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Unlocking literacy: The power of parents and cultural heritage

This blog was written by [Felicia Boateng](#), [Dr Margaret Ebubedike](#), [Dr Eric Addae-Kyeremeh](#), [Prof Kwame Akyeampong](#), [Dr Jane Doka](#), and [Portia Dery](#), The Open University.



“... attending these traditional events can greatly contribute to children's literacy development. ... Events like the Sallah festival often involve reading and reciting, which helps improve their reading skills.” (Parent, Nigeria)

When we think about literacy, our minds often turn to schools, textbooks, and formal lessons. But could the most profound literacy lessons begin long before a child steps into a classroom? Could the home environment, local community, and inherited cultural traditions play a more significant role than we realise? Does this untapped potential have the power to spark children's interest in literacy and language development?

In communities across the world, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, [parents and caregivers play a critical role](#) in shaping early literacy development. Yet, their contribution often goes unrecognised. Simple everyday activities like [storytelling, singing folk songs, and playing traditional games](#) are powerful tools for developing literacy skills. While it is easy to assume that only schools and teachers can teach children to read and write, what about the learning that happens at home? Parents, especially mothers, are a child's first teachers, even if they do not always realise it.

The untapped potential of parents and cultural heritage in literacy development

“... she holds on to any story she is been told and tells it to others and she would also form her own stories from the stories she is been told. I then discovered telling them stories makes them creative.” (Parent, Nigeria)

Our recent research project, ‘[The Power of Parents](#)’ funded by [mc2h foundation](#) sheds light on the role of parents, caregivers, and communities in fostering literacy development in the home and family environment. The study focuses on Ghana and Nigeria, countries in Sub-Saharan Africa where poverty and low literacy rates create significant challenges for children's education. But amidst these challenges, the study reveals something powerful: [parents and cultural heritage can be leveraged as the key to breaking the cycle of low literacy](#). Although, some parents in these communities have little or no formal

education, but their cultural knowledge is a powerful resource that can strengthen children's foundational literacy skills.

But the question is: **Why don't we see this cultural richness reflected in schools?**

It is easy to assume that only formal education can teach children to read and write. But what about the informal ways children learn at home, without a classroom? In [The Power of Parents](#) research, the study found that parents, regardless of their education level were actively involved in their children's literacy development. Many parents may not have had the opportunity to attend school themselves. However, despite their own limited education, they remain deeply committed to their children's learning; sometimes employing the assistance of other extended family members or neighbours. Interestingly, some of these parents do not recognise how powerful their everyday activities develop literacy in their children.

Lessons learned and ways forward

"For example, when my children learned to read and write in our local language, they were able to understand the basic concepts of phonetics and sentence structure more easily." (Parent, Ghana)

What can we learn from this? The lesson is clear: **Cultural practices are valuable educational tools that need to be recognised and integrated into formal education systems.** Whether it is a song that teaches new words or a traditional game that helps children develop problem-solving skills, these practices are vital to a child's learning process. This approach is not just about acknowledging culture: it is about harnessing it for literacy. One implication here is the need to bridge the gap between informal and formal literacy development. Schools should not ignore the potential of cultural practices but rather find ways to integrate them into the curriculum. Imagine the possibilities if schools recognised that a game like 'Ampe' (a local game in Ghana) could teach phonics, or a local folk song could enhance vocabulary.

"... I cannot even suggest to the teacher that she can learn faster through drumming. What I am saying will be seen as senseless because I do not have money." (Parent, Nigeria)

Although considering parents and cultural practices are crucial in literacy acquisition of children, implementation is not always easy. The [The Power of Parents](#) study found that many parents lack confidence to engage with formal education systems, partly due to limited education or ignorance of their potentials. They may not see themselves as 'teachers' or feel equipped to support their children in formal literacy practices. However, incorporating culturally familiar activities like drumming and singing can provide an accessible way for parents to support their children's literacy development. [These activities help children](#) recognise sound patterns, improve memory, and develop language skills naturally, fostering early literacy in a less intimidating way for parents.

How can we change this?

"I believe involving parents in these activities and offering workshops to help those who did not go to school would be very helpful..." (Parent, Nigeria)

To fully harness the power of parents and cultural heritage and capitalise their funds of knowledge, we need practical steps:

1. First, we need to acknowledge the challenges that parents face; be it financial, educational, or social. Many parents in low-income communities feel that better resources or more formal education would [make them more effective in helping their children](#). But in reality, parents possess a wealth of cultural knowledge that is just as valuable. It is time to reframe the narrative: *Parents are not just recipients of education; they are partners in the learning process.*

2. Second, we should consider organising low-cost effective workshop for parents to create awareness of their potentials; by encouraging them on how to use storytelling, traditional songs, and games as literacy tools.
3. Next, encourage stronger home-school collaboration where schools engage parents by inviting them to share cultural stories and literacy strategies in classrooms.
4. Finally, invest in developing culturally-relevant literacy toolkits. This will ensure that there are accessible resources tailored to local traditions, ensuring that literacy strategies feel relevant and practical for families.

Conclusion

The Power of Parents’ research makes one thing clear: Parents, especially mothers, are an untapped resource in the fight for better literacy outcomes. By recognising the educational potential of cultural heritage and everyday activities, we can empower parents to play a greater role in their children’s learning.

‘Let us shift the focus from just formal education to the informal learning that happens at home and in the community’. It is time to stop seeing culture and parents as ‘the other’ in literacy development and start seeing them as partners in education. When we do, with time, the impact on children’s literacy will be immeasurable.