

The Influence of Parental Support on Child's Learning of Literacy in Tanzania

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Abstract

In the past few years, the Tanzanian government has made several commitments and efforts to improve the provision of basic literacy and numeracy skills the country by executing various programmes, including the Primary Education Development Plan (PEDP), under which primary school teachers were trained on how to teach numeracy and literacy. The government's emphasis on literacy has also been evident in the country's crucial policy documents particularly the Education and Training Policy (ETP, 1995, 2014), which clearly states in one of its objectives to enable every child to acquire basic learning basic literacy and numeracy skills. Despite various efforts and initiatives executed over the years, aimed at laying a solid foundation of literacy skills for children aged between five and 13, little seem to have been done in harnessing the potentials of parents and families support in teaching of literacy and numeracy. In fact, there is evidence that there are still many children without proper numeracy and literacy skills. Yet, there also seem to be limited empirical studies in the context of Tanzania focusing on examining innovative ways for engaging parents in supporting child's acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills, including exploring the factors that could effectively foster the parents' contributions towards their children's acquisition of literacy skills and the inhibiting factors. This study attempts to understand the contribution of parents to supporting their children's acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills in Tanzania's primary education.

Key words: literacy, parents' engagement, numeracy skills, parental support

Background to the Study

This study set out to investigate the contribution of parental support to children's acquisition of literacy skills in Tanzania. The acquisition of literacy skills (vis. Reading, Writing and Arithmetic) constitutes one of the important pillars of successful functioning in later life stages (Thompson, Bakken, Fulk, & Peterson, 2004). Indeed, literacy constitutes a basis for the development of means of acquiring further knowledge and other basic life skills. Conversely, the lack of literacy skills may hinder one's ability to cope with various life challenges, and may lead to one's inability to adapt and/or adopt developments in science, technology and innovation, which in turn may retard the advancements in other spheres of life at the individual and national levels (Reder, 2010).

Evidence from literature suggests that literacy skills are developed quickly during the elementary and middle-school years (Reardon, Valentino, & Shores, 2012; McBride, 2016). These studies indicate that, in most cases within the school context, the acquisition of literacy skills takes place in lower grades, and its emphasis tends to improve as a child progresses to the

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upper levels of schooling. Furthermore, for children to acquire and develop reading skills effectively, it is crucial that they master phonics, sight recognition, reading clues and reading experiences (White, 2005). Other essential skills for developing literacy skills include phonological awareness, letter and word recognition, writing and spelling skills as well as oral language abilities that can be expressed through vocabulary and language skills (Makin & Whitehead 2003; Paez, Tabors, & Lopez, 2007).

From these arguments, one deduces that family and parental child support are crucial in shaping and influencing kid's literacy skills acquisition and development, because one can learn from day-to-day life's experiences and encounters. At the family level, for instance, programmes such as weekend reading and writing sessions or after-school teachings aimed at helping kids, can shape or improve the kids' literacy and numeracy skills (Gomby, 2012). Moreover, parents and other family members are also important in supporting their children to practise at home, in such learning activities as sound and letter recognition drills, reading to children practice, literacy play games, as well as songs and rhymes (Close, 2001). At the family level, parents or siblings can support literacy and numeracy training by providing different literacy books to the children, and encouraging them to visit nearby libraries as well as insisting on shared reading programmes (Sénéchal, 2012).

Other studies (see, for example, Mielenon & Peterson, 2009) indicate that, at the family level children can also develop literacy skills through interaction with other people in society to which they belong. There are other ways through which children can develop literacy skills at family level such as exposing them to spoken language for them can hear, interpret and imitate what is being communicated (Saracho, 2004; Gomby, 2012). Learning of literacy and numeracy at the family level can also occur when children engage in different types of games and plays with literacy skills training components, which allow them to gain reading and writing experiences vital for developing their literacy skills (Sénéchal, 2012; Mielenon & Peterson, 2009).

Evidence from developed countries such as the US suggests that, although almost 90 percent of children recognise words by sight and acquire basic reading and writing skills at elementary grades schooling, some of those children acquire numeracy and literacy skills before entering grade one, and others acquire those skills at kindergarten (Rerdon, Valentino, & Shores, 2012). According to Rerdon *et al.* (2012), at grade three, almost all the children can read correctly. On the contrary, in developing countries such as Tanzania, there is evidence (see, Uwezo, 2012, p.20) that until recently, a significant proportion of higher grade children lacked competence in reading and writing, the skills that were ideally expected to have been mastered at grade two (Standard I). In this regard, Uwezo (2012) observes that only 30 percent of grade three (Standard III) pupils could read a story written in Kiswahili, and only 10 percent of them could read a story written in English. Similarly, Kitunga's (2011) study found that Bagamoyo and Kongwa districts ranked relatively poor in Tanzania in terms of literacy rates, and the majority of the pupils in those districts performed below the average of 50 percent in national standardised tests. Also, out of 21 primary schools in those districts, 15 schools scored below the average of 50 percent in reading. In this study, factors such as unsatisfactory parental support and parents' and family socio-economic status were pointed out as possible causes that could limit a child's development of literacy skills, as a large proportion of pupils progressed from

grade one (Standard I) to grade two (Standard II) and other upper grades without actually having acquired those skills.

Significance of parental involvement in literacy and numeracy training

As stated earlier, studies (see, for example, Naidoo, Reddy, & Dorasamy, 2014; Gadsden & Ray, 2003) show that parental involvement in children's education is crucial for different reasons, including its playing a substantial role in fostering the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills. Parents can also play a pivotal role because they can engage in different teaching and learning as well as assessment activities, including activities such as monitoring reading and ensuring that their children do homework and remain committed to school learning activities. Hannon (2013), for instance, asserts that when schools engage with parents regularly, it becomes easy for them to discuss the child's academic progress and suggest ways to solve problems observed in teaching and learning. Furthermore, Myoungsoon and Heekyoung (2002) proffers that good interaction between parents, school and children is also essential because it can help children register progression in reading and writing by laying a good foundation that would accelerate the development of their literacy and numeracy skills. In other words, when parents engage in supporting them in different home teaching and learning activities, children are likely to develop literacy and numeracy. Conversely, when parents disengage from supporting children learning, they tend to perform poorly in their literacy skills tests (Uwezo, 2012).

Challenges limiting parental support to children's learning of literacy and numeracy

Though literature (for example, Jung, 2010) highlight many challenges that affect parents' likelihood and readiness to support students, including the parenting style, with the parents' socio-economic status identified as the main limiting factor in most studies (see, for example, Sirin, 2005; Waldfogel, 2012). Authors, for instance, indicate that children from low socio-economic status families may fail to perform better because their parents cannot afford to provide them with necessary academic requirements that would otherwise support their learning (Sirin, 2005; American Psychological Association, 2015). Hartas (2010) and Gaitan (2013) associate the level of parents' education and economic status with the likelihood of supporting kids' learning, arguing that parents who are well-educated and economically well-off, are more likely to easily create a literacy-rich environment that would motivate learning than those without such characteristics. In fact, pupils with such parents are likely to afford buying literacy learning materials and primers. This assertion is also supported by Adekola (2007) whose study indicates that children with well-educated parents had higher chances of performing better at school. Similarly, Ngorosho's (2011) study found that parents' education had strong contribution to children's reading and writing skills development.

Studies also associate family socio-economic status with their abilities either for higher or lower development of language skills (Jensen, 2009). Also, children from families with high socio-economic status could have better development of language than those from lower socio-economic status, who tend to perform poorly when it comes to print knowledge and

experienced delays in the development of phonemic awareness and they are likely to face difficulties in developing reading skills (Heath *et al.*, 2014). Additionally, poor performance in literacy skills may occur if family members do not provide proper supportive literacy learning environment and materials or prepare a friendly home literacy environment (Heath *et al.*, 2014; Waldfogel, 2012). A study by Gadsden and Ray (2003), however, shows that parents' involvement and support of child's education can positively contribute to academic achievement, regardless of the parent's level of education. Meanwhile, it is important for schools to sensitise parents on effective ways to support child's reading and writing skills, and for them to work collaboratively work with schools to boost child's literacy skills and academic achievement (Glasgow & Farrell, 2007).

Purpose of the study

The study was conceived within the context of the needs and thrusts of the Tanzania Education and Training Policy (ETP; United Republic of Tanzania [URT] 1995, 2014), which stipulates that every child should acquire basic learning tools of literacy as a basic right in life. Despite the Tanzanian government and non-government efforts to eradicate illiteracy and ignorance in the past few years, the problem of illiteracy has persisted in some segments of the society. A study by Uwezo (2012) shows that 70 percent of Tanzanian Standard II (grade two) pupils entered Standard III (grade three) without knowing how to read a Standard II story written in Kiswahili in 2012. The magnitude and persistence of this illiteracy problem in the country has also been reported in other international reports such as that of the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SAQMEQ, 2005), which ranks Tanzania as one of the leading countries with lowest literacy skills levels at the primary school when compared to counterpart countries in the Southern-Eastern region (SAQMEQ, 2005). Meanwhile, although there is evidence (for example, Epstein, 1995; Sprick and Rich, 2010) affirming the critical role of parents in supporting children's acquisition of literacy skills, little is known about how parents in Tanzania can contribute meaningfully to fostering child's acquisition of literacy skills in areas with higher illiteracy rates such as Shinyanga (Uwezo, 2013). The purpose of this study was to investigate the contribution of parental support towards children's acquisition and development of literacy skills in Shinyanga, Tanzania. The study had threefold objectives, which were to: (1) explore the forms of parental support towards children's acquisition and development of literacy skills; (2) explore the contribution of parents' socio-economic status to children's acquisition of literacy skills; and (3) assess the contribution of the learning environment to children's acquisition and development of literacy skills.

Methodology

The data presented in this paper were gathered from 119 participants made up of the Municipal Primary Educational Officer ($n=1$), Ward Educational Officers ($n=4$), Parents ($n=49$), Head teachers ($n=5$), standards I and II teachers ($n=10$) and pupils ($n=50$), who were selected through purposive and simple random sampling techniques. Data collection methods were interviews, focus group discussions, documentary review and the questionnaire. The analysis of qualitative

data included transcription of interviews and coding. A content analysis was then carried out to identify key themes and patterns in data. On the other hand, the analysis of quantitative data adopted descriptive statistics through the comparison of percentages across participants in attempt to illuminate on salient issues, and processes relating to parents' engagement in supporting children's learning of literacy and numeracy.

Theoretical perspective underpinning the study

Parental participation can be examined using different models and perspectives (Topora, Keane, Shelton, & Calkins 2010). Different authors view the parental and community engagement differently. One of the most widely cited perspective on parental and community engagement strategies was proposed by Epstein (1995), who suggested six categories of constructive family engagement. More recently, however, the Harvard Graduate School of Education (2006) proposed an alternative theoretical model for understanding school community engagement, indicating ways in which families can support their children's education, through different forms such as participation in home visitation programmes, community organising, and participation in school decision-making as Figure 1 illustrates:

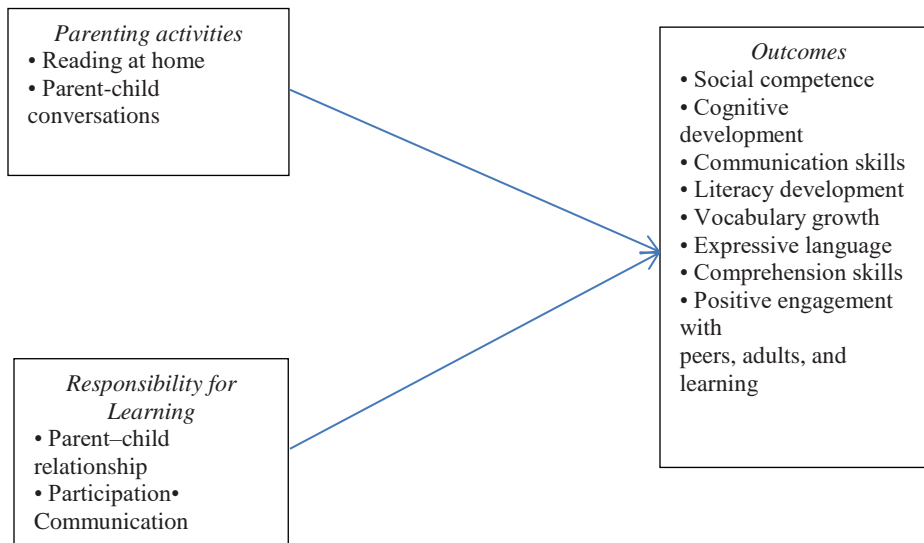


Figure 1: Processes of family involvement and young children's outcomes (Adopted from Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006, p.656)

The model proposed by Dearing *et al.* (2006) seemed to be appropriate for this study because, similar to Epstein's Model of Parental Involvement, it indicates processes and models of family involvement and young children's outcomes. Additionally, Dearing *et al.*'s (2006) categorisation seemed to be appropriate for the present study because it highlights the major three overlapping spheres, namely the family, the school, and the community that partner and collaborate and they are likely to influence children learning and growth.

Findings

Forms and extent of Parental Support to Children's Learning of Literacy and Numeracy

The analysis of interviews with parents suggested that, there were different forms of parental support to teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy. For example, one of the commonest ways of parental support to children's literacy skills development, noted in the findings, was by providing them with requisite literacy learning materials such as writing boards, alphabetical blocks and primers. Additionally, the other commonest way of supporting children's development of literacy skills was by assuming the teacher's roles at home, by engaging in preliminary teaching of how to read and write and assigning children with literacy skills drills. Other forms of parental support, noted in the findings, include monitoring the children's school progress and to inspect their exercise-books at home to check for their progress and revise with them on what had been learnt at school so as to strengthen their literacy skills. Some parents also offered their support by registering kids into remedial literacy classes for drills and practices. The following interview quotes provide an illustration of some of the common forms of parental support reported the participants:

I have a Standard I child I am supporting with the learning of reading and writing for at least five times a week. My support is mainly in a form of buying him learning materials such as the writing board, alphabetical blocks and books. I also teach and supervise him on how to read and write (Interview, Parent 8, 10/03/2015)

My child is in Standard II. I help him in the evenings by giving him supplementary readings and writing books as well as teaching him those skills (Interview, Guardian 6, 12/03/2015).

During interviews, some parents also reported that they offered support by narrating and reading stories to their children so as to develop their listening skills, and they felt that doing so made a big contribution to their learning how to read and write. Findings on the existence of different forms of support rendered to children in the present study are also consistent with findings in a previous study by Epstein (1995), which underscores the role of different kinds of parental support in speeding up a child's acquisition and development of literacy skills.

With regard to quantitative data, the analysis of data from questionnaires indicated that at least 22 percent of the parents surveyed reported that they had one or more ways of supporting child's learning of reading and writing at home, by inspecting their exercise-books to see if they had been given homework or assignments and providing them with reading and writing materials. Participants also reported that they used techniques such as storytelling, shared reading, literacy skills, drills and games with cartoons and DVD/VCDs to assist them to acquire or develop literacy skills such as comprehension and vocabulary.

Socio-economic factors influencing parental to support child's literacy and numeracy skills

As noted in the literature, socio-economic status (SES) can negatively or positively affect learning and development. Previous studies such as Marks, Mcmillan, Jones and Ainley (2000)

and Ngorosho (2011), identify socio-economic status indicators such as family's or parents' occupation, education, income or wealth as key proxies in explaining the success or failure in learning. In the present study, it was noted that the majority of the parents from middle income families (almost 90%) had relatively higher possibilities of supporting their children than their counterpart parents from low-income families (those below the official minimum wage). From the interviews conducted, it was noted that parents with relatively lower incomes felt that they were not in a position to support their children properly, and in most cases they could not meet costs such as paying for remedial classes and making other school contributions towards the provision of school meals or buying of supplementary reading materials which could have boosted their kids' literacy and numeracy learning as reported below:

I'm both a teacher and an entrepreneur. My daughter is in Standard II, I spend part of my income to pay for tuition fee and to provide her with the school needs. I have never failed to help my daughter due to lack of income (Interview, Parent 2, 14/03/2015).

I'm a micro-businessman. I spend 5,000 per month for tuition, buying books and other requirements or school needs that are important in supporting my child to know how to read and write. (Interview, Parent 3, 22/03/2015)

I don't engage in any economic activity but their father is engaged in micro-businesses that yield very little income, too insufficient to meet both the home needs and children's school needs (Interview, Parent 4, 20/03/2015).

Depending on family's socio-economic position, there might be variations among parents' likelihood and ability to supporting children's learning of literacy and numeracy. It appears from the findings that parents with good income were more likely to support their children's learning of literacy and numeracy at home than those with relatively low income groups. The findings on the role of family income in supporting learning are also in line with the findings in a study by Hartas (2011), which indicate that family income could positively or negatively affect child's learning. To ascertain the qualitative data on the role of socio-economic status, subsequent interviews were carried out with pupils ($n=10$), in which some of the pupils from relatively poor family background reported that the support they were getting was relatively low when compared to a support accorded to their fellow children from relatively well-off families. Some of the pupils from relatively well-to-do families, for example, reported that they were almost all the time provided with school requirements, including reading and writing primers, as illustrated by the following interview excerpts:

My father is a small-scale businessman. He provides me with all necessary school requirements and all school contributions, including costs for remedial classes, costs for school watchman, and costs for porridge. He buys me different reading and writing materials that I need (Interview, Standard II Pupil 2, School E, 11/03/2015).

I don't attend any remedial literacy class due to the financial problems. When others get into remedial classes, I just go back home. My parents cannot afford paying for my porridge and they sometimes delay in paying required school contributions (Interview, Standard I pupil 1, School C, 13/03/2015).

I can't support my children education. Myself I only went up to Standard II, I can't even read or write a single sentence. What I am doing, after my children arrive home I tell them to help each other if they have homework (Interview, Parent 4, 20/03/2015).

These testimonies illustrate further differences among the participants interviewed, suggesting that varying socio-economic status can translate into varying family abilities in supporting child's learning of literacy and numeracy. Clearly, these findings suggest that, unlike their counterpart children from relatively poor family backgrounds, children from well-to-do families had relatively more possibilities of providing their kids with almost all the school requirements. The analysis furthermore suggests that, the majority of the parents with relatively higher education had relatively higher levels of readiness to support children's literacy skills by teaching, supervising and monitoring their progress than those with relatively lower levels of education. One of the possible reasons for these discrepancies among families could be the parents' level of awareness of the importance of education, as suggested one interviewee implied:

I'm a teacher. I teach my children every day during evenings. After he has arrived home I inspect his exercise-book and supervise him to accomplish the home-work assigned to him on reading or writing skills. (Interview, Parent 2, 14/03/2015).

Implicitly, differences among parents are largely based on socio-economic conditions but with some variations in terms of an ability to support children's literacy skills between a relatively educated parent (parent 2) and the uneducated one (parent 4). As stated earlier, one of the possible reasons for these differences could be that educated parents had better awareness of the importance of education to their children than their uneducated parents.

Further analysis of the findings indicate that, in some cases, even parents with relatively lower levels of education could support their children in such areas as moral encouragements and material support. The findings on the effect of parental educational level on parental ability to support children's acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills in the present study are also similar to those of a study by Adekola (2007), which found that parents' level of education could influence child's learning with graduate parents or those with high school education having relatively higher influence on child's learning. The findings are further supported by those in a study by Gaitan (2013), which show that the educational support provided to children highly depends on the parents' education level.

Other family contexts influencing parental support to learning of literacy and numeracy

As suggested by Emerson, Fear, Fox and Sanders (2012), various contexts such as designated area to do home-works and kids' access to reading and writing materials, can influence learning. From the analysis, it was noted that some contexts such as the relatively literacy-rich environments at school and at home could support the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy. During an interview, for instance, some participants reported that, children from the home environments with fewer disturbances or other unnecessary interruptions had relatively higher likelihood of being supported to learn more effectively than others as reported below:

For children living close to entertainment social halls or music clubs it becomes extremely difficult for them to learn and practice literacy and numeracy skills at home, due to noise interruptions and similar distractions (Interview, Ward Educational Officer B, 10/04/2015).

Indeed, contextual factors such as home learning environment can influence the likelihood of a child getting parental support. As these findings suggest, some pupils living near undesirable learning environments might be tempted to imitate and engage in non-academic and other delinquency behaviours. Similar findings are also reported in a previous study by Brown and Campione (1996), who noted that pupils from relatively conducive literate environments are likely to perform better than those in unpalatable conditions due to the nature of the learning environments. Subsequent interviews conducted suggested that, from participants' point of view, at least two kinds of learning environments exist—supportive and unsupportive:

I have a special study room in my house for my children to practise reading, writing and other subjects. I normally show them love and provide them with learning materials. I have also prepared a studying schedule for them when they are at home (Interview, Parent 7, 15/03/2015).

I provide my child with all necessary requirements such as books for him to practice reading and writing at home. Also I provide him with study time and sometimes I teach him (Interview, Parent 1, 23/03/2015).

It is difficult for children to practise reading and writing skills at my home because we have rented only one room in which we stay with our children. There is no special place for studying and there is inadequate literacy learning materials such as books to support our children (Interview, Parent 4, 20/03/2015).

The variations in the learning environments children are exposed to also tend to influence how they enhance or inhibit their learning and acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills. Subsequent interviews with pupils revealed that the majority of home environments (nearly 70%) were unsupportive to home learning. On the other hand, some pupils reported that they had enough time for studying at home and sometimes they received support of being taught by their parents/guardians. The variation in the home learning environment is illustrated further in the following interview excerpts:

There are many cases where I am supported to read and write at home. My parents provide materials such as books as well as exercise-books. I'm also allowed to study at home. My parents are good readers and, sometimes, encourage me to study hard (Interview, A Standard I Pupil 1, School E, 11/03/2015).

... it is very hard for me to practise reading and writing at home because there are not enough literacy skills learning materials; there is not enough space for us to study. Also, my parents do not have a culture of teaching me how to read and write (Interview, Standard I Pupil 1, School C, 13/03/2015).

These statements further underscore the variations in home learning environments among families, whereby, pupils from supportive home learning environments reported that they were more comfortably learn how to read and write than those from less supportive home learning environments. For the former, their homes appear to be frequently equipped with different learning materials such as story-books, charts and plays that could aid the children in their reading and writing drills and practices, which the latter can only dream about.

The findings from focus group discussions conducted with pupils ($n=6$) also revealed that parents from families with access to literacy and numeracy rich materials were also likely to practise literacy and numeracy skills with their kids through various activities such as vowels sounds and syllables as well as storytelling. In contrast, some of the pupils from unsupportive home learning environment with limited literacy learning materials and facilities reported to have fewer literacy and numeracy drills at home, as illustrated the following statements from FGDs:

I wish I had enough literacy learning materials at home. My parents could assist me in practicing reading and writing for quicker learning reading and writing skills (Focus Group Discussion, Pupil 4, School C, 13/03/2015).

I don't practise reading and writing at home. I have no learning materials and facilities that could help me to practice (Focus Group Discussion, Pupil 1, School A, 10/03/2015).

In other words, some kids lacked conducive literacy and numeracy teaching and learning home environments that could otherwise have supported their learning of literacy and numeracy. It seems important, therefore, that parents are encouraged to prepare a supportive home environment that would enhance the prospects of their children's improved learning outcomes in reading, writing and numeracy skills. The findings on the role of home environments are also in line with those of Cunningham (2008), whose study indicates that a well-prepared home learning environment is essential for quicker acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills. Moreover, a supportive school and home learning environment is vital because it provides room for children to learn in favourable conditions (Alleyne, 2005; Bardige & Segal, 2005; Brown & Campione, 1996). On the other hand, unsupportive learning environment should be discouraged because they can retard the home learning pace and parents' likelihood for engagement in teaching. These findings are also in line with those of Borkowski, Ramey and Power (2009), who affirm that a conducive environment is a crucial factor for children acquisition and development of literacy and numeracy skills. The influence of home and family contexts influencing the teaching and learning of literacy were also analysed quantitatively using questionnaires. With regard to the suitability of learning environments, the findings indicated that 35 out of 49 (71.4%) of the parents felt that their home environments were supportive of their children's learning and teaching of literacy and numeracy, and 14 of them (28.6%) felt that they had unsupportive home learning environments. Meanwhile, 37 percent of the parents reported that their homes had some of the important home conditions in favour of literacy teaching and learning for children that would allow them to practise what they have learnt at school. Some of the resources reported included play games, primers, story-books, DVD, VCD, brochures, fliers, exercise-books and pencils. However, only 17 percent of those parents reported to have special rooms with resources for their children to study and only three

percent of the parents had a home library equipped with books for children to read at home. Also, only a few of them seemed to have developed a culture of reading by encouraging children to study hard and practise reading and writing at home and at school.

Conclusions and policy implications

This paper has examined the contribution of parental support to the children's acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills in Tanzania. The study was conceptualised within the existing empirical studies, which consistently indicate that meaningful parental engagement could help schools boost student achievement and produce productive graduates. The findings in this study suggest that, whereas some families and parents, in Tanzania could support the children's teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy skills, quite a substantial proportion of the parents could not support their children for many reasons such as families' poor living conditions and socio-economic status, unfavourable home environments and other contextual factors. Given the potential benefits the family and parental support can offer to the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy, it is crucial that policies are formulated and strategies are devised to encourage strong school-community partnerships, in which children are adequately supported to learn. Therefore, the authorities and schools should use both, the successful and unsuccessful family-school interventions, to learn about problems and best practices that could eventually help them to devise means for promoting excellence in the teaching of literacy and numeracy and engender better learning outcomes. Such efforts should involve the monitoring of various kinds of support currently offered and prop them up to ensure their sustainability and scaling-up.

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