

# Parents and Community Engagement in Literacy Skills Learning

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## Abstract

Literacy skills constitute one of the most important life competences that schools teach. The issues of literacy and numeracy are themes of concern in Tanzania due to the low literacy levels observed among Tanzanian pupils. This paper focuses on parents' and community engagement in literacy learning. Within the framework of qualitative research approach, the phenomenological design informed the study procedures. A sample of 12 teachers and eight (8) parents was purposively chosen using convenient and snowball strategies. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. Accordingly, the content analysis approach was employed to analyse the views of teachers and parents on the practices of parents' and community engagement in literacy learning and factors that strain parents and community engagement in literacy skills learning. The findings indicate that there were no practices of engaging parents and community in their children's literacy skills learning. This implies that there were no parents and community engagement framework and strategies for enhancing literacy skill learning and acquisition among the children. The factors that strained parents and community in their children's literacy skills learning were associated with inadequacy of finance, lack of support and supervision to pre-primary education programmes by the government; absence of parents and community engagement framework for enhancing literacy skills learning; the beliefs that learning happens in school and teaching is done only by teachers; and parents' poverty and ignorance. The overall conclusion is that the literacy learning of children is a shared responsibility. Therefore, parents and community have a reciprocal responsibility to engage with the school to promote literacy skills learning. Parents and community engagement framework for enhancing literacy skills among the children is undeniable. The study recommends that a combination of actors (parents, community, government and non-governmental organisations) needs to intervene and play well their roles to establish strong parents and community engagement framework and strategies for enhancing literacy skills learning.

*Key words:* Literacy, Engagement, Community Engagement

## Introduction

Generally, literacy skills constitute one of the most critical life competences that every child should learn. Literacy skill is conceptualised as the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2011). Failure to learn quality literacy skills in the early grades limits children's ability to communicate effectively and succeed in higher grades and in life (Bornfreund, 2012).

The literacy skills learning course begins well before the children enter school, and once children start attending school, they continue to learn at home, and in the community. Parents

play a critical role in providing learning opportunities at home and in linking what children learn at school with what happens elsewhere (Emerson, Fear, Fox, & Sanders, 2012). By participating in and facilitating diverse learning experiences and activities outside the school, parents and community become significant factors in children's overall literacy learning and education.

Good relationships between and among parents, community and teachers are fundamental to facilitating children's learning (Wheeler & Connor, 2006), including literacy acquisition and development. These relationships need to be built on respecting and valuing one another's contribution. They enable knowledge to be communicated between the school and home. Communication helps to enable parents and teachers to work together in a genuine partnership to provide positive literacy learning environments for each child (Wheeler & Connor, 2006).

Considered broadly, parents and community engagement involves partnerships between parents or families, schools and communities, raising parental/familial awareness of the benefits of engaging in their children's literacy learning (Emerson *et al.*, 2012; Muller, 2009). These kinds of partnership enlarge parental and community capacity, and create conditions in which children learn literacy skills more effectively (Muller, 2009). This takes literacy skills learning and education beyond the school gate.

A community is a system of people, linked by their association, communication, assumed responsibilities, obligations with one another and allegiance to common values and purposes (Redding, 2006). A system of people can be from the same neighbourhood in a narrow sense or the whole community, including Community-based Organisation (CBOs) or Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), faith-based organisations (FBOs), and charity organisations in a broader sense. For the purpose of this paper, community engagement refers to the connections between the school services related to children's literacy acquisition and development and all forms of inputs and contributions by community services to school. On the other hand, parental engagement is conceptualised as any formal and informal relations that parents have with school services and devote their efforts to supporting children's literacy skills learning at home and school.

The Ecological theory underpins how parenting practices, school practices and the community all interact and contribute to the learning outcomes of children in different aspects (Swick & Williams, 2006; Ryan, Fauth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006). From this broader perspective, the literacy development of children aged 5-13 years is represented as a shared responsibility for families, schools, communities and others rather than being the exclusive domain of schools. Thus, parents and broader communities have a reciprocal responsibility to engage with school to promote literacy learning.

Due to their strategic placement in the children's live, parents' engagement is a crucial force in children's development, literacy learning, and success at school and in life (Patrikakou, 2008). Parents' engagement may occur at home, school, in parent-teacher communication, and parent-to-parent communication forms (Dearing *et al.*, 2007; Patrikakou, 2008). The home learning environment is formative in a child's social development and is an essential contributory factor to literacy learning in all the stages of the schooling course (Kendall, Straw, Jones, Springate, & Grayson, 2008). In fact, parents can create a home environment suitable for literacy and numeracy learning by designating an area to do homework; providing access to reading, writing and mathematical materials; and assisting the children with their homework, reading, storytelling, writing and mathematical activities (OECD, 2011).

Although the home learning environment remains critical to a child's education, dialogue between parents and school needs to occur to keep parents informed about the curricula, courses, school rules, and assessments. Building this kind of communication allows parents and teachers can then work together to support the child in his or her education (Lee & Bowen, 2006). This dialogue can lead to conversations about optimal home learning environments that in turn benefit a child's literacy and numeracy pursuits (Emerson *et al.*, 2012). In the school, parents may participate in school activities (such as sporting events), be part of a committee, or attend meetings with their children's teachers (Moorman & Litwick, 2007). Gains in literacy learning are most prominent when parents, communities and school staff work together to engender a supportive learning environment both at home and the school.

### **Strategies for Parents and Community Engagement**

Literature indicates that parents and community engagement strategies can be considered using Epstein's Research-Based Framework of school-family-community partnerships (Epstein, 1995; Oakes & Lipton, 2007; Sanders & Epstein, 1998). Epstein's Research-Based Framework consists of six dimensions of constructive engagement that offer the school, parents and community a broad range of activities that can engage all parties and help meet the children's literacy skills acquisition and development. Such parents and community engagement strategies include:

- Parenting which can involve helping parents establish home environments that support literacy activities such as writing, reading, storytelling, singing and so on and support children as students;
- Communicating which can involve designing and conducting effective forms of communication about school literacy programmes and children's literacy progress;
- Volunteering which can involve recruiting and organising help and support for school functions and literacy activities;
- Learning at home which can involve providing information and ideas to parents about how to help students at home with school work and literacy related activities;
- Decision-making which can involve parents in school decisions on matters related to literacy progress and activities;

- Collaborating with the community which can involve identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen and support schools, students, and their families (Epstein, 1995:15).

The interrelationships among and between parents, community and professionals (teachers) in support of children's literacy learning, whether at home, in community or in school, are critical. Kernan (2012) asserts that a child's learning and development takes place in a range of contexts: at home with the family, in non-formal settings in the community, and in formal early childhood education settings. In all of these settings, parents play an important role. Parents' engagement can be in early literacy learning of their children in the home and neighbourhood context (informal and non-formal learning contexts) and in institutionalised or formal settings such as day care, pre-school playgroups and the first two years of primary school (Kernan, 2012). According to Goodall and Vorhaus (2011), parental engagement involves learning at home, school-home and home-school communication, in-school activities, decision-making and collaborating with the community.

Parents, who are engaged in children's literacy, play different roles. According to Weiss, Lopez and Rosenberg (2010) and Osterling and Garza (2004), parents' engagement based on a foundation of shared responsibility strengthens four key roles that families play in their children's literacy and education. These roles are, first, supporting learning (including engagement in children's play, shared book reading, showing high expectations, and having conversations about a student's occupational and educational aspirations); second, the school partner role (including attendance at parent-teacher conferences, communication with teachers, and volunteer involvement in school activities); third, the role of advocate for school improvement (advocacy in the form of collective organizing and mobilization); and, fourth, the decision-maker and leadership role (this role builds parent social networks that can influence school climate).

The issue of literacy is a theme of concern in Tanzania due to the low literacy level observed among Tanzanian pupils. Empirical evidence indicates that literacy skills among Tanzanian children are poor (HakiElimu, 2014; Sumra & Katabaro, 2014). Uwezo's findings in 2011 and 2012 show that the majority of pupils in primary schools cannot read both Kiswahili and English (Uwezo, 2013). The poor literacy outcomes are associated with several factors. In many schools, learning environment is not conducive to learning. Lack of classrooms, toilets, water, and electricity and inadequate supply of teachers contribute to poor literacy and numeracy outcomes (Sumra & Katabaro, 2014).

The poor literacy outcomes have brought about controversies among different stakeholders in Tanzania. Parents complain that teachers do not do their work properly whereas teachers complain against the parents and community due to lack of support from them. On the part of government, teachers and community complain of inadequate finance and, in many cases, lack of support and supervision to pre-primary education programmes.

## **Purpose, Objectives and Questions of the Study**

This paper focuses on parental and community engagement in literacy learning in Dodoma Municipality in Dodoma Region (province), Tanzania. The main objective was to investigate parents' and community's engagement in the literacy learning of children in Early Childhood Education. Two research questions guided the study: anyhow do parental and community practices support literacy skills learning? What factors strain parental and community engagement in the literacy learning of children?

## **Study Design and Methods**

The phenomenological design informed the study particularly on procedures to investigate the issues related to the parents' and community's engagement in literacy learning. The phenomenological design was chosen because it provides a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by several study participants (Creswell, 2007). This means that it views the phenomenon under study from the first order perspective, whereby the researcher describes the phenomenon as it is through the eyes of the participants of the study. The phenomenological design was, therefore, appropriate for the study as the latter intended to capture the views of teachers and parents on the parents and community engagement in literacy learning and understanding through their lived experiences in their respective contexts.

The study involved two public schools located in the peripheral Dodoma Municipality. The schools were purposively selected because the researcher had experienced complaints from parents of children in both schools that children were not doing well in literacy learning. Thus, the researcher sought to capture the extent to which parents and community were engaged in literacy skills learning in these schools. The study involved teachers and parents. The sample comprised 12 teachers and eight (8) parents. The sample size was guided by saturation strategy often deployed in qualitative studies.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. Accordingly, content analysis was used as a method of data analysis in this study. At first, the content of each interview session was transcribed and repeatedly read to obtain an overall understanding of the data and gain ideas for further analysis. The process included open coding, and creating main categories. Creating categories provided a means for description and understanding the views of teachers and parents on practices of parental and communities in supporting literacy skills learning and factors that strain parents and community engagement in literacy skills learning.

## **Study Findings**

### ***Demographic Characteristics***

The study targeted teachers' and parents' views on parental and community engagement in literacy learning in Dodoma Municipality. The study involved 12 teachers and eight (8) parents. Among the 12 teachers, seven (7) were male, and six (6) were female. The ages of teachers ranged from 27 to 51 years. In terms of their qualifications, all of them held Certificate Grade

“A”. Their work experience ranged from nine (9) to 28 years. Out of the eight (8) parents, five (5) were male and three (3) were female. Their ages ranged from 22 to 49. In terms of education level, five (5) male and one (1) female parents were Standard VII (7) leavers; one (1) female parent did not attend any formal education whereas one (1) female parent was a Form Four leaver.

### *Practices of Parents and Community in Supporting Literacy Skills Learning*

Over 83 percent (n=10) of teachers interviewed indicated that there were no practices of engaging parents and community in their children’s literacy skills learning. It was established that the parents were only engaged, to some extent, in celebrating the parents’ days and in matters of discipline as one teacher explained:

We rarely involve parents in literacy activities. We engage them, when there are problems related to behaviours or contributions... We meet parents twice per year during parental meetings... but we don’t involve them in matters related to literacy learning.

Similarly, about 75 percent (n=6) of the parents interviewed concurred that there were no practices of engaging them in their children’s literacy skills learning. They complained that they rarely heard anything from the schools unless there is a problem with their children’s behaviour or performance. One parent, for example, remarked:

We are not engaged in learning activities or any other activities. All learning activities are done by teachers. Not all of us are called to school to hear academic performance of our children unless there are discipline problems. Parents are not valued.

All the teachers interviewed insisted that the schools lacked support, interventions and strategies of engaging parents and community in literacy activities. Some 91 percent (n=11) of the parents interviewed reported that they did not individually communicate with teachers or heads of school on their children’s literacy skills learning and development. This implies there were no parents’ and community’s engagement framework and strategies for enhancing literacy skills among the children and education in general.

These findings are in line with Mawere, Thomas and Nyaruwata (2015), who noted that some parents were often passive participants and rarely took part in making decisions pertaining to what goes on at an Early Childhood Education (ECE) centre. When teachers lack confidence in talking to parents and are unable to communicate educational matters effectively, parents and community engagement in children’s learning is disrupted (Wheeler & Connor, 2006). Parental role in early childhood development involves parents helping teachers to set the stage for their children’s learning. It is, therefore, important that ECE teachers strive to establish this reciprocal relationship or partnership with parents to expose children to quality ECE programmes (Mawere, Thomas, & Nyaruwata, 2015).

### *Factors that Strain Parents' and Community's Engagement in Literacy Learning*

Generally, there was a strained relationship between parents, community and teachers concerning the children's literacy skills learning. It was reported that teachers, parents and government were not playing their roles properly. Teachers complained about lack of support from the parents and community. One of the teachers said:

Lack of awareness of the importance of literacy skills for a child among the parents limits their engagement in their children's literacy skills learning. Parents are irresponsible to the matters of literacy skills learning for their children. I tell you, they don't play their roles. They are reluctant to send their children to nursery schools. They don't support teachers. They don't like to be engaged in their children's learning, although they keep on complaining that literacy skills among their children are nearing demise.

Conversely, parents complained that teachers did not do their work properly. One of parents had the following to say:

Teachers who work with public schools don't teach properly. As the result, children spend more than two years in Pre-primary Education without mastering appropriate literacy skills. Teachers are there waiting for salary. Our expectation is that teachers should play their role of guiding children in learning literacy skills and other life competences.

On the part of the government, teachers and parents complained of inadequate finance and in many cases lack of support and supervision to pre-primary education programmes. This was attributed to the absence of a parental and community engagement framework for enhancing literacy skills learning.

The study found that teachers and parents had misconceptions that parents who were not educated could not help their children learn and acquire literacy skills. In this regard, 91 percent (n=11) of the teachers interviewed said that parents with elementary education could not teach their children literacy or other skills. One teacher said:

Many parents in this area are uneducated and ignorant. They cannot teach literacy skills. No need of engaging them in activities in which they are not professional. The duty of teaching literacy should be left to schools. Parents are unable to support literacy skills learning because of their low level of education.

Similarly, the parents interviewed said that they could not teach literacy skills to their children because their level of education was too low for them to do it. As a result, they insisted on the teaching literacy being the sole responsibility of a teacher. Parents, on the other hand, should send their children to school to acquire literacy skills. Parents reported that learning happens in school and teaching is done only by teachers. In all, 87 percent (n=7) of the parents interviewed indicated that schools and teachers were duty-bound to teach the children. One of the parents was, for example, said:

What I understand is that teaching is done at school by teachers. How can I become a teacher? When I send my child to school, I expect teachers to do their work. My duty is only to make sure that all school requirements are available. It is teachers in schools who are trained to teach literacy skills.

Apart from such beliefs that learning happens in school and teaching is done only by teachers, parents were too poor to afford literacy teaching and learning materials. This concern was raised by 75 percent (n=6) of the parents interviewed. One parent said:

Many of the parents in our community are poor. As you can see the business I do, it is for me to secure money for food for the family. Every cent I get goes to food. I don't have any surplus to let my child go to nursery school.

Another parent affirmed:

My friend, those with good employment like teachers and nurses, their children enjoy life and education in this area compared to my children who depend on my small vegetable garden for survival.

Similarly, one teacher quipped:

I can assure you that many people in this area live below poverty line. We face many unique challenges when working with poor parents. The parents are unable to contribute anything to their children's education, including literacy learning. Generally, in our area, children dropout from school or do not access literacy skills because of the poverty of their parents. This applies to all levels of education including the ECE.

Interestingly, teachers and parents did not realise that parents could be engaged meaningfully in their children's literacy activities, at no cost, such as storytelling, helping children in their homework, and counting using local materials.

These findings are in line with those of Mawere *et al.*'s (2015) who asserted that lack of knowledge of the pedagogical principles and knowledge of the stages of child development deter some parents from establishing a partnership with their children's school. Parents thought that teaching is solely the responsibility of the school and the teachers and, hence, their paying of school fees to facilitate the process. Similarly, Wheeler and Connor (2006) point out factors that restrain parental and community's engagement in children's education, especially literacy skills. These factors include pressures due to poverty, lack of money, disability and single parenthood; negative feelings about schools and low value placed on education; poor and low levels of parental literacy; parents not being aware of the difference they can make in their children's learning by providing requisite support; and parents' lack of confidence and knowledge about how to be involved in their children's learning.

## **Conclusion**

The provision of literacy skills to all children is a shared responsibility of parents, schools and the community at large. Therefore, parents and the wider community have a reciprocal



responsibility to engage with the school to promote literacy learning and development. The need to have a parental and community engagement framework for enhancing literacy skills among the children is undeniable. The framework must acknowledge and value effective communication between parents and teachers, community and school. There is also a need for partnerships between parents and teachers, community and school; good relationships between the school and the wider community. Other dimensions include fostering collective decision-making and facilitating effective parent, teachers and community participation in children's literacy learning and development.

Generally, relations between school, home and community vary widely. Schools that reach out and engage community and parents are likely to be better resourced and to record better learning outcomes among the students. Community engagement can result in better school facilities and infrastructure and help ensure the availability of school meals for the students. Schools can also help improve learning outcomes by assisting and helping parents understand the crucial role they must play to help students learn accordingly. This engagement with parents needs to begin during Early Childhood Education (ECE) and continue throughout the child's education. Positive and supportive engagement of parents can increase their willingness to keep children in school. In this regard, relations with parents coupled with community engagement should be integrated in in-service teacher training programmes.

On the whole, parental and community engagement in literacy skills learning faces a number of challenges. A combination of actors (parents, community, government and non-governmental organizations) needs to intervene and play well their respective roles to overcome the challenges. Moreover, there is a need to establish policies and practices that emphasise on parental and community engagement in children's literacy learning and development.

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