

An Evaluation of Socio-Cultural Barriers to Reading and Writing among Rivers State Children: Identifying an Ideal Communicative Approach

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Abstract Cultural and language barriers create several communication challenges that impact reading and writing skills, particularly among children. This article evaluates the impact of socio-cultural barriers on the reading and writing skills of the children of Rivers State, with the aim of locating an ideal communicative approach, the adoption of which would help to overcome these barriers. With the purpose of conducting an inclusive analysis, the study examines a number of secondary resources. The first part of the study focuses on previous scholarly reviews so as to analyze the main causes and challenges of socio-cultural communication barriers among children. The second section of the study discusses the communication barriers prevailing in Rivers State and how parental care and a proper education system can eradicate these issues. Based on the findings deduced from the secondary resources, recommendations are proposed that provide a foundation for future researchers. Moreover, solutions are proffered with the objective of minimizing the impact of socio-cultural communication barriers on the reading and writing skills of children in Rivers State.

Keywords Communicative Approach, Evaluation, Socio-Cultural, Barriers, Reading and Writing, Children

1. Introduction

The importance of effective communication between parents and children during the early childhood years cannot be ignored. As highlighted in Bercow's study (2008), the ability to communicate effectively is a *life skill* which directly influences the social, educational and cultural development of children. It is therefore crucial that parents work on their children's verbal and written communication skills during the critical period of early childhood. The reviews highlighted in this study show that a problem in the development of communication skills can impact several aspects of a child's overall development.

The Rose Review (2005) states that smooth communication is not only important for personality development, but also influences the literacy skills of a child. The two most important aspects of education (i.e. reading and writing) rely on communication skills. Moreover, it is important to prepare a child for practical interaction with the outer world. The Rose Review considers listening and speaking abilities as the basis of reading and writing skills. According to Burns and Radford (2008), the complex social,

cultural and linguistic differences prevailing in different organizations and societies influence every child in a different way. The overall impact of these elements is reflected in the learning abilities and personality of a child. Moreover, the family serves as the main learning site for the child, as it is the sphere of most of his/her immediate interaction. After family, a child spends most of his/her time at school. Therefore, parenting and early schooling are two of the main factors which play a vital role in child development, including the development of his/her reading and writing skills.

Cultural differences and family structure alter parental input, which ultimately influences child development (Girolametto, Weitzman, Wiggs, and Pearce, 1999). These differences are particularly evident in third world African countries like Nigeria, where issues such as child labor and abuse are common. A society where gender-based discrimination is a common practice does not provide children with a healthy environment in which to groom their reading and writing skills. Moreover, the worsening literacy rate poses several additional challenges in adopting a communicative approach to eradicating the aforementioned barriers.

The main purpose of this research is to highlight the socio-cultural barriers impacting the reading and writing skills of children, with a particular focus on the Rivers State of Nigeria. The study also aims to evaluate communication

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strategies which have made a difference and explores how these efforts can be made further effective.

2. Background

2.1. Understanding the Influence of Socio-Cultural Barriers on Children

Scholars envision 'culture' in different ways, depending on their approach and perspective. Some scholars suggest that art forms—including, for example, literature, music, dance, drama, and fashion—define the culture of a society. Although there is no denying the fact that all these elements constitute the culture which differentiates one society from the other, some scholars define culture using an even broader perspective. According to this perspective, culture covers all the aspects of a given society, from its educational principles to its everyday practices. Nwagbara (2006) cites a study by Porter and Samovar in which the authors assert that the culture of a given society encompasses learning and education, knowledge, values, morals, practices, beliefs, concepts, relationships, family structure, and expectations. Moreover, culture is formed when practices are transferred from one generation to another. However, culture does not only differ from one society to another, it can also differ from one group to another within the same society. A society comprised of people speaking different languages and practicing different beliefs has a diversified culture and these differences often represent socio-cultural barriers.

According to Kartha (2010) there is no society that is free from socio-cultural differences. As an integral part of a civilization, culture represents all the learned norms, practices, behaviors through which a person prioritizes his/her personal goals. Kartha's study suggests that the personality of an individual reflects the social and cultural foundation of a society's organization. The cultural and linguistic differences prevailing in a society can have a negative impact on individuals, and their problems and weaknesses reflect this impact.

Bassey's (2006) study highlights the fact that culture teaches people to overcome different social challenges. This study defines socio-culture structure as the set of rules and guidelines which create virtual boundaries that determine how a group of individuals express their thoughts and practice their beliefs. This study's innovative contribution lies in its proposal that the members of society have the potential to overcome the established cultural norms and social rules. The reasons that compel individuals to struggle and resist reveal something important about the culture of a society. For example, most patriarchal societies where the literacy rate is low are adversely affected by gender-based discrimination. When the ideas of some individuals in society conflict with the perceptions of the majority, socio-cultural barriers emerge. These barriers not only influence the power enjoyed by individuals in a society, but also directly affect early childhood development.

The ways in which people are informed and educated

about overcoming these socio-cultural barriers vary across different societies. Moreover, the extent to which people follow these guidelines decides the extent of the influence of cultural and social barriers on individuals' personalities. Bassey's study highlights the fact that the effectiveness of the strategies adopted to eradicate the negative elements or barriers prevailing in a society can be judged by the level of child development in that society. According to this study the immediate influence of parental care and early education in society form the personality of a child; social organization profoundly influences reading and writing skills. Socio-cultural barriers impair the communication skills of children, often giving rise to disabilities, particularly in developing countries.

Although Western countries also consist of societies with mixed cultures, these barriers do not influence child development in these countries as much as they do in Third World underprivileged countries. According to Uyoata (2001), culture is solely the outcome of inherited norms and practices, and has nothing to do with intelligence. People inherit practices without even analyzing their influence. While culture provides a way to unite people with similar approaches, differences in attitudes give rise to socio-cultural differences. For a complex society like Nigeria with a diversified culture, Okonofua (1998) defines socio-cultural differences as the division of a society into various groups on the basis of cast, creed, religion or language. This study reflects the idea that when a society like Nigeria does not have explicitly defined norms to educate people about coping with differences, challenges emerge for individuals, particularly children, in terms of the development of communication skills.

In its analysis of culture in Nigeria, this article argues that culture encompasses material and non-material elements ranging from everyday practices related to popular culture to philosophy and art. Bassey's study (2006) highlights the fact that one cannot analyze culture as a whole. Every state in Nigeria has a different social structure and culture which is influenced by the literacy rate and reliance on modern ways of living. Researchers have pointed out that culture directly influences the communication skills of individuals as it decides the extent to which an individual can exercise power. For this reason the early childhood years are critical, as social practices profoundly influence a child's intellectual development. In the Rivers State of Nigeria, where the government is taking measures to improve the literacy rate, there are greater opportunities for people to provide children with a barrier-free environment for developing basic reading and writing skills.

Wilson (2004) lists seven factors that are present in every cultural group or society: economic growth, religious practices, government and private organizations, literature, traditions, and the arts. Nigeria has a rich and well-established culture which has been preserved for centuries. Some aspects of the heritage have been preserved through various artistic forms, like painting and music, but other non-material aspects, like individuals' knowledge and

approach to life, have changed with the passage of time. Contemporary Nigerian society represents a complex blend of religions, castes, and languages. In Nigeria, culture not only varies across different states but also across different ethnic groups within the same state. There is no denying the fact that religious values greatly influence lifestyles, and the great variation in Rivers State reflects the fact that every family has a different socio-cultural structure largely governed by religious obligations.

According to Keghku (2006), cultural transformation is inevitable. A number of factors like economic stability, technology advancement, and changing values influence the ideas and priorities of individuals. However, the ability of individuals to differentiate between positive or negative change depends on their knowledge. In Rivers State, the literacy rate is better than in other Nigerian states but children still face difficulty in developing their reading and writing skills. Many researchers highlight the fact that communicative approaches can improve the situation to a great extent, while others emphasize the collaborative efforts of parents, teachers and policy makers to successfully implement communicative approaches in every state institution.

2.2. The Background of Socio-Cultural Barriers in Rivers State, Nigeria

Murray (1999) study noted that the American Psychological Association's 1999 Annual Convention was conducted with the understanding of the importance of eradicating the structural barriers to the development of a healthy childhood environment in underprivileged countries. The convention concluded that discrimination, stereotypes, and abuse are some of the negative outcomes of socio-cultural differences.

Cultural differences have given rise to distinct parenting styles and approaches across the various states of Nigeria. Several case studies have concluded that the literacy rates vary significantly among the Nigerian states. Moreover, religious beliefs and practices also vary significantly from state to state. For this reason it is extremely difficult to analyze parenting methods in Nigeria. However, in Rivers State where Christianity is practiced by more than 80% of the population, policy makers have been striving to implement communicative strategies in educational institutions to provide young children with a healthy environment for learning.

Another factor that further underscores the need for the eradication of socio-cultural barriers is the changing global economy. The emergence of globalization has increased the number of multinational organizations, both in developing and developed countries. The result is that educational institutions have to adopt different strategies for preparing children for the practical world. Effective communication skills are the need of the hour and a society plagued by communication barriers cannot produce confident and competent individuals. One of the most effective ways to strengthen a country's economic growth is to focus resources

on child development. The social organization of Rivers State reflects the fact that the collaborative efforts of parents and teachers are critical to the success of its communicative approach.

Latest population figure of Nigeria (167 million people) makes Nigeria the seventh most populated nation in the world and the most populated countries in the African, and women constitute more than half of the population of the country. However, the country has always been male-dominated and suffers from high rates of female illiteracy (National Population Commission (NPC), 2011). This contradiction has greatly influenced the socio-economic development of the country and poses several challenges for early childhood education (Ololube, Egbezor & Kpolovie, 2008; Ololube, Kpolovie & Egbezor, 2009). Despite the fact that the government of Nigeria has taken various steps to eradicate illiteracy, gender-based differences have worsened over years. As with the other states of Nigeria, Rivers State represents a society with a diverse culture, where men consider women as their subordinates, and this has impacted child development in adverse ways (Okunna, 2002).

The challenges posed by communication barriers in Nigerian society are not new, and profoundly impact basic education in the region. In Rivers State, linguistic differences, gender-based discrimination and high illiteracy rates are some of the dominant elements which have hindered the implementation of effective educational policies. Although Rivers State is one of the strongest pillars of the Nigerian economy, children in this region are not provided with a suitable environment for developing their basic reading and writing skills.

According to the scholarly literature on socio-cultural barriers, conflicting ideas and practices that are influenced by the cultural fabric of a society lead to miscommunication between individuals living in the same society. Keeping this claim in view for the eradication of cultural barriers in Rivers State, it is important to understand the complex cross-cultural associations and differences. No educational policy or political strategy can eliminate communication barriers without an understanding the core problem.

According to Ting-Toomey (1994), in order to understand socio-cultural barriers, it is important to comprehend the driving factors. This study enlists three major factors that create conflict between individuals. The first factor is cognitive limitation, which means people are bound to view the world within their own frame of reference and they involuntarily compare changes in the environment with their own concepts. When a society undergoes change, people consider it a threat to their values even if the change is positive. Ting-Toomey points out that social changes are inevitable and the rigid behavior of individuals creates cultural barriers.

The second factor, according to Ting-Toomey (1994), is behavioral limitations. This means that every group in a society practices its own set of beliefs and follows its own rules. Along with common social practices there are certain individual practices which vary among different groups

living in the same society, as is evident in Rivers State. The region provides a home to a number of social groups belonging to different religions and following different practices. When these groups interact with each other, they face communication problems due to cultural differences. Communication barriers particularly impact children, as cross-community marriages are very common in Rivers State. Such families do not provide a suitable environment for a child to polish his/her communication skills.

A common misconception that poses several challenges in the successful implementation of educational policies in Rivers State is that conflicts caused due to interest can be resolved in the same way as differences of basic needs. It is important for policy makers to understand that interests are substantial while basic needs are not.

Rivers State has a complex social structure. People are divided into different groups on the basis of culture, social elements, language, cast and religion. In addition, factors like gender-based discrimination, child abuse, low literacy and poor economic conditions are also evident in Rivers State. These factors have created various socio-cultural barriers in the region which hinder communication, thus impacting early childhood development and education. This study surveys the scholarly literature, including several case studies, to evaluate the impact of different socio-cultural aspects on the reading and writing skills of children in Rivers State.

3. Research Framework

In order to examine the socio-cultural differences prevailing in Rivers State, Nigeria, and evaluate the ways in which they hinder the successful implementation of an ideal communicative approach, the research framework of this study is divided in two parts: the literature review and the evaluation of case studies.

The first part of the study reviews the findings of other scholars who have conducted qualitative as well quantitative studies in the same context. The second part is based on a meta-analysis of case studies and statistical data collected from secondary resources.

Meta-analysis refers to a type of research methodology in which quantitative data is evaluated in light of various studies (Mullen, 1998). However, in order to cover all the aspects of the issue under discussion, the information is not gathered from primary resources. Instead authentic secondary resources have been chosen to provide future researchers with an inclusive ground for conducting further research on this subject. The framework aims at combining and analyzing the findings of qualitative, quantitative and case studies for the purpose of deducing comprehensive results.

4. Literature Review/Case Studies

There are 36 federated states in Nigeria of which Rivers

State is one. The state is considered one of the most important states of the country as it has 18 of the 774 LGAs (Local Government Areas) of the country. It is spread over a wide area of 23,000 km and according to the census result of 2010, the current population in the region is 3.25 million, which makes Rivers State one of the most populated states of Nigeria. The statistical data collected by government organizations reveals that men constitute 50.3 percent of the total population of Rivers State while women constitute 49.9 percent. Yet male domination and female disempowerment prevail despite the equal population ratio of males to females.

Census data reveals that young children from age one to ten constitute 25 percent of the total population of Rivers State. Moreover, 50 percent of the young children are girls and strong gender-based discrimination in Rivers State restricts girls from acquiring education. This means that 50 percent of school-aged children do not even acquire basic education. Another fact that influences the reading and writing skills of young children is the precarious economy of Rivers State. Underprivileged children cannot avail themselves of as many opportunities as financially stable children. Socio-economic barriers hinder the implementation of nondiscriminatory educational programs and most young children in Rivers State cannot even establish basic reading and writing skills.

Before 1999, the state government was not taking serious measures to improve the literacy rate of the region. It was after the instalment of a democratic government in 1999 that the provision of education was listed as one of the principal policy goals. As mentioned in the 7-Point Agenda in the Economic Blueprint (2008) and Briggs, Ololube, Kpolovie, Amaele, and Amanchukwu (2012), every child in Rivers State deserves quality education irrespective of family background and financial status. Keeping in view the socio-cultural barriers prevailing in Rivers State, the government has made considerable efforts to ensure equal educational rights regardless of gender. Prior to the 7-Point Agenda plan, there was no concept of allowing girls to acquire higher education. However, the provision of quality childhood education has also been listed in the Millennium Development Goals with the aim of reducing poverty. International organizations have been taking measures to raise awareness among the governments of developing countries of the potential for impaired reading and writing skills to hinder economic growth. For this reason, the year 2015 has been designated as the time period by which young children everywhere will be provided with adequate facilities to acquire quality education.

Rivers State is one of the most disadvantaged states in Nigeria from an educational point of view. Although previous administrations have been forming strategies to eradicate illiteracy from the region and ensure proper education for every child, due to worsening communication barriers no strategy has made any considerable difference.

From the data recorded by the federal association of Nigeria, it is obvious that since the implementation of

Universal Basic Education (UBE) in Rivers State in 1999, the number of young children in primary schools has increased considerably. The UBE board, flagged by Obasanjo, not only improved the overall child literacy rate in the region but also minimized gender-based discrimination to some extent. However the UNDP (2002) revealed that due to social and cultural barriers many students drop out of primary school within four years. Thus socio-economic barriers have continued to impact the reading and writing skills of children in Rivers State even after the successful implementation of UBE.

According to a study by Luneau (2002), there are some socio-cultural barriers in Rivers State that hinder the implementation of a communicative approach for improving the reading and writing skills of young children in educational institutes. These factors are:

1. Early Parenting
2. Early Childhood Education
3. Gender-Based Discrimination
4. Child Abuse and Labor

Early Parenting

A number of educators consider the early childhood years as the most important period for developing the social and cognitive skills of children (Ololube, Briggs, Kpolovie & Ezindu, 2010). However, most researchers agree that child development starts prior to kindergarten age, which means that effective early parenting is very important for preparing children for school. A child develops his basic interaction and communication skills from the home. Educators like Zigler (1986), Elkind (1988), and Katz (1987) highlight the fact that an overly formal teaching style is inappropriate for delivering primary education for the reason that a child needs a home-like atmosphere to develop his/her creative skills. These studies emphasize the fact that parents share responsibility with teachers for improving the learning skills of their children.

According to a study by Peisner-Feinberg *et al.* (1999), the combination of effective parenting, a suitable learning environment, and trained teachers can eradicate every socio-cultural barrier which impacts early child development. In Rivers State cross-community marriage is common, which means that the social and cultural differences between parents can adversely affect learning capabilities of a child. Proper parental care and development of basic values are important for the child to develop different aspects of learning and understanding. These factors form the basic components of a child's personality and decide his/her behavior in a social gathering.

To Bronfenbrenner (1986), family values and environment are two of the most important factors which influence the growth, development, and education of a child. Baker, Goesling & Letendre (2002) reveal that parents who pay close attention to their children motivate them to perform better in school. Ololube (2009) demonstrates that proper parenting is the first and most important step for rectifying flaws in the education system. It suggests that the

first step for successfully implementing a communicative approach in educational institutions in Rivers State is to motivate parents to take a keen interest in their children.

Wade and Moore (1998) claim that those children who have exceptional reading and writing skills are supported by their parents. In Rivers State, most women are not literate enough to guide their children through various academic challenges. Programs like UBE have definitely increased the percentage of children enrolled in primary institutions but parents are still unaware of the importance of their guidance. When children of different cultural backgrounds interact with each other, they face great difficulty in communicating with each other due to socio-cultural barriers. Most educational institutions in Rivers State provide a mixed cultural environment to children; young children therefore need proper parental care for overcoming the communication barriers present in educational institutions.

While most studies emphasize parental involvement, in many countries the education system does not educate parents about the ways in which they can help their children overcome many childhood challenges. There are no standards or model defined in any of the research with which to build a balanced system where the responsibility of childhood development is mutually shared by parents and teachers. Sheldon's (2002) study suggests that parental care serves the purpose of an investment in developing the personality of a child. It suggests that the education system in Rivers State is not solely responsible for the worsening impact of socio-cultural barriers on the reading and writing skills of children but that parental ignorance is also one of the most influential factors hindering the successful implementation of a communicative approach. Viewing the importance of early childhood parenting in the light of Coleman and Churchill's (1997) study, one realizes that parental guidance encompasses many aspects of child development. Through the provision of emotional support and educational resources, parents can motivate children to overcome learning disabilities and weaknesses. The study confirms that educational institutions are the ideal place for children to interact with others from different cultural backgrounds, but family environments teach a child how to adjust to these differences.

From these studies, we can conclude that irrespective of the social structure and culture of a society, parental involvement during the early childhood years plays a decisive role in a child's academic success. Moreover, in a society where the educational system is not as well developed as elsewhere, parents share equal responsibility with teachers for developing the basic reading and writing skills of children. According to Epstein (2001), home is the first place where a child experiences cultural and social differences. On the one hand, proper parental guidance can help children adjust to these differences. On the other hand, a family where cultural differences are evident and parents do not give adequate guidance can permanently impair the child's development. Dunst, Trivette & Deal's study (1988) advocates a family-oriented approach whereby parental

support and guidance provide a child with countless opportunities to learn from different ideas and perspectives. In a society where intercultural marriages are common, such as Rivers State, a child can learn to accommodate and adjust to socio-cultural differences at home. By the same logic, lack of parental care limits the learning opportunities and arrests the development of children in Rivers State. Instead of understanding and benefiting from the social and cultural differences, the reading, writing and communication skills of children in Rivers State are adversely affected by lack of parental care.

Early Childhood Education

There are a number of studies that point to the importance of educational programs and vocational training sessions for high schools, colleges and universities in preparing students for job opportunities. Lack of literacy research on early childhood education reflects the problem that educators and policy makers around the world fail to realize the need for proper education systems and policies for kindergarten and primary schools (Ololube, Kpolovie, & Egbezor, 2009). The study by Robinson & Robinson (1968) is the first to highlight the fact that policy makers believe that young children do not have the ability to learn complex reading and writing skills, thus depriving them of potential learning opportunities.

Some studies suggest that proper early education serves the purpose of establishing a firm foundation for learning socio-cultural values as well as how to interact with others of different cultural backgrounds. In a society like Rivers State, which represents a blend of heterogeneous cultures, early education programs can enhance the intellectual skills of children (Reissman, 1962). Moreover, studies by Elkind (1986), Weikart (2000) and Marcon (2002) emphasize that exposing children to formal education and structured academic courses can impact their reading and writing abilities.

Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, and Milburn (1995) claims that pre-school mentoring can help teachers identify a child's strengths and weaknesses. For example, if a child has difficulty recognizing letters of the alphabet, then direct exposure to formal reading can damage their reading skills beyond repair. Further intensifying the need for early pre-school programs in Rivers State is the medium through which education is delivered. For non-native English students, it is always difficult to study in a foreign language. Studies by Featherstone (1986) and Gormley, Gayer, Phillips & Dawson (2005) report that most teachers think that academic courses can develop the reading and writing skills of children, but this conclusion is not necessarily valid. Children need to have a solid understanding of different cultural norms and social structures in order to overcome the communication barriers prevailing in a society.

Child Abuse and Labor

In order to ascertain the impact of abuse and labor on early childhood development and education, it is important to understand the core concept of child labor. While many researchers and international organizations have attempted

to elaborate the concept in light of various theories, laws, experiences, and cultural and social aspects, there is a need to clearly define the boundaries of this phenomenon to encompass all forms of labor and abuse. Every nation has its own notion of the threshold point at which child abuse begins, but all children, irrespective of society, need a peaceful environment to develop their reading, writing and learning skills (Okafor & Bode-Okunade, 2003).

The International Labor Organization (ILO) defines child labor as any physical or mental activity that stresses a child beyond his/her capacity and deprives him/her of early childhood care, education, and development. The ILO (2005) clearly states that all social and cultural practices which prevent a child from acquiring education should be considered a form of child abuse. Contrary to popular perception, according to which only physical torture should be considered abuse, if a child is forcefully deprived of the resources for adequate development, then he/she is abused. The ILO suggests that all forms of abuse can permanently impair the intellectual development and communication skills of a child. In many Third World countries child labor is a common practice due to poverty and illiteracy. Child labor robs children of the opportunity to acquire an education and foster their personal development. Worst of all, child labor destroys the dignity of children and sacrifices their self-esteem, thus endangering their learning abilities. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has declared child labor the most hazardous threat to early childhood education and development. The Convention has highlighted several times that child labor wastes precious time that should be devoted to the development of a child's personality and academic skills.

Empirical research studies explain that in developing nations where there are no laws to restrict child labor, only financially stable families provide their children with adequate resources to acquire an education. This deadlock situation in most poor countries is the main driving force behind the worsening poverty in these countries. Many research studies focusing on Nigeria suggest that children work to earn a living and a very low percentage of working children attend schools. A large percentage of education-deprived children are those who have to work for their families. While the standard of living is not very high in Nigeria, in large families with inadequate financial resources, children are forced to work at a very early age (Edmonds, 2008).

The condition of child labor and abuse in Rivers State is as poor as in any other state in Nigeria. A number of children are abused by their parents, employers, and educators daily. Due to poverty, illiteracy, and no strict enforcement of laws, the situation is worsening day by day. Child abuse in Rivers State has further limited the opportunities for children to overcome social and cultural barriers. Forced labor creates financial discrimination between financially stable and unstable children, thus hindering the successful implementation of a communicative approach in educational institutions (Corby, 2006).

Evaluation of Case Studies

A number of case studies have been conducted to investigate the issues confronting the primary education system of Rivers State. The government of Rivers State has taken several measures in collaboration with international organizations to facilitate adequate opportunities for children to develop their academic abilities, including their reading and writing skills. Some of the case studies and educational programs are evaluated here in order to analyze the flaws in previously adopted strategies and propose an all-encompassing solution for the successful implementation of a communicative approach. Moreover, the evaluation of case studies will help parents understand the importance of proper parental care in overcoming all the socio-cultural barriers prevailing in a metropolitan society like Rivers State.

The current governor of the Rivers State, Chibuike Amaechi, has taken appreciable measures to provide young children with the means to complete primary, secondary, and higher education. Onwumere's (2011) report summarizes an important step taken by the government of Rivers State to reduce the impact of social, cultural and financial differences on the education system. As several international organizations including the United Nations note, most children who cannot acquire education are underprivileged and victims of child labor. Thus two important negative aspects of Rivers State society, poverty and unaffordable education, prevent the implementation of a communicative approach. To resolve these two issues, Chibuike Amaechi joined hands with UNICEF in 2011 and signed the Programme Implementation Agreement (PIA). The representative of UNICEF analyzed the social structure and education system of the Rivers State, and suggested that a simultaneous focus on upgrading the standards of the education system and eradicating social differences is needed for successful implementation of PIA. Mr. Charles Nzuki, a UNICEF official, appealed to the governor to start eliminating the differences between prestigious and low status schools. The program not only aims at providing an education to the poor children in Rivers State, but also at eradicating those differences that have divided the society in terms of social class. UNICEF and the government of Rivers State agreed that these barriers can impact the communication skills and learning abilities of children. Therefore, the first step of the program is the establishment of a fair and accessible education system in which children can learn various aspects.

Due to the unavailability of resources and manpower, as well as existing social and cultural differences, successful implementation of PIA might take a decade or more. The success of this program can be evaluated based on the fact that 5000 teachers have been enlisted for training. The aim of this training program is to modify the education system in order to provide children from different family backgrounds with an interactive environment to develop their reading and writing skills. The enlisted teacher will be trained in the UBE

software program. Although all the details of the program have not been revealed to the public, the training of teachers on such a large scale serves as a milestone in the promotion of a communicative approach in the schools of Rivers State.

A case study conducted by Idumange (2005) focused on the prevalence of gender-based discrimination in Rivers State and its impact on the communication skills and learning abilities of children in the region. It is observed that there is only a slight difference in population in terms of gender and over the years this difference has not changed much. More importantly, according to the findings of this case study only 50 percent of girls are given the opportunity to acquire a basic education. This means that every year 50 percent of the children in Rivers State are deprived of education as a result of gender discrimination. This deprivation not only lowers the literacy rate, but also impacts the communication skills of children who are attending school. With very little interaction with girls during academic years, most males in Rivers State face communication problems in working with female colleagues. Moreover, most mothers in Rivers State are not literate, so they cannot help their children develop their reading and writing skills.

Becow (2008) evaluated children and young people (0–19) with speech, language and communication needs. This report makes recommendations to government about the steps it should take to transform provision for and the experiences of children and young people with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) and their families. These recommendations are a culmination of ten months of extensive evidence gathering and analysis, as well as consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. During the Review he identified five key themes/issues that need to be addressed for real change and improvement to happen, and recommendations are gathered under these five themes: communication is crucial; early identification and intervention are essential; a continuum of services designed around the family is needed; Joint working is critical; and the current system is characterized by high variability and a lack of equity.

The national policy of education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004) focused on the formation of some pre-school policies to facilitate improved educational standards for children. According to these policies, the most important factor in improving the learning and reading skills of children lies in parental involvement in childhood education. However, there have been no training programs for parents to date.

5. Findings

Based on the evaluation of case studies and scholarly journals, this study has highlighted various socio-cultural barriers. Some of the important findings of this study are as follows:

- There are three main driving forces impacting the

education system in Rivers State: improper parental care, child abuse and labor, and untrained teaching staff;

- Poverty, illiteracy and gender-based discrimination are three of the most important socio-cultural barriers which have divided the education system of Rivers State in terms of social class;
- While the present government is taking several measures to rectify the problems with the education system and provide children with adequate opportunities for developing their reading and writing skills, the government budget and lack of capital is delaying the execution of many educational programs.

All these findings are based on a meta-analysis of recent and authentic secondary data. As this study aims to propose solutions for overcoming the challenges faced by the children of Rivers State due to socio-cultural barriers, prior research studies have been consulted. Moreover, in order to increase the reliability of the findings, those cases studies have been selected which include primary surveys of a large sample.

6. Conclusions / Recommendations

The research study is based on a meta-analysis of various qualitative and quantitative research studies. In evaluating the data collected from secondary resources, the study concludes that a communicative approach to delivering content is far more effective than a theoretical approach, keeping in view the socio-cultural barriers prevailing in Rivers State. As most of the children belong to modest family circumstances, it is important to provide opportunities for them to overcome the challenges posed by cultural and social differences.

The present system of education in Rivers State is flawed and promotes class differences. The respected schools that boast high quality academic facilities are unaffordable for underprivileged children who are the focus of this research. A high percentage of such children cannot afford the cost of a private education. The government of Rivers State has signed a program in collaboration with UNICEF to revise the infrastructure of the current education system by training teachers.

The various strategies including the training programs implemented by the government to promote international standards of education have effectively reduced the impact of socio-cultural barriers. Therefore, it is concluded that teachers' training and modifications to the academic curriculum can help children of Rivers State develop their reading and writing skills. From the analysis it is also concluded that parental guidance and involvement would be highly beneficial in motivating children to improve their academic skills despite the discussed challenges.

Previous research studies have been consulted to develop a theoretical framework that highlights the issues of a particular time period; for this reason many studies cannot

help future researchers investigate the socio-cultural barriers prevailing in reading and writing among Rivers State children. This study intends to provide a solid foundation for future researchers, consequently the findings address the generic issues of Rivers State that impact the reading and writing skills of children.

Very few studies are based on a hybrid research methodology or meta-analysis. Case studies are mainly based on quantitative analysis, while most research studies have adopted a qualitative approach. Whereas these studies are not inclusive and cover some particular area of a problem, this study is based on a meta-analysis of scholarly research, including recent case studies, to address all aspects of the problems of reading and writing.

Unlike prior research that discusses the findings of surveys or statistical data, this study is divided into two parts: the theoretical framework and the evaluation of case studies. In the evaluation section, the problem is addressed, while in the literature review scholarly perspectives are discussed to solve the problems. Thus this research not only summarizes the socio-cultural barriers of Rivers State, but also proposes a solution for policy makers to overcome these challenges. This study suggests that specialized interventions, which provide school readiness skills to children early in their school years, enhance children's learning performance in core curriculum areas, such as reading and writing as they move into more formalized schooling accounts for better transition to higher level education (Ololube et al., 2010; Nonoyama-Tarumi & Bredenberg, 2009).

Therefore it is recommended that future studies are conducted to assist the government and private organizations of Rivers State in eradicating the barriers that impact the reading and writing skills of children. Moreover, future studies should focus on the weaknesses in the education system and the promotion of early childhood education programs in Rivers State. Many researchers (e.g., Agabi, 2010; Asuka & Paulley, 2008) claim that Nigeria, as a third world country, cannot revive its educational infrastructure programs. However, researchers should promote those ways through which the government of Nigeria, especially in Rivers State can make the most of its available resources.

In any case, this study may have been affected to some extent by the time the study was conducted:

- As this study relies on prior research and case studies, it was difficult to find relevant studies. A number of case studies focused on Nigeria as a whole, so it was necessary to consider their relevance to Rivers State.
- To increase accuracy, recent statistical reports and case studies were consulted. As Rivers State has been plagued by poverty, illiteracy and socio-cultural barriers for years, many studies were discarded because they did not contain present findings.
- Another limitation of the study is to relate data to the specific context of Rivers State.
- Multiple surveys were needed for this research study, so a number of case studies which include primary surveys

are cited in this research.

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