

# SUPPORTING VULNERABLE CHILDREN THROUGH JOLLY PHONICS AND READING DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY YEARS

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## Abstract

*Vulnerable children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, often face significant barriers in accessing quality education, leading to poor academic outcomes and perpetuating cycles of poverty. This study explores the impact of Jolly Phonics, a multisensory phonics approach, on reading development in early years (ages 3-5) among vulnerable children in Nigeria. A pre-test post-test experimental research design was adopted for the study. The sample consisted of 268 nursery pupils from five schools selected from the three senatorial districts of Akwa Ibom State. Two intact classes in each school were selected to form the experimental and control groups, with the Jolly Phonics as the treatment for the experimental groups. Two research questions were formulated to cover reading development (cognitive and linguistic) and to guide the study, and two null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 alpha level of 0.05. The data collected were analysed using means, independent t-test, analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) and the Burt test. The result reveals that Jolly Phonics was effective in enhancing the pupils' reading skills and phonetic awareness among vulnerable children. The experimental group gained from 3-29 months reading age (3.3 – 4.5) in the Burt test. The t-test analysis shows a significant difference of 9.42 (df 266) between the post-test mean score of the experimental and control groups. There was also a significant difference of 3.40 (df 82) between the post-mean scores of the experimental groups in the urban and rural schools. Based on the findings of the study, recommendations were made, among which is the need to provide training for more educators and community workers to reach more vulnerable children.*

**Keywords:** Jolly Phonics, Development, Reading Ability, Vulnerable Children, Linguistic

## Introduction

The ability to make sense of written material is called reading. We read for various reasons and to acquire information. One of the most important responsibilities of pre-primary and primary schools has always been teaching children to read. To succeed in school and fulfil his or her responsibilities as a member of society in the future, every child must fully develop his or her reading skills. Reading is important for career success because it is the foundation of much of a person's enjoyment in life. If you have the necessary skills and are willing to put them to use, it opens up a world of amazing possibilities. Reading with skill opens the door to concepts and

information that can make one's life and the world better. It is impossible to overstate the significance of reading. Without the ability to read, it is much harder to fully participate in modern society and function competently. For some, this gateway is narrow, obstructed, or completely closed off.

Omojuwa (2015) summarises this by stating that functional literacy extends beyond learning and ensures a child's ability to read for survival even after primary school.

To ensure that they receive a solid foundation in literacy, vulnerable children, such as those from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with special needs, and those who are at risk of falling behind their peers, require specialised assistance. Jolly Phonics and reading readiness programmes can be extremely helpful in meeting these children's early needs.

The reading ability level of children is a significant milestone in their educational journey. Typically, children develop reading ability at different paces, but here are some general guidelines on what to expect at various levels:

- **Infancy (0-12 months):** Babies start recognising books and understanding that gestures and sounds convey meaning. They respond to stories and pictures, vocalising and patting the pictures.

- **Toddlers and Preschoolers (2-3 years):** At this stage, children start recognising letters and sounds. They engage in interactive learning, such as tracing letters, playing with playdough, and singing songs that emphasise letter sounds.

- **Early School Age (4-6 years):** Children begin to develop phonics and decoding skills. They learn sight words, match words with pictures, and predict story outcomes.

- **School Age (7-8 years):** Children build reading fluency and comprehension. They recognise sight words, read familiar stories aloud, and develop critical thinking skills.

- **Older Children (8-12 years):** At this stage, children become independent readers, exploring chapter books and developing comprehension skills.

This means that children who began pre-school at age four to six should be able to develop phonics and decoding awareness. However, every child develops at their own pace, and some may need more support than others (Etuk 2015). The revised Burt reading test (1974) has set a standard of children's reading age and the number of words a child can read at each given age.

Reading methods refer to the approaches and techniques used to teach reading skills to children. Looking at the Nigerian educational scene, where English, being the second language, is not frequently used in most homes, reading and speaking in English becomes a serious handicap. Udoosen and Ukpak (2005) stress the need for teachers to adopt effective approaches to teaching reading, as most pupils come to school without the slightest reading readiness for the school environment. Ekpo (1999) indicates that where English is used extensively, and reading materials and objects abound, children will likely display reading readiness, but where the opposite is the case, children will not show any form of reading readiness. According to her report, Ingham (1992), in support of this fact, stressed that without doubt, the economic status of a family correlates highly with the degree of a child's reading readiness.

Teachers may inadvertently worsen children's reading readiness due to a lack of phonics instruction. Insufficient or inadequate phonics teaching can hinder decoding skills (National Reading Panel, 2000). Relying too heavily on context and meaning can neglect phonetic skills (Ehri *et al.*, 2001). Also, failing to identify reading difficulties can lead to delayed support (Snow *et al.*, 1998) and using unproven methods can confuse children and hinder progress (Moats, 2007).

Thus, teachers need to adopt effective strategies to enable the learners to acquire learning skills. Research has shown that effective instruction can significantly impact reading achievement (Snow *et al.*, 1998; National Reading Panel, 2000;). By adopting evidence-based approaches, teachers can:

- Improve reading outcomes for diverse learners
- close the reading gap for struggling learners

- enhance learner engagement and motivation
- support long-term academic success
- Foxcroft and Chapple (2017) have listed some essential techniques to include:

**Phonics-based approach:** The phonics-based approach is an effective approach to teaching reading, particularly for early learners. Research has shown that systematic phonics instruction significantly improves reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). This approach emphasises the relationship between sounds and letters, enabling children to decode words effectively.

**Multisensory Approach:** The multisensory approach combines visual, auditory, and kinesthetic techniques to engage children and enhance learning. Studies have demonstrated that multisensory phonics programs improve reading skills, including phonemic awareness, decoding, and comprehension (Joshi *et. al.*, 2002; Wernick & Caidarella, 2016). This approach is particularly effective for struggling readers and those with learning disabilities.

**Whole Language approach:** The whole language approach prioritises comprehension and meaning, encouraging children to read continuous texts to build vocabulary and fluency. While this approach has its advocates, research suggests that phonics-based instruction is more effective for early literacy development (Ehri *et. al.*, 2001)

Reading problems in children are a significant concerns, affecting their academic and personal development. Ekpo (1999) indicates that in the children's reading process, their reading environment should be attractively decorated with visuals to stimulate them to read. Modern audio-visual media should no longer be held as supplementary enrichment aspects of teaching/learning events, but should form part of a school curriculum. In the absence of audio-visual media, well-illustrated, colourful storybooks could do the work of audio and visual if such materials are presented by an instructor who has adequate knowledge of processes.

1. Some impediments to children's ability to reach their reading age are as follows:
  - (i) Dyslexia: a learning disorder characterised by difficulties with phonological processing, decoding, and reading fluency (Lyon, 1995)
  - (ii) Reading comprehension difficulties
  - (iii) Phonemic awareness deficits
  - (iv) Fluency disorders
  - (v) Overcrowded classrooms make it difficult for teachers to provide individual support
  - (vi) Inadequate reading materials and resources
  - (vii) Language barriers, particularly in rural and northern areas
  - (viii) Socioeconomic factors, such as poverty and lack of access to books
  - (ix) Inadequate teacher training and support
  - (x) Insufficient funding for education
  - (xi) Poor infrastructure, including inadequate libraries and reading facilities
  - (xii) Corruption and mismanagement of education resources
  - (xiii) lock-stepping pupils through their class readers
  - (xiv) Adopting poor teaching methods

(xv) Lack of appropriate variation in the teaching approaches to reading. For example, the use of activities such as picture recognition, storytelling, card games, news reading, cartoon collection, posters, flash cards, role play, story club, reading competition, leisure reading, etc., can be incorporated into reading lessons for variety to generate interest (Edem, 2015).

(xvi) Lack of commitment on the part of the teachers due to poor job satisfaction.

2. Generally, researchers have clearly shown that the average Nigerian learner, whether at the primary, secondary or tertiary levels, cannot read or write fluently in English or in the Nigerian languages (Tinuoje, 1991 and Omojuwa, 2015). Most children who fail to read do so not because they are incapable of reading, but largely because of poor teaching approaches utilised. Primary school teachers in Nigeria depend mostly on the prescribed course materials to suit the learners' reading needs. Consequently, the learners are not provided with the right kinds of learning experiences to enable their acquisition of literacy skills that are compatible with the children's reading age. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate whether pupils reading age will improve significantly if they are taught with the synthetic phonics method. The specific objectives are to:

1. the effect of the post-test scores on pupils' reading ability, specifically to assess the degree to which post-TRST scores indicate improvement in reading ability in the experimental groups show variation in the study area; and
2. investigate the mean scores of pupils' reading ability in the experimental group vary across different school locations?

### **Research Questions**

1. To what degree do the post-test mean scores of pupils' reading ability in the experimental groups show variation?
2. How do the mean scores of pupils' reading ability in the experimental group vary across different school locations?

### **Hypotheses**

H01 There is no significant difference in the post-test mean scores of pupils' reading ability in the experimental and control groups.

H0 There is no significant difference in the post-test mean scores of pupils' reading ability in the experimental group across different school locations.

### **Methodology**

Two government primary schools were deliberately chosen from each of the 3 senatorial districts in Akwa Ibom State for the Jolly Phonics pilot study in September, 2024, using a purposive sampling technique. The selection was based on the population of the pupils (i.e. if the school had enough pupils for both the experimental and control groups).

The Jolly Phonics research team conducted an initial 2-day training workshop for nursery school teachers from the experimental groups.

Additionally, the research team visited the schools to identify and designate the experimental and control groups. The population comprised all government Nursery Schools in Akwa Ibom State. The study initially had 108 participants in the experimental group and 116 in the control group. However, by the time of the final testing, the numbers had reduced to 84 participants in each group.

In September 2024, the research team administered a pre-test, using Burt's reading test, to the study participants. The Burt Reading Test is a standardised, individually administered reading assessment tool designed to measure a child's word recognition skills. The test consists of 110 words, arranged in increasing order of difficulty. A child reads the words aloud until they incorrectly read 10 consecutive words. The child's score is converted to a

reading age based on established norms. The test aims to provide teachers with valuable information to inform instructional decisions, identify reading difficulties, and monitor progress. Hence, a child who can read two words from the list is adjudged to be at the reading age of 5 years, 3 months. As the subjects read, the correct options were circled with blue and red ballpoints at the pre-test and post-test, respectively, to enhance easy identification of the subject's performance.

There was a one-day refresher workshop where areas of difficulty, like blending the magic-e, among other things were re-taught to the teachers. The exercise lasted for 36 weeks. At the end of the 36 weeks, there was a post-test still on Burt's Reading Test.

The Jolly Phonics Finger Big Books introduce the 42 main letter sounds in English stories, actions, pictures and sounds to introduce children to phonics. Each book focuses on a specific set of sounds, and the finger action helps children remember the sounds and blend them to form words. The books provide several options to teach early literacy skills for language, reading and writing. The Finger Phonics Big Book 1-7 are large, colourful books. The books are typically used in conjunction with the Jolly Phonics scheme, which is as follows:

Book 1	has the sounds	s at ip n
Book 2	has the sounds	ck eh rm d
Book 3	“	g o u l g b
4	“	ai j oo ie ee or
5	“	z w ng v oo or
6	“	y x ch sh th th
7	“	quou oi ur er ar

**2. Jolly Phonics Word Freeze:** The Jolly Phonics Word Freeze is a fun activity designed to help children practice reading and spelling skills. The book helps build pupils' confidence in reading and spelling words using Polly Phonics. The teacher says a word, and pupils have to read it, say it, and then hold their position until the teacher says 'thaw' or gives the next word. This activity encourages active participation, improves reading fluency, and reinforces phonics skills in a fun, engaging way.

**3. Jolly Phonics Tricky Word Wall Flowers:** Jolly Phonics Tricky Word Flowers are a good resource for teaching children to read and spell tricky words. These colourful flowers feature 72 tricky words, divided into six sets of 12 words each, and are designed to be displayed on a wall or board. Each set comes in a different colour, making it easy for children to identify the words they want to learn. The flowers are 13.5cm across and are made of sturdy cardboard, perfect for withstanding little hands. They can be displayed on the walls of the classroom and used to practice reading and spelling.

**4. Jolly Phonics Alternative Spelling Poster:** The colourful poster shows different spellings of nine vowels, along with sample words and illustrations. For example, the 'ai' sound is represented by 'ai' in 'rain' in 'day' and 'a-e' in snake.

**5. The Alphabet Poster:** This poster displays the 26 letters of the alphabet in order, with arrows indicating correct formation. The letters are arranged in four colour groups, matching the Jolly Dictionary, to help children learn dictionary skills.

**6. The Phonics Handbook:** The Phonics Handbook is a comprehensive guide to teaching phonics, specifically designed for educators and parents using the Jolly Phonics programme, with over 100 large, clear photocopies of worksheets for the children. The handbook is designed to enhance teaching in the following five basic skills:

- Learning the letter words
- Learning letter formation
- Blending for reading

- Identifying the sounds in words for writing
- Tricky words, irregular words

The handbook provides a structured multi-sensory, synthetic phonics and lesson planning experience for young children. Each process of pronouncing and reading sounds is prescribed along with pictures, flash cards, action games and stories to illustrate the sounds. This is further supported by additional phonics information on the sound.

**Data Analysis:** The data collected were analysed using means, standard deviation, Burt's Reading Test, Independent t-test and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). The results are shown below, starting with the research question 1.

### Research Question 1

To what extent do post-test mean scores of pupils' reading ability in the experimental and control groups differ?

To answer this question, the Burt Reading was applied in tables 1a-e.

**Table 1a: Burt's Reading Test Analysis of Pupils' Reading Ability in School 1**

School	Experimental Group				Control Groups			
School 1	Pre-Test		Post-Test		Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	NO	RA	NO	RA	NO	RA	NO	RA
	15	5 or 5	1	5.4	15	5 or 5.8	13	4 or 5.8
			1	5.4				
			3	5.6				
			2	5.5				
			2	5.6				
			1	5.8				
			1	5.7				
			3	5.4				
			1	5.6				

NO= Number of Pupils

RA= Reading Age

Table 1a above shows that all the pupils, both in experimental and control groups in school 1 were below or at the reading age of 5 years before the treatment. After the treatment, there was no improvement in the control group, whereas the experimental group had enhanced the reading ability of 13 pupils at the range of 5 years 4 months to 5 years 8 months. Only 2 could not make any appreciable improvement in the experimental group.



**Table 1b: Burt's Reading Test Analysis of Pupils' Reading Ability in School 2**

SCHOOL	EXPERIMENTAL GROUP				CONTROL GROUPS			
SCHOOL 1	Pre-Test		Post-Test		Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	NO	RA	NO	RA	NO	RA	NO	RA
	18	Below 5 or 5	6	Below 5 or 5	18	Below 5 or 5	18	Below 5 or 5
			2					
			2					
			1					
			2					
			1					
			1					
			2					
			1					

For school 2, all the pupils in the two groups were reading below or about the age of 5. After the study, there was no improvement for the control group whereas the treatment had favoured 12 pupils out of 18 pupils in the experimental group at the range of 4 years 3 months to 5 years 1 month.

**Table 1c: Burt's Reading Test Analysis of Pupils' Reading Ability in School 3**

School	Experimental Groups				Control Groups			
School 1	Pre-Test		Post-Test		Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	N	RA	NO	RA	NO	RA	NO	RA
	13	Below 5 or 5	13	Below 5 or 5	13	Below 5 or 5	13	Below 5 or 5
			4					
			3					
			1					
			1					
			1					
			2					
			1					

In school 3, all the pupils were reading at below 5 or 5 reading age before the treatment, after the treatment, 8 pupils out of 13 in the experimental group were reading at the age of 4 years and 3 months to 5 years. The gain was between 3 and 14 months whereas, the control group, only 2 pupils out of the 13 gained 13 months reading age (RA).

**Table 1d: Burt's Reading Test Analysis of Pupils' Reading Ability in School 4**

SCHOOL	EXPERIMENTAL GROUP				CONTROL GROUPS			
SCHOOL 1	Pre-Test		Post-Test		Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	NO	RA	NO	RA	NO	RA	NO	RA
	18	Below 5 or 5	2	Below 5 or 5	18	Below 5 or 5	9	Below 5 or 5
			1	4.5				
			2	4.4				
			4	4.4				
			5	4.9				
			1	5.1				
			1	5.4				
			2	5.4				

At the beginning of the study all the pupils in school 4 were below or at the reading age of 5 years. After the study, all the experimental groups had read at between 4 years and 4 months and 5 years 4 months, a gain of between 3 months and 17 months range while 4 pupils out of 18 in the control group could read up to 5 years and the other had no improvement.

**Table 1e: Burt's Reading Test Analysis of Pupils' Reading Ability in School 5**

School	Experimental Group				Control Group			
School 1	Pre-Test		Post-Test		Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	No	RA	No	RA	No	RA	NO	RA
	20	Below 5 or 5		Below 5 or 5	22	Below 5 or 5		Below 5 or 5
			1	3.3				
			1	3.5				
			1	3.6				
			2	3.7				
			2	3.8				
			2	3.9				
			2	3.10				
			3	3.11				
			2	4.1				
			2	4.2				
			1	4.3				
			1	4.8				



The above table shows that before treatment, 20 pupils in the experimental group were below 5 or were at 5 years reading age and 2 could read at 5 years, 3 months. After the study, all the pupils had made improvement at the range of 4 months to to 5 years 5 months.

To further illustrate the level of pupils at the initial stage and the extent of improvement made, descriptive statistics were used to make the picture apt.

**Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) Analysis Showing Pupils' Reading Level Before and After the Treatment.**

S/N	Schools	Treatment	N	Pre-Test mean	SD	Post-Test mean	SD
1	1	Exp. control	15	0.13	4.91	4.91	2.85
			15	0.06	0.26	.31	.35
2	2	Exp. control	20	0.10	0.31	5.10	4.38
			20	0.00	0.00	0.05	.22
3	3	Exp. control	14	0.00	0.00	4.64	5.60
			14	.007	0.27	.50	.76
4	4	Exp. control	13	0.00	0.00	10.00	7.54
			13	0.08	0.28	.77	1.09
5	5	Exp. control	22	0.32	0.65	15.18	8.26
			22	0.00	0.00	1.36	1.87
			168	.13	.40	8.39	2.49
				0.04	.19	.60	1.20

The post mean scores of the experimental groups far outweigh those of their counterparts in the control groups. The pre-test mean score reveals that both groups could not at the initial stage and did not differ much.

To determine whether the difference in the post mean scores were significant, an independent t-test analysis was employed to test the two hypotheses.

**H<sub>01</sub>:** There is no significant difference in the post test means score of pupil's reading ability in the experimental and control groups.

**Table 3: Independent t-test Analysis of the Difference in Post-test Mean Scores of Pupils Exposed to Jolly Phonics and Those in the Traditional Method.**

Variables	N	X	SD	t	Sig
Jolly Phonics Y	84	8.39	.49.99	9.42	
Traditional Method	84	.60	1.20		

<sup>x</sup>p<.05, df= 166; critical t= 1.98

The table reveals that the calculated is 9.42, which is greater than critical t-test of 1.98 with degree of freedom 19=66 at 0.95 alpha level. On the basis of this result, the null hypothesis 1 was rejected. We therefore conclude that there was no significant post-test mean difference between the two groups.

**Ho2:** There is no significant difference in the post-test mean score of the pupils reading ability of the experimental groups by school location.

**Table 4: Independent t-test Analysis of the Difference in the Post-test Mean Scores of the Effects of Treatment in Urban and Rural Schools.**

Variables	Location of Schools	N	X	SD
Experimental	Urban	55	10.20	8.11
	Rural	29	4.78	4.31
Control	Urban	55	.75	1.40
	Rural	29	.31	.60
Total	Urban	110	5.52	7.52
	Rural	58	2.55	3.80

<sup>x</sup>p<0.05; df= 166; crit. T= 1.98

The result in table 4 reveals that the t-cal (3.40; df= 82) was greater than cri.t of 1.99. The null hypothesis 2 was therefore rejected. It was concluded that there was a significant difference in the post-test mean scores of the experimental groups in the urban and rural schools. A further analysis was done to remove the effect of entry level on the respondents as shown in Table 5:

**Table 5: Analysis of Co-Variance (ANCOVA) on the Effects of Treatment on Pupils' Reading Ability**

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	2561.5467	2	1280.773	44.377	.000
Intercept	3074.166	1	3074.166	106.504	.000
Re-test	10.165	1	10.165	.352	.554
Treatment	2445.970	1	2554.970	84.740	.000
Error	4762.633	165	28.864		
Total	107.4.400	168			
Corrected Total	7324.180	167			

R squared = 3.50 (adjusted R Squared = .342)

The table shows an F –ration of 84.740. This indicates that treatment effect was significant and that the experimental group's performance was as a result of the potentialities of Jolly Phonics.

### Discussion of Findings

Tables 1a, b, c, d, and e indicate that the children in both experimental and control groups lacked any form of reading readiness, as there is no indication of any reading ability before treatment. The only reading ability was indicated by two children from school five who were at the reading age of 5 years before treatment. This agrees with Udosen and Ukpak (2015) who confirm that most pupils come to school without any slight reading readiness, and as such, the teacher needs to adopt the appropriate strategies to enable the learners acquire reading skills.

Furthermore, looking at the experimental and control groups after treatment, there is a marked improvement in children's reading ability in the experimental group, while the control group still lacks a significant improvement in reading ability. For instance, out of 15 children that participated in the experimental study from school 1 (Table 1a), all of them gained between four and nine months on their reading age. None of the children in the control group gained anything. The highest performance from the experimental groups can be seen in school 5 (Table 1e). Out of 20 children, 8 gained between 1 year, 1 month and 2 years, 5 months on their reading age. For the control groups, 17 children gained nothing on their reading age, while 5 out of them gained 3 months. This study corroborates Ekpo's (2000), who asserted that children exposed to favourable conditions where reading materials abound will display reading readiness and subsequently improve reading ability, while the reverse is the case where no materials exist.

As shown in Table 2, there was no marked difference in the pre-test mean scores for both experimental and control groups. A closer look at the table reveals that the post-test means scores for the experimental groups outweigh those of their counterpart in the control groups. The significant difference in performance of the experimental group over the control group, as indicated by the significant t-calculated (9.42) in Table 3, can be explained by the fact that the children in the experimental group were exposed to Jolly phonics, a stimulating and exciting strategy that enhanced reading ability. Foxcroft & Chappel (2017) observed that the synthetic phonics-based approach has the potential to impact children's reading ability as it provides a variety of reading experiences to them. Edem (2015) further agrees that the lack of variation, as in the case of the traditional

classroom situation, does not generate interest in the children's desire to read.

Table 4 reveals that the  $t_{cal}$  is greater than the  $t_{cri}$ , which further confirms that there is a significant difference in the performance of children in the urban and rural locations. The children in the urban locations with a standard deviation of 7.52 for the urban and 3.80 for the rural location confirm the assertion by Ekpo (2000) and Ingham (2008) that the socio-economic status of a family correlates highly with the degree of the child's reading success. The attrition rate experienced in the study is further proof that children from rural areas are greatly hampered in their reading ability by poverty. Most pupils dropped out of the study because their parents could not provide adequate encouragement and material sustenance for the children's interest to be sustained in school. Foxcroft & Chapple (2017) list parents' involvement in supporting children's reading ability as an effective strategy for improved reading performance.

## Conclusion

The study concluded that the environment plays a vital role in learning. Thus, pupils from rural areas not only faced the challenge of not being able to access quality reading instruction and resources, but they also looked wretched and sickly and could not achieve as much as those in the urban areas.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following were recommended:

1. Provide training for more educators and community workers to reach more vulnerable children.
2. Incorporate Jolly Phonics into the Nigerian early years education curriculum.
3. Regularly assess children's progress and adjust the intervention as needed.
4. Engage parents and communities in supporting early years education.
5. Address underlying issues, such as poverty and lack of resources, to ensure sustainability.
6. Conduct longitudinal studies to assess long-term impact and explore adaptations for different contexts.

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