

Curriculum Interpretation and Learners' Attainment of Reading Skills in Uganda a Case of Selected Districts in Acholi Sub-Region

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Abstract:- The study sought to assess the influence of curriculum interpretation on learners' attainment of reading skills in Acholi Sub region, Uganda. The finding indicated a significant relationship between curriculum interpretation and attainment of learners' reading skills. The study recommended a more coordinated approach to language policy implementation so that all learners can have the opportunity to learn to read first in their mother tongue and for reading to be beneficial and meaningful for them. Emphasizing instruction in local languages in government primary schools disadvantages learners when it comes to preparation for Primary Leaving Examinations. The government needs to streamline policy on thematic curriculum implementation so that all learners in Uganda are given equal opportunities when it comes to primary leaving examinations.

Keywords: Curriculum Interpretation, Learners, Reading Skills

I. INTRODUCTION

The current study brings out the relationship between curriculum interpretation and attainment of basic reading skills based on thematic curriculum in Acholi sub-region. The education sector reforms in Uganda, as enshrined in the Education Strategic Investment Plan aim at improving the quality of basic education through curricula reform. Uganda has been developing and revising its curricular since the colonial and missionary education days in order to meet the national goals of education in Uganda (Muyanda-Mutebi, 1996). The establishment of National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) under the Ministry of Education has come with very little success in managing curriculum reforms in Uganda. Most of the curriculum challenges in Uganda are hinged on issues of curriculum content, pedagogical approach, assessment and language in education policies (Altinyelken, 2015). NCDC appears to be producing mainly instructional materials for the primary school curriculum in Uganda (Muyanda-Mutebi, 1996).

The current curriculum in primary schools in Uganda falls under three categories – the lower primary school, the bridging curriculum, and the upper primary school. Lower primary covers P1 – P3 classes, the bridging curriculum

Covers P4 only, and the upper primary covers P5 – P7 classes. The lower primary curriculum (now the thematic curriculum) is the curriculum used for P1-P3 classes. It is called Thematic Curriculum because its content is arranged around themes that are familiar to the learners. The recommended medium of instruction is Local Language for the learners whose first language is not English. English, however, is taught in English, and as a strand right from Primary One. Thematic Curriculum is hinged on five pillars namely: The use of themes that interest children, Use of local language as a medium of instruction, The class-teacher system, Use of non-text book materials; and Continuous assessment of learners' achievements (NCDC, 2006). From its inception in Ugandan education curriculum, thematic curriculum has yielded almost nothing to improving the reading skills of learners. In Acholi sub-region, children that have been subjected to thematic curriculum can hardly read and write. Can you use some authority here like NAPE and UWEZU to strengthen the statement. This paper is intended to assess the interpretation of curriculum on the learners' ability to master the basic reading skills in Acholi sub-region. The focus on Acholi sub-region is premised on the two-decade civil strife, which subjected children in Acholi to serious challenges that impede attainment of quality education. This assessment will almost water down the main IV of Curriculum Reform, it will look like we are stressing conflict and quality. Can we revise to make curriculum reform come out as a main issue here? In addition, several children reach primary seven without attaining an appropriate level of cognitive skills, literacy and numeracy. They cannot ably read and write.

Specific Objectives

To assess the effect of curriculum of interpretation on the learners' ability to master the basic reading skills.

Research Hypotheses

There is no significant relationship between curriculum interpretation and learners' attainment of basic reading skills.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Curriculum Interpretation

The concept 'curriculum' means all the learning which is planned or guided by the school, whether it is carried in groups or individually, inside or outside the school (Jadhav & Patankar, 2013). It means all the learning, which is planned or guided by the school, whether it is carried on in groups or individually, inside or outside the school. Curriculum reform presents teachers, schools and boards of management with a unique opportunity to engage in professional development, improve learning outcomes, and prepare children for the challenges and opportunities of the future. The necessity to promote the development of literacy, numeracy and life skills in lower primary classes motivated the introduction of mother tongue education in Uganda in 2006/2007 (Ssentanda, 2014).

The task however, was a complex one, which required in-school management teams, principals and boards of management to lead the implementation of reform in the school as an organization. Curriculum reform takes place in the classroom and it involves teachers translating curriculum documents into practice, embracing new teaching programmes and methodologies, and providing a broader range of learning experiences for their pupils (Stack, 2005). One of the striking features of curriculum change and implementation is the perceived mismatch between the intended curriculum and the classroom reality, i.e. a disparity between policy and practice (Stack, 2005; Altinyelken, 2010; Jadhav & Patankar, 2013). Stack (2005b) examined the gaps between policy and practice in relation to curriculum change and argue that, while there is agreement on the aims of reforms, there is evidence of divergence in practice. He argued that in practice ideas are often contextualized and displaced and, therefore, they are often unable to meet the social development goals demanded of them. Likewise, in the most successful cases a firm national commitment to change was combined with an acceptance of diversity at the school level, an insistence on school accountability and an effective mix of dissemination strategies.

Verspoor, (2006) claims that the diversity in schools needs to be taken into account to implement large - scale changes. The continuum of forces of educational change consist of, on the one side, top-down (or external) end of the continuum and on the other side, bottom-up (or community-based) end of the continuum. In contrast to the superficial top-down changes, the community-based changes are likely to be deep and enduring (Rogan & Grayson, 2003). Therefore, it is important for the curriculum implementation process that sufficient attention is paid to the bottom-up changes that are needed for curriculum change to take root on the ground. The extent to which educational change is top-down or bottom-up is one dimension along which notions of educational change differ. However, as (Fullan, 1991) suggests, it is not just a question of selecting top-down or bottom-up approaches, one to the

exclusion of the other, but it is about carefully selecting forces that are likely to be most effective in the situation at hand.

Curriculum planners at the school level should be allowed to consider the context and capacity of their school, and they should be encouraged to select a route in working towards a meaningful implementation of the proposed changes (Rogan, 2007). Depending upon where on the continuum the change is located, different kinds of change forces will be invoked, and hence different kinds of changes are likely to occur. It is argued that certain rather simple structural changes might need to precede the introduction of deep changes (Rogan & Grayson, 2003). Aslan (2016) found that teachers who use cross-curricular themes create active readers by engaging students in authentic literacy tasks that emerge naturally from interesting and worthwhile topics and ideas. Whereas some of the competencies emphasized in thematic curriculum may not pertain to the content of one or more subjects, they can be practiced and applied to learning to learn social skills. Basing on a fieldwork investigation on the implementation of thematic curriculum in Uganda, (Altinyelken, 2010) found that majority of teachers were enthusiastic about the curriculum. However, its appropriateness and implementation efforts would be constrained by a multitude of challenges. Cognizance to structural realities in Ugandan classrooms, this study called for increased attention to the implementation process. Teaching in local languages in rural schools brings the subject content closer to the learner; however, future grasp of other subjects is impeded. For example, (Kispal, 2008) stated that reading skills are needed for all the other tasks that teachers want their children to do in handling texts: to understand the effects achieved through choices in vocabulary, to recognize what the writer is trying to accomplish through the whole text and to appreciate what the impact on the reader may be. It is the ability to draw inferences that predetermines reading skills, the inability of which may cause poor comprehension. Teaching reading across the curriculum has been found to assist learners in good vocabulary knowledge development and intelligent sharing among one another (Ony & Ovayioza, 2011). Learners can explore and exploit texts and materials to their own advantage in the varied content areas.

Learners Attainment

While it is factual that some teachers may find it hard interpreting the curriculum in class, different learners have different learning abilities. For instance, (International Dyslexia Association, 2017) found that children with dyslexia (a language-based learning disability) have difficulties with specific language skills, particularly reading. Learners with dyslexia usually experience difficulties with other language skills, such as spelling, writing, and pronouncing words. Dyslexia affects individuals throughout their lives; however, its impact can change at various stages in a person's life. Dyslexia is referred to as a learning disability because makes it difficult for a child to succeed academically in the typical instructional environment. Genlott & Gronlund (2013)

contends that learning to read and write is a basic skill that unfortunately not everybody acquires sufficiently. This is further aggravated by lack of teachers and time in school in addition to the enormous rise in informational activities due to the Internet and other information technology-enabled opportunities has made literacy skills increasingly important to ever more people. More than half the teachers did not link their individual planning with the school plan. Some teachers said that they did not use the curriculum documents when planning the learning experiences for their pupils; they based their planning on the textbooks or commercially produced materials rather than on the content objectives outlined in the curriculum.

Despite the fact that teacher trainees expect themselves to learn how to teach and thereby become effective at transmitting the knowledge, skills, and attitudes associated with a particular subject or program; education practitioners with years in the profession know differently (Jadhav & Patankar, 2013). Successful practice in the classroom is inextricably linked to curriculum development-the everyday decisions about both what to teach and how to teach. The ability to read for meaning and pleasure is one of the most important skills that children learn in primary school. Owing to the fact that almost all future learning is dependent on this fundamental understanding of the relation between print and spoken language, it becomes conventional that literacy, built upon a firm foundation of basic reading, is used as one of the primary measures of school efficacy. Children who become novice readers within the first three years of primary school also have higher levels of socio-emotional well-being stemming from improved self-expression and communication as well as the self-confidence that comes from cracking this difficult code (Pretorious, Jackson, Mckay, Murray, & Spaul, 2016).

Like in many developing countries, the opportunity of learning to read with fluency, accuracy, prosody and comprehension is unaffordable to many children. Whether learners are instructed in their local language or in English the conclusions are the same. Most of the Ugandan children cannot read for meaning by the end of primary three, even in their home language. Ssentanda (2014) recommends that

when learners are first introduced to reading, the teaching of sound-letter correspondences in Luganda (and other local languages) and English needs to be harmonized. Since reading and writing are critical skills to master in the early years of learning and determine the progress of a child's educational life, this should be a priority area for investment in education. Furthermore, it would be worthwhile having more classroom-based studies to build a fuller understanding of current classroom practice with regard to the teaching of reading, in different kinds of learning environments. Such studies can help to inform the future development of teacher training.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study used a cross sectional-descriptive design which collected point data on Curriculum interpretation and learners' attainment of reading skills in Acholi sub-region, Uganda. Ngechu (2004) noted that descriptive studies are used to examine phenomena or characteristics associated with a subject population, estimate proportions of a population that have these characteristics and discover associations between a set of independent variables and a dependent variable. Data from 397 respondents sampled from the districts of Gulu, Amuru, Pader, Nwoya, and Kitgum was used. A stratified random sampling technique, in which districts were treated as strata, was used to select the sample. Accordingly, the following sample sizes were selected in each district: Gulu (120), Amuru (60), Nwoya (54) Pader (63) and Kitgum(100). The variability in the samples sizes was because of the differences in the number of populations in each district. A structured questionnaire designed in a Likert format with responses ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1) was used. The questionnaires were administered and delivered by research assistants. Data was analysed by the use of SPSS. The analysis of the data was performed using correlation analyses.

IV. RESULTS

The study sought to assess effect of curriculum interpretation on learner's attainment in reading skills among children in Acholi sub-region.

Curriculum Interpretation

Location of School	Language used as a media for instruction from P1 to p3 in your school	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Urban	Acholi	4.5833	12	.43519
	English	3.7083	24	1.18795
	Total	4.0000	36	1.07792
Semi-Urban	Acholi	3.8333	12	.17408
	English	4.2500	36	.28868
	Total	4.1458	48	.31999
Total	Acholi	4.2083	24	.50181
	English	4.0333	60	.81926
	Total	4.0833	84	.74378

Source: Field data, 2019

In urban schools, there appears to be better curriculum interpretation by teachers who instruct in Acholi (mean = 4.5833; Std. = .4351) than English (mean = 3.7083; Std. = 1.1879). In semi-urban schools, there appears to be better curriculum interpretation by teachers who instruct in English (mean = 4.2500; Std. = .2886) than Acholi (mean = 3.8333; Std. = .1740). Teachers from semi-urban schools (mean = 4.1458) appear to interpret the curriculum well than their counterparts in urban schools (mean = 4.000). Similarly, teachers who instruct in Acholi (mean = 4.2083) appear to interpret the curriculum well than their counterparts who instruct in English (mean = 4.0333). A comparison of

standard deviations indicates significant differences in curriculum interpretation among teachers from urban schools than those from semi-urban schools.

The relationship between curriculum interpretation and attainment of basic reading skills was established using Pearson’s correlation coefficient. There appeared a strong positive relationship between curriculum interpretation and attainment of reading skills ($r = .717$; $p < .01$). This was a significant relationship at a significant level of 0.01. The indication with the above statistic is that as teachers improve their competence in curriculum interpretation, their learners are able to gain a mastery in reading abilities.

Pearson’s correlation

		Curriculum Interpretation	Attainment of basic reading skills
Curriculum Interpretation	Pearson Correlation	1	.717(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	84	84
Attainment of basic reading skills	Pearson Correlation	.717(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	84	84

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The above relationship assumed a numerical variable measure, yet curriculum interpretation and attainment of reading abilities may not always be numerical. In this regard,

Spearman’ correlation, which is based on relationship between ranks of ordinal or scale variables was established.

Spearman’s Correlations

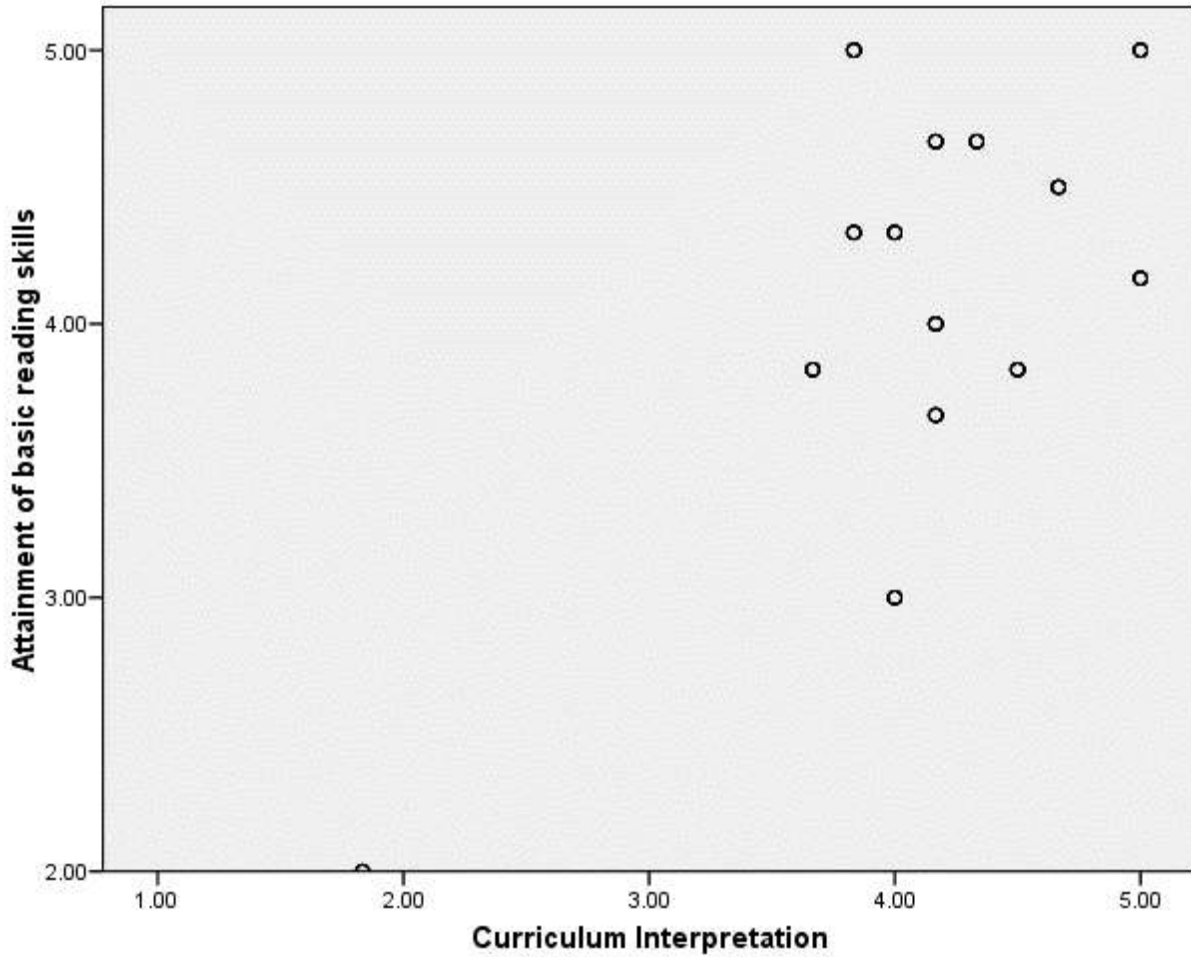
			Curriculum Interpretation	Attainment of basic reading skills
Spearman's rho	Curriculum Interpretation	Correlation Coefficient	1	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	
		N	84	
	Attainment of basic reading skills	Correlation Coefficient	.367(**)	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.
		N	84	84

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

At a level of 0.01, there appeared to be a significant positive relationship between curriculum interpretation and learners’ attainment of reading skills ($r = .367$; $p < .01$). This was a weak relationship, which suggests that variation in teachers’ curriculum interpretation is associated to a weak variation in learners’ attainment of reading skills. The variation in associations between curriculum interpretation and attainment of reading skills as indicated by Pearson and Spearman is significant. This suggests some influence of outliers in the

observed pairs. To examine the existence of outliers if any, a scatter plot was generated.

The findings in the scatter plot indicated outliers below 2.00, which could have affected the relationship between curriculum interpretation and attainment of reading skill we need to be consistent with skills and perhaps the wide difference between the correlation coefficients as revealed by Spearman and Pearson.



The level of association between curriculum interpretation and learners’ attainment of reading skills was polished by eliminating the outliers. The resultant correlation between

curriculum interpretation and learners’ attainment of reading skills was re-established.

Correlations

		Curriculum Interpretation	Attainment of basic reading skills
Curriculum Interpretation	Pearson Correlation	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	N	78	
Attainment of basic reading skills	Pearson Correlation	.260(*)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.021	
	N	78	78

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

The relationship between curriculum interpretation and attainment of reading skills ($r = .260$; $p < .05$) suggests a weak association between curriculum interpretation and attainment of reading skills. The strong relationship that appeared before was due to the outliers otherwise, curriculum interpretation has a weak association on attainment of reading skills.

V. DISCUSSION

The study found that teachers who instruct in local languages interpreted the curriculum than those who instruct in English. The results are in line with (Aslan, 2016; Kispal, 2008) who pointed out that teachers who use cross-curricular themes (discussion of texts in curricular areas outside literacy) create

active readers by engaging students in authentic literacy tasks that emerge naturally from interesting and worthwhile topics and ideas. The findings support the original goals of thematic curriculum: presentation of learning experiences in languages which the learners are already proficient (NCDC, 2006). However, teaching in local languages as the case is in semi-urban schools puts learners at a disadvantage when they progress for Primary Leaving Examinations, which are primarily set in English. Thus, learners in urban schools where teachers instruct in English are better off than their counterparts in semi-urban schools.

Teachers in semi-urban schools interpret the curriculum well than teachers in urban schools. The findings are in line with (Altinyelken, 2010) who recommended that structural realities of Ugandan classrooms call for increased attention to the implementation process of the thematic curriculum. The possibility of teachers from semi-urban schools having a better interpretation of the thematic curriculum than their counterparts in urban schools can be premised on the reality of the learning environment in semi-urban schools than the urban schools. In semi-urban schools, lesson planning is based on curriculum documents as opposed to urban schools where lesson planning is based on textbooks or commercially produced materials rather than the content objectives outlined in the curriculum (Stack, 2005). There were significant differences in curriculum interpretation among teachers' in urban schools than those in semi-urban schools. The findings agree with (Genlott & Gronlund, 2013) who posited that learning to read and write is a basic skill that unfortunately not everybody acquires sufficiently. This study further established that while reading skills were improved considerably, the biggest improvement concerned writing skills. Lending support from (Genlott & Gronlund, 2013), the aspect of improving writing skills more than reading skills underscores efforts in implementing thematic curriculum in Uganda (Altinyelken, 2010). It is of no surprise that learners can write what they can hardly read since they only write what they see.

The correlation between curriculum interpretation and attainment of reading skills appeared strong but was due to some outliers. The strength of attainment of reading skills basing on outliers demean teaching reading across the thematic curriculum. According to (Ony & Ovayioza, 2011), teaching reading assists learners in good vocabulary knowledge development and intelligent sharing among one another. These authors emphasized the need for instructors to refocus reading across the curriculum to address students' needs to achieve instructional goals and to prepare citizens for independent learning. Removing outlier data revealed a weak association between curriculum interpretation and attainment of reading skills. This finding agrees and supports (International Dyslexia Association, 2017) who established that low reading abilities are sometimes due to dyslexia, a language-based learning disability, which results in people having difficulties with specific language skills, particularly reading. Learners with dyslexia usually experience difficulties

with other language skills, such as spelling, writing, and pronouncing words. In this view therefore, their failure to attain reading skills is not in any way linked to curriculum interpretation, outliers in the data or classroom structure, as posited by (Altinyelken, 2010) but a learning disability. In a related view, low reading attainment is associated to the absence of ready support structures (libraries, electricity and flourishing publishing industries), language policies in multilingual situations and patterns of communication to reinforce reading are challenges in many communities (N'Namdi, 2005). Supporting the low reading skills attainment, (Kispal, 2008) found that the ability to draw inferences predetermines reading skills. Poor inferencing (the ability to use two or more pieces of information from a text in order to arrive at a third piece of information that is implicit) causes poor comprehension and not vice versa.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study sought to assess the effect of curriculum interpretation on attainment of learners' reading skills in Acholi Sub region, Uganda. There is significant relationship between curriculum interpretation and attainment of learners' reading skills. However, there is a frail association between curriculum interpretation and attainment of learners' reading skills among the schools investigated. Essentially, rendering much efforts to curriculum interpretation does not imply high attainment of learners' reading skills. Curriculum is seen by teachers as an authoritative encumbrance and not a machinery to interact with content for effective learning. Though teachers appear to interpret the curriculum, learners find it hard to develop concepts in the local language since they do not have a variety of language practice, which stifles their reading skills of certain topics. The differences in word pronunciation as used in either the local language or English affect learners' phonetic development, which will subsequently affect future learning of other subjects. In addition, learners' development of reading skills is sometimes suppressed when the theme is boring, and the teacher has little information and resources to cover a particular theme. It comes without doubt that teachers from semi-urban schools appeared to interpret the curriculum well than teachers from urban schools. This was emphasized by the fact that teachers in semi-urban schools instruct in the local language (Acholi) than those from urban schools, who instruct learners in English. This study brings out remarkable knowledge to the existing knowledge on curriculum development that thematic curriculum in Uganda is well interpreted by teachers. The fact that learning is arranged in themes that seem familiar to learners and instructions are given in local languages makes curriculum interpretation easier, than it would be in English. However, this interpretation on the side of the teachers does not always translate in development of reading skills on the side of learners. It should also be noted that emphasizing instruction in local language disadvantages learners when it comes to preparation for primary leaving examinations, which are presented in English. The adage that learners from urban

schools in Uganda perform better than those from rural and semi-urban schools is likely to continue as learners from urban schools are proficient in English than their rural and semi-urban counterparts.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study found that rendering much effort to curriculum interpretation has a weak association with attainment of reading skills. Learners find it hard to differentiate word pronunciation as used in either the local language or English. This study lends support to recommendations by (Ssentanda, 2014) who recommended a more coordinated approach to language policy implementation so that all learners can have the opportunity to learn to read first in their mother tongue and for reading to be beneficial and meaningful for them. Emphasizing instruction in local languages in government primary schools disadvantages learners when it comes to preparation for Primary Leaving Examinations. There is need to streamline policy on thematic curriculum implementation so that all learners in Uganda are given equal opportunities when it comes to primary leaving examinations.

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