

***Encouragement of Storytelling and Student Authorship*:** In certain schools, storytelling and the creation of stories by both pupils and teachers are actively promoted. For instance, schools like 02, 07, and 04 facilitated the writing of stories and articles by students and educators, which were then displayed on notice boards and in classrooms. The creation of class libraries was a common practice, wherein each class transformed a corner into a library space and exhibited students' written materials. This approach not only fosters creativity but also encourages students to read out of curiosity, as exemplified by the enthusiasm displayed in reading their peers' work.

***Localization of Reading Materials*:** Numerous teachers in the surveyed schools were observed to craft their reading materials, such as charts, reading cards, games, and puzzles, from locally available resources. This practice was particularly evident in School 07, where classrooms were adorned with charts and reading cards, readily accessible to students during their free periods. This initiative facilitated easy access to materials, nurturing a conducive reading environment.

***Incorporation of Scheduled Reading and Library Lessons*:** scheduling reading and library lessons emerged as a noteworthy practice to foster reading engagement systematically. School 08 featured library lessons as an integral part of its timetable for all classes, illustrating the importance of structured reading sessions. However, proper adherence to timetabling was essential for its effectiveness, as seen in the experiences of School 08. Allocating specific periods for reading not only exposes students to reading materials but also allows educators to guide and advise them on effective reading practices.

***Designing Interactive Spaces*:** The concept of "*talking compounds*," "*talking offices*," and "*talking classrooms*" was prevalent across the schools in the study. These areas displayed informative posters and materials aimed at communicating messages to the entire school

community. Incorporating such interactive spaces enriches the school environment and further promotes reading beyond the classroom.

Strengthening Storytelling and Pupil-Created Storybooks Storytelling and the development of storybooks were also prominent in encouraging reading practices. Educators reported engaging students in activities such as storytelling and collaborative writing to enhance creativity and enthusiasm for reading. Schools like 03 facilitated the sharing of stories, nurturing a sense of community and curiosity among students.

Wayforward

Based on the findings of the study, it is recognized that addressing significant gaps in the reading development of elementary/primary school children requires a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach to literacy issues across different levels of the educational system. This perspective marks a shift from focusing primarily on the provision of resources to addressing the concerns related to student engagement and interest at various intervention levels within schools and policies.

Efforts in National Curriculum Development should be directed towards designing a reading curriculum that fosters learner interest. Additionally, there should be an emphasis on producing reading materials starting from the first grade. Furthermore, it is essential to incorporate reading assessment, as teachers often perceive reading as non-examinable, leading to its neglect in teaching.

Within schools, it is imperative to establish a culture where reading is consistently prioritized, with headteachers taking an active role in supervising reading-related activities. Moreover, parents play a crucial role in supporting their children's reading abilities, nurturing a conducive environment for practice and growth.

Overall, the study underscores the necessity of a holistic approach that addresses various factors impacting reading development, including curriculum design, resource provision, assessment, school culture, and parental involvement.

CONCLUSION

In addressing the research problem of enhancing reading abilities among pupils in primary schools within Kayunga District, this study explored various dimensions, strategies, and models pertinent to the realm of reading instruction. The investigation sought to understand the causes of reading difficulties, the teaching models utilized, and the strategies implemented to bolster reading proficiency.

The findings unveiled multifaceted challenges contributing to pupils' reading inabilities. These ranged from insufficient reading materials, inadequate variety, and quantity of resources to limited access within schools. The lack of awareness among pupils about available reading materials further hindered their engagement. Moreover, the absence of parental support and the presence of inappropriate reading materials added complexity to the situation.

Regarding teaching methods, a diverse spectrum of models emerged. The interactive teaching approach was recognized by educators for its positive impact on pupils' comprehensive understanding of texts, fostering cooperation, and promoting problem-solving skills. The top-down approach underscored the importance of meaning-driven reading, while the bottom-up approach emphasized the significance of foundational skills.

To cultivate proficient readers, various strategies were suggested. The provision of educative and engaging Non-Textbook Reading Materials (NTBRMs) surfaced as a key approach. Establishing readers' clubs was identified as a means to enhance comprehension through shared experiences. Storytelling and pupil-authored storybooks were found to promote creativity and encourage reading. Crafting reading materials locally allowed for resourceful and accessible content. Timetabling reading and library sessions within the curriculum emerged as a structured method to guide students. Lastly, the design of interactive spaces within school premises enriched the reading environment and disseminated information.

In conclusion, this study navigated the intricate landscape of reading abilities among pupils in Kayunga District. By recognizing the challenges, teaching models, and strategies at play, educators, policymakers, and stakeholders can collaboratively pave the way for an enriched reading culture. Fostering a love for reading through engaging materials, interactive platforms, and structured lessons can empower pupils and lay the foundation for lifelong learning and literacy proficiency.

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