



## Basic Tenets of Experiential Learning in Emergent Reading Activities in Early Childhood Development and Education Centres in Kenya: A Comparison of Public and Private Schools

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### Abstract

*Emergent reading competencies are building blocks for learning to read. To successfully acquire these competencies, learners have to be supported to utilize their interest and talents through personalized or experiential learning. Kenya is currently implementing a Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) which aims to make learners active participants in the learning process. However recent studies have shown that teachers still tend to teach content as opposed to building competencies. The focus of this study was to assess if teaching activities in emergent reading instruction in Kenya conform to the basic tenets of experiential learning. The study utilized the survey research design. Data was collected from 102 Pre-Primary one (PPI) teachers in public and 34 in private pre-schools who were randomly selected from Bureti Sub-County in Kenya, using questionnaire and observation checklist. The study found that basic tenets of experiential learning are largely adhered to in the public pre-schools, while there is still a lot to be desired in the private schools. The study recommends that continuous retraining was necessary especially in the private entities as well as availing experts in the field to mentor teachers and model best practice in competency based education.*

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## 1. Introduction

Under the Vision 2030, the government of Kenya is committed to endow its citizens with globally competitive and quality education. To arrive at this target, the government strives to provide quality early childhood education (ECE). Early Childhood Education is defined as the period from birth to eight years old, a time of remarkable growth with brain development at its peak. It is an important phase in the life of a child because it is at this stage that the foundations of all other later learning are laid (UNESCO, 2019). In ECE Emergent reading competencies are building blocks for learning to read, while learning to read is crucial to children's success in school and to their optimal life trajectories (Innis, 2015; Weitzman & Greenberg, 2010).

These early literacy skills do not develop on their own, they have to be stimulated. They occur when children are consistently given opportunities to talk, read, sing and play with motivated and engaged adults who in turn promote an interest in, and enthusiasm for, language in oral and written form (Bardige & Senegal, 2005).

A critical aspect of emergent literacy, according to Axelsson, Lundqvist, and Sandberg (2019) is the attitude towards reading that children acquire in the early years by interacting with language, books and print. If early experiences with books and reading are fun, exciting, and enjoyable for a child, that child is likely to continue to feel that way about reading throughout life. Wang (2018) suggests that the understanding of concepts must go hand in hand with the acquisition of skill and knowledge to develop competence.

It is within this spirit that Kenya's Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) aims at fostering both lower and high level skills concurrently where the teacher remains a guide or facilitator while the learner constructs their own knowledge through exploration and experiential learning (Republic of Kenya, 2017). Experiential learning in its simplest form means learning from experience or learning by doing (Lewis & Williams, 1994). Essentially, the aim of the language activity area in pre-primary curriculum is to experientially develop oral,

reading readiness competencies in order to lay the foundation for reading competence, which the focus of this study is.

## **2. The Research Problem**

Competence-based Education (CBE) with its teaching and learning approaches has received a good deal of attention and support within the educational profession in recent years (Mbarushimana & Kuboja, 2016). CBE is described as an institutional process that moves education from focusing on what academics believe graduates need to know (teacher-focused) to what students need to know and be able to do in varying and complex situations (Hoogveld, Pass, & Jochems, 2005). A competency is where a learner has attained the ability to perform a task to a point at which he/she is reasonably expected to perform at a particular level. Kenya is currently implementing a Competency Based Curriculum (CBC). The CBC aims that as learners grow they are active participants in the learning process through collaborating with others in group projects, hands-on exploration, and aiming at authentic tasks and product development (Republic of Kenya, 2017). However, a study by Momanyi and Rop (2019) found that in the new CBC teachers still tend to teach content as opposed to building competencies. They indicated that teachers are still employing teacher centred approaches as opposed to the discovery methods that allow learners to utilize their interest and talents to acquire skills and competencies through personalized or experiential learning. In the light of these revelations, the focus of this study was to assess if teaching activities in emergent reading instruction in Kenya conforms to the basic tenets of experiential learning in the spirit of the CBE.

## **3. Literature Review**

Emergent literacy is the knowledge, skills and attitudes that children develop before they learn the conventions of formal reading and writing (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2010). This section performs a review of related literature on aspects that relate to the basic tenets of experiential learning. It first examines writings on tenets of experiential learning, then, on teaching strategies and environments that support implementation of these strategies and consequently draws a deduction from them.

### *3.1. Basic Tenets of Experiential Learning*

A tenet is defined by Walpole (2017) as short, concise ground rules for engaging with a wide variety of situations. In the field of education, principles help guide and inform practice (Nicol, 2007; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Numerous scholars have fashioned tenets relating to experiential learning thus:

Kujalova (2005) highlights experimentation and the field demonstration method where instruction should be practical and of easy application in solving problems. He underscores the inductive method where students work from the specific to the general principles, and also stresses the problem-solving method where good teachers keep good problems created out of situations before the minds of their students. Kujalova further suggests that experiential education will lead to genuine (meaningful and long-lasting) learning. He emphasizes on learner's free decision-making and the sense of responsibility for his/her decisions. This is also connected with the principle of involving levels of risk, comprising physical, emotional, social or intellectual difficulty to be overcome by an exercise of intelligence.

Weibell (2011) considers that experiential learning has a quality of personal involvement in which the whole person in both his feeling and cognitive aspects is in the learning event. He believes that in experiential learning actions are self-initiated, the learner has the sense of discovery, of reaching out, of grasping and comprehending from within, tasks are evaluated by the learner and that when learning takes place, the element of meaning to the learner is built into the whole experience.

In his part, Burnard (1989) suggests underlining attributes that define an experiential learning activity as action, reflection, Phenomenological, Subjective human experience and Human experience as a source of learning. Action denotes that the learner is not a passive receptacle but an active participant; and there is physical movement, not just sitting. Reflection indicates that learning only occurs after the action is reflected upon. The meaning of phenomenological that objects or situations are described without assigning values, meanings or interpretations; the learner must ascribe meaning to what is going on; and the facilitator's meaning must not be automatically forced upon the student, while subjective human experience suggests that a view of the world is the learner's not the facilitator's. Human experience as a source of learning indicates that experiential learning is an attempt to make use of personal involvement as part of the learning process.

### *3.2. Essential Teaching Strategies in Early Reading*

Readers aren't just born, they're nurtured and created (Paul & Russo, 2019). Effective reading instruction encompasses a range of teaching practices that provide varying levels of support at different points of need (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). This means that the education provided in early childhood has to ensure the differentiated stimulation of children, encouraging exploration, exercises, tests and experiments as autonomous learning experiences. However, Schickedanz (2003) disapproves of structured, prescriptive, and rigid pre-reading content but rather it should be embedded in the basic activities of early learning and play long embraced by early education practice and research.

Studies have shown that play offers many opportunities to facilitate literacy learning (Berk, 1994; Morrow & Rand, 1991; Neuman & Roskos, 1993). Giving children the opportunities to explore and use literacy through their daily routines and play is effective in increasing the range and amount of literacy behaviours during play, thus allowing children to practice their emerging skills and show what they have learned (Neuman & Roskos, 1993). Therefore any strategy employed for emergent reading has to be play-based and experiential in nature.

Oral language is also crucial in emergent reading as it lays the foundation for the reading and writing skills children will develop as they enter and progress through school (Reeder & Baxa, 2017). Oral language can be defined as the ability to hear, understand and interpret a spoken discourse (Gillen & Hall, 2013). These include rich teacher talk reading aloud, circle time, small group activities, adult-child conversations, storytelling and play (Roskos, Christie, Richgels, & Donald, 2003). Having a solid foundation in oral language will help children become successful readers and strong communicators as well as build their confidence and overall sense of well-being (Reeder & Baxa, 2017). Therefore teachers should expose learners to plenty of oral language activities and play.

Reading aloud has maximum learning potential when children have opportunities to actively participate and respond (Morrow & Gambrell, 2001). In Storybook reading aloud the teacher exposes children to numerous enjoyable stories, poems, and information books while providing supportive conversations and activities before, during, and after reading. Lindberg and Swedlow (1980) believe that repeated reading of favourite books builds familiarity, increasing the likelihood that children will attempt to read those books on their own.

Another strategy for emergent reading instruction is shared book experience. Shared reading occurs when a more experienced reader reads a text book to a group of readers. Lindberg and Swedlow (1980) consider that the first books that a child is exposed to and the ways in which they are introduced may determine his literary tastes for a lifetime. Shared book reading facilitates better emergent reading experience and supports better reading outcomes.

### **3.3. Environments Supporting Emergent Reading**

Creating a literacy-rich environment offers children opportunities for engaging in emergent literacy behaviours in a meaningful and authentic way, (Bardige & Senegal, 2005; Fellowes & Oakley, 2014). An environment that supports emergent literacy is full of possibilities for imagining and opportunities for pretend play. It provides children with not only a wealth of spoken and written words but also many opportunities to engage in reading, writing, singing, and storytelling activities.

Neaum (2000) suggests a number of authentic ways this can be achieved, including, actively engaging in talk with the children; Labelling toy boxes and cupboards, labelling children's work and other displays, providing menus, price lists, appointment books, maps, instructions, leaflets, notebooks and pencils, reference books, charts; reading and enjoying books, and ensuring that books are included as part of the resources at activities. It is also important that areas where children work are cosy and inviting so that children are drawn to them (Hill, 2009; Neuman & Bredekamp, 2000).

Evidence emanating from this literature indicates that success in emergent reading hinges on the strategies as well as the environments that support its instruction. The above readings bring out very distinct principles of experiential learning. First, learning has to be action oriented where the learner is an active participant. Secondly, there is emphasis on learner's free decision-making where the learner participates in devising of actions and takes responsibility for his/her decisions. Thirdly the learner should ascribe meaning to what is learned and be able to apply knowledge to solving everyday problems.

## **4. Methodology**

This study employed the survey research design. A survey is a process used in collecting people's thoughts, opinions, and feelings from a relatively large number of cases from existing population units with no particular control over factors that may affect the population characteristics of interest (Zechmeister, 2003). The study was carried out in selected public and private ECDE centres in Bureti Sub County in Kenya. It targeted pre-primary one (PP1) teachers selected from the schools of the study. The information was collected using questionnaire and observation checklist. Using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, simple random sampling was used to select 102 teachers proportionately drawn from public and 34 from private pre-primary. Four teachers in public PP1 and two in private were randomly selected for classroom observation in a pre-reading lesson.

## **5. Theoretical Framework**

This study was anchored on the Experiential learning theory proposed by Kolb (1984). According to Kolb learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Kolb created the experiential learning theory anticipating to attest how children need to experience things in order to learn. In Kolb's theory, the impetus for the development of new concepts is provided by new experiences. Kolb's theory was used to generate the variables tested in this study.

### 6. Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of data analysis on whether teachers in ECDE centres in Bureti Sub-county aligned activities for emergent reading to the basic tenets/principles of experiential learning.

In this survey, teachers were asked to consider ten items that sought information for the study. Table 1 and 2 summarize teachers' responses in public and private pre-schools respectively. In the discussion, Strongly Agree (SA) and Agree (A) were collapsed into one, (Agree) just as Disagree (D) and Strongly disagree (SD) into Disagree.

**Table-1.** Alignment of Emergent Reading Activities to the Tenets of Experiential Learning in public schools.

	SA		A		U		D		SD		T	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Tenets of experiential learning												
When carrying out activities for teaching reading:												
Learners take part in the selection of activities	8	7.84	18	17.65	0	0.00	46	45.10	30	29.41	102	100
The learner is always active but not passive participant	44	43.14	48	47.06	1	0.98	7	6.86	2	1.96	102	100
There is always free movement in the classroom	29	28.43	53	51.97	1	0.98	15	14.71	4	3.92	102	100
Pupils communicate with each other freely	39	38.24	53	51.97	1	0.98	8	7.84	1	0.98	102	100
The learning environment challenges the learner by changing their expectation often	25	24.51	45	44.12	8	7.8	21	20.59	3	2.94	102	100
The learning environment encourages adventure	33	32.35	51	50.00	4	3.92	12	11.76	2	1.96	102	100
Learners are guided to use their own experience (what they have seen / heard before ) in solving problems and carrying out an activity	42	41.17	44	43.14	2	1.96	12	11.76	2	1.96	102	100
Learners are allowed to make their own conclusion and to form their own opinions	22	21.56	46	45.10	7	6.86	18	17.65	9	8.82	102	100
Learners take responsibility for their actions	25	24.51	50	49.02	3	2.94	15	14.71	9	8.82	102	100
There is follow –up of every activity (discussion, assignments, post mortem etc)	44	43.14	46	45.10	0	0.00	7	6.86	5	4.5	102	100

Source: Field data (2020).

As shown on Table 1, majority 76(74.51%) of teachers in the public pre-schools said they did not involve their learners in the selection of learning activities. Only 26(25.49%) alluded to involve their learners in selection of activities. The same state of affairs was in the private schools where most teachers, 27(79.41%) said that their learners did not participate in selection of learning activities. A paltry 26 (25.49%) in the public and 7 (20.59%) in the private conformed to Weibell (2011) proposal that for an activity to qualify to be experiential it has to be self-initiated, even when the impetus or stimulus comes from the outside (the teacher), the sense of discovery, of reaching out, of grasping and comprehending, comes from within (the learner). In other words, ideas for experiential events must originate from the learner and not prescribed by the teacher.

Table-2. Experiential Learning in private schools.

	SA		A		U		D		SD		T	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Tenets of experiential learning												
When carrying out activities for teaching reading:												
Learners take part in the selection of activities	2	5.88	5	14.71	0	0.00	10	29.41	17	50.00	34	100
The learner is always active but not passive participant	7	20.59	10	29.41	3	8.82	8	23.53	6	17.65	34	100
There is always free movement in the classroom	5	14.71	8	23.53	0	0.00	7	20.59	14	41.19	34	100
Pupils communicate with each other freely	12	35.29	7	20.59	1	2.94	6	17.65	8	23.53	34	100
The learning environment challenges the learner by changing their expectation often	10	29.41	5	14.71	1	2.94	12	35.29	6	17.65	34	100
The learning environment encourages adventure	3	8.82	7	20.59	0	0.00	14	41.18	10	29.41	34	100
Learners are guided to use their own experience (what they have seen / heard before) in solving problems and carrying out an activity	3	8.82	8	23.53	2	5.88	12	35.29	9	26.47	34	100
Learners are allowed to make their own conclusion and to form their own opinions	11	32.35	10	29.41	0	0.00	9	26.47	4	11.76	34	100
Learners take responsibility for their actions	8	23.53	9	26.47	5	14.71	7	20.59	5	14.71	34	100
There is follow –up of every activity (discussion, assignments, post mortem etc.)	8	8.82	6	11.76	0	0.00	11	47.06	9	32.35	34	100

Source: Field data (2020).

A bulk 92(90.20%) participants in the public schools acknowledged that when carrying out activities for teaching reading the learner was an active but not a passive participant. Only 9(8.82%) indicated that in their emergent reading lessons learners were not active. Similarly, a larger number 17(50%) in the private schools had their learners active during class activities. This resonates well with [Burnard \(1989\)](#) contention that activities cannot be experiential unless the learner takes part actively but not as a passive vessel. However, the results reveal that the proportion indicated by private school teachers 14(41.18%) as not being active in reading lessons was remarkably high. This tendency was confirmed in the classroom observations where it was a hive of activity in the four public school classrooms, most of the pupils were fully engrossed in activities. An example is presented on [Figure 1](#).



Figure-1. A classroom activity in a public pre-school.

The contrary was seen in the two private schools in observation, where the teacher mostly used demonstrations, probably because of limited classroom space. One case is presented in [Figure 2](#). This class had



68 pupils in a 4 by 4 metre classroom, which seemed to have initially meant for something else, not a classroom. The children were sitting very close together because of the limited space. There was not even enough space for the teacher to carry out demonstrations. The large number of pupils in the class also posed a challenge in provision of enough materials for individual or even group work. The situation in the private school is worrying because these children are likely to miss out on benefits derived from physical activity which include increased learning capacity as well as confidence and concentration from an early age.



**Figure-2.** A reading lesson in private pre-school.

Majority 82(80.39%) in the public schools indicated that free movement while activities were being carried out was common place in their classrooms. Only 19(18.63%) differed that their pupils moved freely in class. In the four observed public classrooms pupils moved around to borrow items and observe what other groups were doing. This matches up with [Dotson-Renta \(2016\)](#) who opined that in experiential learning movement allows children to connect concepts to action and to learn through trial and error. It was the reverse in the private schools where a vast majority of respondents, 21(61.76%) disagreed that there was free movement in their classrooms in the course of activity. 13(38.24%), way below half said that their pupils moved freely during activities. This went against [Dotson-Renta's](#) caution that the restriction of movement, especially at a young age, impedes the experiential learning process.

Most of the teachers 92(90.17% in the public schools and slightly more than half 19(55.88%) in the private schools claimed that pupils communicated with each other freely during the activities. Based on the observation in the four public school classrooms, generally pupils talked freely with excitement as they shared materials and ideas. In one classroom a pupil was spotted calling out her discoveries to anyone who cared to listen while in another pupils were busy debating fiercely about what they had learnt. It was dissimilar in the two private schools because a lot of teacher talk and teacher control was observed. Pupils were restrained from talking to each other and in one of the classrooms the teacher kept shouting at pupils to keep quiet. Class control here was feasibly difficult.

For learners to experience productive struggle they need to be presented with appropriately challenging work. [Livy, Muir, and Sullivan \(2018\)](#) consider that Productive struggle leads to productive classrooms where students work on complex problems, are encouraged to take risks, can struggle and fail yet still feel good about working on hard problems. This study further sought to find out if the learning environments challenged the learners by changing their expectations often. A greater part of the respondents 70(68.63 %) in the public pre-schools affirmed that the learning environment challenged the learners by changing their expectations often. The contrary was true in the private school where more teachers 18 (52.94%) held that the learning environment did not challenge the learners. Therefore, It is important for teachers foster a classroom culture that values and promotes productive struggle by providing students with challenging tasks.

A predominant portion 87(85.29 %) of the respondents in the public pre-schools stated that the learning environment in their classrooms encouraged adventure. However, it was divergent in the private schools where most of the participants 24(70.59%) stated that their learning environments did not encourage adventure. The opposite stood out during the school observations. Plenty of manipulative materials were placed strategically around the two private school classrooms and a lot of charts were anchored on walls, as

opposed to three of the four public school classrooms where there were a few old charts on the walls, some torn out and dirty. However, none of the observed teachers referred to any of the displayed material during the lesson, nor were the pupils given opportunity to work with them.

A huge number 86(84.31 %) of public schools participants indicated that they accorded learners opportunity to use their own experiences in solving problems and carrying out an activity while a differing opinion was shown by majority 21(61.76%) in the private schools who said that the learners were allowed to use personal experiences to solve problems. This suggests that teachers in the public schools adhered to the principle articulated by [Lewis and Williams \(1994\)](#) that students learn by doing, applying knowledge to experience in order to develop skills or new ways of thinking. On the contrary private schools gave the principle of using own experiences a wide berth.

There was a near consensus in response to the item that stated that learners were allowed to make their own conclusions and to form their own opinions as 68(66.6%) of the public pre-schools' respondents and 21(61.76 %) in the private schools confirmed the assertion. This is consistent with [Chapman, McPhee, and Proudman \(1995\)](#) whose proposition was that students should be able to reflect on their own learning, bringing "the theory to life" and gaining insight into themselves and their interactions with the world for an activity or method to be defined as experiential.

The results also indicated that a bigger proportion 75(73.53 %) of the public and 17(50 %) of the private school respondents pointed out that learners took responsibility for their actions. It is instructive to note that 5(14.71%) in the private school sample, the biggest quota on the "Undecided" response in the whole study, either did not know how pupils take responsibility for their learning or did not want to expose the school for fear of victimization from management. This suggests that the failure (in private school) by pupils to take responsibility for their actions cascades from the teachers' possible indefiniteness on issues.

Majority 90(88.24 %) in the public schools specified that there was follow-up for every activity carried out. Whereas, the contrary is true of the private schools where majority 20(58.83 %) objected the statement. [Lewis \(2018\)](#) recognized that teachers use the results of assessment to make follow up. Feedback is expected in the form of discussion, assignment, post mortem or any other style of follow-up that would ascertain the success of the lesson. If the learning objectives were not adequately achieved, the teacher would need to revisit the lesson in a different manner, revising the approach to learning. Either the lesson might be taught again or areas that confused several of the students are cleared up. This will allow for modification of the lesson plan in the future, clarifying or spending more time on areas where the assessments showed the students were weakest.

## **7. Discussion**

It is apparent from the responses from this study that the basic principles of experiential learning were largely adhered to in the public schools as all the items were affirmed by more 68% of the respondents (Strongly Agree plus Agree). On the other hand there was partial compliance in the private pre-schools where only four items were acknowledged by more than 50% by the respondents. In a nutshell it means that in emergent reading activities in public pre-schools learners take part in the selection of activities, are always active, move freely in the classroom as they communicate with each other.

It is also true that the learning environment challenges and encourages adventure for the learner. Learners are guided to use their own experiences in solving everyday problems, make their own conclusions and take responsibility for their actions. At the end of it all, teachers make a follow-up for every activity carried out. This upholds attributes that define experiential learning as put forward by [Kujalova \(2005\)](#); [Lewis and Williams \(1994\)](#); [Chapman et al. \(1995\)](#) that learners have to be active participants, that actions have to be reflected upon for learning to take place and that the learner must ascribe meaning to what is going on. The only out of step tenet that public pre-schools need to step up is allowing pupils more space in selection of activities for the lesson. This is good news on the part of the public school because this assures that the Kenyan CBC is valuable to its users as it creates future real-world relevance and provides opportunity for creativity in its learners.

However, a lot is left to be desired in the private schools as only four items scored above 50%, that in their emergent reading classes, their learners participated actively, communicated among themselves and that they took responsibility for their actions. The remaining six items did not adhere to tenets of experiential learning.

To put this into perspective, the public pre-schools edged very closely to essence of emergent reading in the Competency Based Education as compared to the private schools which still lagged way behind. It is disturbing to note from this study that the large number of pupils in private preschool are deprived of the sense of accomplishment that goes with experiential learning and that fuels the desire to learn.

## **8. Conclusion**

The focus of this study was to compare adherence of emergent reading activities to the basic tenets of experiential learning in public and private ECDE centres in the implementation of the CBC. In education, tenets are important because they help guide and inform practice. The CBC is mainly anchored on experiential learning whose tenets underline active participation of learners. Regarding to adherence to the basic tenets of

experiential learning it is evident from this study that emergent reading activities in the CBC in Bureti Sub-county, and by extension, Kenya, were largely adhered to in the public schools as compared to private schools which still lag behind. The implication is that since the early proficiencies with language have a considerable impact on children's future reading development, there will be a reading gap between children who went to public and private school in future reading success. It's likely for children in public school to become more skilled readers than those in the private school, affecting achievement in learning and future careers. This trend need urgent attention from those concerned in the Ministry of Basic Education and other supervisors of education to ensure balance in instruction in both public and private preschool. Now, more than ever, it is crucial for teachers to integrate more active learning techniques such as experiential learning in the preschool classroom to help prepare children for the future workplace.

## 9. Recommendations

The present study revealed that tenets of experiential learning were observed almost to the letter in emergent reading activities in the public pre-school as compared to the private school where more than 60% of the tenets were flouted. This being the case the study recommends that continued retraining needs to be mounted especially in the private entities to help teachers fix their mind-sets on the Competency Based curriculum and to avoid relapsing into the more academic practices of the previous 8:4:4 system of education which was as academic as is seen in the private preschool. Secondly, there is need to avail experts in the field to monitor and model best practice in ECDE in the Competency Based Education. Thirdly, the Ministry of Education needs to keep a closer look at the running of private schools by intensifying monitoring and supervision in the way it does with the public schools.

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