



# COMMON READING PROBLEMS IN SCHOOLS

It is important for parents to be able to recognise when a child has a reading problem in order to help the child learn to read well. It is possible to have children who can pronounce words very well without understanding what they are reading.

Research has shown that children with reading problems fall into one of the following categories:

1. The child can recite from the class reader (course book) without recognition or understanding of printed words.
2. The child can call words from the book with correct pronunciation but without understanding.
3. The child can read easy books but not the level of books used in his class.
4. The child is in upper primary and has not learned to read at all.

## **The child can recite passages without understanding or recognizing individual words**

Most children with reading difficulties often memorize passages in their textbooks. The moment they look at the pictures they know which passage to recite. This is common in classes where teachers encourage pupils to read after them or where children are encouraged to repeat passages orally over and over. Children who recite instead of reading are at times said to be "reading off head". This is a good indication that children in this category cannot read at all.

The teacher should consider it very important to identify such children in class. Watch out for children not following the book when they read orally. The teacher can do this by moving up and down the room to identify children looking around or outside the window, when reading. Each child should open to page to be read, before they start reading.

The teacher should encourage children to point to each word they read with hand or a broom-stick at the beginning stage when they are learning to read. However, this should be discouraged later when the child can read. Later, pupils can learn to use a folded piece of paper as a line marker to help them follow without pointing to individual words.

### **The Role of the Teacher**

Immediately you discover a child that appears to be reading “off head”, test the child’s ability to read some of the same words when they are written on the blackboard or a piece of paper. The teacher can write individual words, use the same words to make different sentences, and then ask the child to read them. Make sure that you don’t administer this test in a way that the child is disgraced, but you could test the child while the rest of the class is outside for break or engaged in written work. When you identify such a child, give the child some extra help in future; if possible plan separate lessons and activities for this child.

### **THE CHILD CALLS WORDS FROM A PASSAGE WITH CORRECT PRONUNCIATION BUT WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING**

We have another group of children who have learned how to pronounce words in print but have not learned to obtain meaning from print. Such children learn to pronounce the words by learning letter-sound relationships. We, however, know that pronunciation is not the same thing as understanding

the meaning of such words. Some children are able to read orally in such a way that what they say sounds meaningful to a listener even if it is not meaningful to them. The teacher can recognise pupils who call words but do not understand them by regularly testing of silent reading comprehension of all children in the class as part of his continuous assessment.

### **The Role of The Teacher**

To test pupil's understanding of what they read, the teacher should first require them to read silently from their books. After this, ask them questions about the passage. The teacher can ask the children to draw pictures about what they read. Constant use of this method will show the teacher which pupils are consistently poor in understanding even though they seem to read well orally. The teacher then needs to test these pupils individually to confirm that they have such a problem. You can ask the children to read a short story differently from the book used in class. After reading, each pupil should be asked to retell the story in his own words. When necessary, the teacher will easily learn which children understand what they read by judging their ability to retell the story.

### **THE CHILD CAN READ EASY BOOKS BUT NOT THE LEVEL OF BOOKS USED IN HIS CLASS**

Learning to read is a continuous process. It does not happen suddenly in primary one or primary two. Children normally start to recognise words by sight. Later, they gradually acquire other skills, which assist them in recognizing words, which they may not have seen in print before.

### **The Role of the Teacher**

#### **Development of Word Recognition skills**

Children may learn to identify words using phonics or letter-sound relationships. Children may learn to use the

context of a sentence or passage to help them identify an unfamiliar word. They may also learn how to analyze the structure of some unfamiliar words in order to recognise them. Each of these techniques is efficiently made use of by good readers.

### **Development of Comprehension Skills**

Children also gradually acquire skill in the ability to comprehend passages. Initially, they are best able to understand passages written in language which is very similar to their own spoken language and which is about things within their own personal experience. Gradually they learn how to understand passages written in more complex language and they learn about things less directly related to their experience.

The rate at which children develop these skills vary. Some fall behind because of frequent absence from school or unfavourable conditions, e.g. overcrowded classrooms, change of textbooks or teachers. However, in schools where the pupils are first taught how to read in English, children who have less opportunity to learn to speak English are slower in learning how to read. We cannot, therefore, assume that all pupils in a class are equally ready to read textbooks for that class level. For example, a primary six teacher should understand that just because the child is in class six does not mean that each child is able to read class six books. Some would have only enough skills to be able to read the easier lower level books.

### **Reading Level Assessment**

A teacher's continuous assessment of reading comprehension is useful for identifying pupils with reading problems. If a child fails to read his level book, lower level books could be used to test his ability to read easier books. This can be done using a teacher-made reading level assessment book.

A teacher can make a reading level assessment book by pinning or gumming passages cut from old textbooks into special exercise book. Passages or copies from lower level English/Reading texts are preferred. If you discover that pupils may have memorized parts of the books used in a lower class, the teacher should cut out only the written parts of each page so the children will not see any of the pictures which might help them recognise the passage. Cut about two or three passages from book one to put in the first pages and labeled level one. Two or three passages from book two will be attached to the next pages and labeled level two and so on.

In using a reading level assessment book, it should be used individually for each child being tested. The teacher should ask each child to read the passages on each level silently, starting with the easiest. Ask each child to retell each passage in his own words after reading. Any time the child is unable to retell a passage, stop testing the child. The teacher should write each child's name in his note or lesson note and state the levels of books the child was able to understand. This information will be used later in planning future lessons.

### **THE CHILD IS IN UPPER PRIMARY AND HAS NOT LEARNED TO READ AT ALL**

Pupils with most serious reading difficulties are those who have not been able to read by the time they reach upper primary. They are easily identified in class as those who cannot read. This also affects their performance in most other subjects, including being able to write. Any time they copy from the board, they usually write words joined together without space; they miss out entire words, letters or even lines. They normally refuse to pass their exercise books. They rarely pay attention in class. In some cases, they stay out of class.

It is important for teachers to understand that even bright children can fail to learn to read at the usual age and that no

child is too old to learn to read. After identification and assessment of children, the parents and teachers have a lot to do to help children with reading problems.

### **How Teachers Can Help Children With Reading Problems**

1. **Stimulating children's interest in learning to read:** The first thing a teacher can do is to move those pupils who need extra help near the front of the class where she can watch them more closely to ensure that they are paying attention and participating in the lessons. Next thing to do is to motivate the children with reading difficulties to want to learn to read well. The class teacher should be educated on how school failure can affect a child's attitude toward learning. Some of the students with several years of reading failure and disgrace at school may at first appear very indifferent to special help from the teacher. The teacher should give such pupils the opportunity to gain a feeling of success in reading.

When children experience some success in learning to read, they begin to gain confidence in their ability and become willing to try. They should not be given work too difficult for them even if it is below what is given to other class members. The teacher should build up self-confidence in the child by giving him encouragement. Avoid negative comments, e.g. 'You can't even read this simple passage', 'You are poor in reading', etc. Instead the teacher should show that he has confidence in the child and that he expects the child to be able to succeed. If the child is discouraged, say something like this: 'That was difficult, wasn't it? We will try again next time; it might be easier for us', etc.

Children should be helped to understand that reading is communication. Children with less exposure to books at home may not understand why they have to learn to read; these children may see reading as not being enjoyable. Such a child

might not likely learn to recognise the communicative function of reading.

The teacher can use write signs and messages for communication in the classroom. Writing labels on objects in the classroom is a good start. You could put signs like ‘Please keep the door open’ or ‘Keep the door shut’. This message can be written and put in class for those who can read.

It is okay to start a day in lower primary classes with “News on the Board”. This method is an excellent technique to help pupils learn to recognise that reading can be a personally meaningful way to communicate. The news may look like this:

**St. Luke’s News, Class 3B**

**Good morning, children.**

**Today is Friday, April 6, 2002.**

Teachers should also try to relate language to children’s personal experiences. Children can gain experiences when they accompany older family members to shop, visit friends, and are encouraged to observe and explore their environment. When the child’s experiences are very limited, his language will be limited too. Lack of experiences is a serious problem for someone learning to read. People can provide explanations when talking about an unfamiliar topic but books cannot. A reader is, therefore, dependent upon his own prior knowledge based on his own experiences.

## **2. Well developed spoken language skills:**

Early language stimulation is very important. Children develop these skills when adult talk to them at home, listen to them talk and encourage them to express their thoughts, e.g. greet parents or other children. They may be taught riddles and taught songs by grandparents. Children that grow up in townships, whose parents work during the day, are often left at home with only a small girl to look after them. Parents often come home too tired and busy to spend time with their children.

This results in some children coming to school with poorly developed spoken language skills.

It is equally important for a child to first be able to speak the language he will learn to read, which is English as the situation is with Nigeria. Most children who cannot read are taught reading in English before they can speak it. Lack of developed spoken English skills leads to failure in learning how to read. Such children may be bright and perfectly capable of becoming good readers. But they might have never learned to read because they missed the opportunity to acquire the spoken language foundation first.

### **3. Curiosity about print and an interest in books**

In school, you see children who have come to school very to read, while you still have others with no understanding of what reading is all about. If a child grows up in a home where he sees family members read books and newspapers often, he is likely to look forward to a day he can also read too. A child that sees people enjoy reading instead of just reading for examinations is likely to grow and enjoy that reading can be personally meaningful. Such children when taken out enjoy and try to read signs, name the letters on captions, etc. However, children who grow up in environments where there are no books, when exposed to textbooks, especially written in a language different from the one they speak, often feel intimidated and confused.

An easy measure of a child's interest is his ability to write his own name. The most important word to a child is his own name. A child who has not paid enough attention to what his own name looks like in print to be able to write it correctly is not likely to have over paid enough attention to other words to be ready to learn how to read them.

There are some practical ways teachers can help develop reading readiness within the usual classroom routine, if he



identifies some children with reading difficulties who are lacking in reading readiness. They include:

**a) Expanding pupils' experiences**

You can have pupils report their observations, orally or in writing. To provide new experiences, the teacher can create a learning centre in the classroom. You could have a nature table and display many learning activities. For example, you could have seeds, colours, shapes of different sizes, etc. Children can dramatize the planting of difficult kinds of seeds, draw pictures, diagrams, etc. You can change items in the nature corner to include other subjects after 4 to 6 weeks in order to vary the activities.

To also expand pupils' range of experiences, use pictures of people, places and things, which may be new to the children. You could have pictures in old wall calendars collected from friends, and this is not expensive to do.

You could also expand pupils' background of experiences by taking them on class excursions. Take children for a walk excursion around and beyond the school compound. If a van is available they could be taken to distant places to get more exposure. Carefully prepare excursions in order to encourage the pupils to actively anticipate their observations, and their behaviour during the excursion. Follow up activities should be given to them afterwards in order to guide the pupils to reflect upon and apply their new knowledge. They can prepare written reports on their observations, or they can be asked to write an imaginary story based on what they saw. They can make models of the various forms of transportation using easily available materials, e.g. wire, empty cartons, bottle caps, etc.

**b) Developing pupils' language skills**

Teachers can provide "Language Model" as she discusses and describes her observations, and those of the

children. Encourage pupils to talk about their observations in their own words. The teacher can help a child that has problem expressing himself with word or phrase he thinks the child needs to convey his thoughts.

Also, written reports should be in the child's own words. The teacher should not write report for children who have not begun to learn to read but can ask child to draw pictures and label them instead. A technique good for lower primary classes who have begun to learn to read is the language experience method.

**c) Stimulation of children's interest in reading**

This could be done using Literacy Awareness Programme (LAP) and news on the board. If the class teacher places these pupils in the front of the classroom, he is likely to remember to keep them alert and actively involved in all reading activities.

The teacher should also individualize his teaching by using techniques such as language experience method and providing appropriate level books.