

Match and Mismatch between Pre-Primary Teachers' Beliefs and Classroom Instruction in Teaching and Learning to Read Kiswahili in Tanzania: Implications for Teacher Education

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Abstract

Teachers' beliefs have the potential of influencing teachers' instructional decisions and/or even accept, resist or renegotiate the mandated curriculum intentions. Yet, knowledge about these relations in Tanzania's pre-primary education is largely lacking. This study sought to narrow this gap of knowledge by exploring pre-primary teachers' beliefs about learning and teaching to read Kiswahili in Tanzania, and the extent to which these beliefs are related to classroom instructional practices and curriculum intentions. The study was informed by a qualitative hermeneutic-phenomenology methodology. Twenty-one pre-primary teachers were involved in this study. Of these, three were males and 18 were females. Of the participants, six had primary teacher education background whereas two had attended a one-year pre-school training course. Empirical materials were generated over a period of six months using 21 semi-structured interviews, 12 classroom observations, 12 post-observation video-stimulated interviews, and content analysis of lesson plans and curriculum. The study findings reveal that teachers' beliefs about teaching to read Kiswahili revolve around direct and systematic phonics instruction and integration of reading and writing activities. The findings further demonstrate that there was both match and mismatch between the teachers' beliefs, their instructional practices and curriculum intentions. Thus, the study recommends the provision of on-going reflective teacher in-service training, fostering of teacher effective participation in curriculum development process, and doubling of efforts aimed to address contextual factors, which interrupt classroom instructional practices and affect the relationship between teachers' beliefs and curriculum intentions.

Keywords: Teachers' beliefs, learning to read difficulties, pre-primary teachers

Introduction

Teachers are professionals who engage in thinking, making judgments, and making both conscious and intuitive decisions about the classroom context, curricula, strategies to implement the curricula and means of assessing what is learned (Feng, 1990). One of the key features of teacher's competency is a possession of theoretical orientation knowledge and belief system about a particular subject matter (Brown & Cooney, 1982; Harste & Burke, 1977).

Teachers hold various beliefs about the self and their teaching role, learners and learning, teaching, subject matter, and learning to teach. These beliefs are an important part of their thought processes and are proven to have a profound effect on their classroom practices (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Orafi & Borg, 2009; Pajares, 1996). Teachers' beliefs can influence teachers' definition of teaching tasks and organisation of the knowledge and information relevant to those tasks (Nespor 1987; Westwood *et al.*, 1997). They also underlie planning, decisions teachers

make about instructional methods, materials, and behaviour of teacher in the classroom and students' learning outcomes (Westwood et al., 1997; Zheng, 2009).

When teachers' beliefs are strongly upheld, they can lead a teacher to emphasise, resist or leave out aspects of the curriculum and methods and advice from significant others (Orafi & Borg, 2009; Westwood *et al.*, 1997). They can also influence the teachers' willingness or unwillingness to make adaptations to accommodate the learning needs of individual children. Ainsworth, Ortlieb, Cheek, Pate and Fetters (2012) assert that teachers' interpretation of the curriculum is based on their knowledge, beliefs and experiences. Arguably, beliefs play a critical role in inducing their curricular and pedagogical decisions (Wilson, 2012). Thus, understanding beliefs held by teachers is a gateway to improving not only policy issues but also practices regarding curriculum design, teacher education and classroom instructional practices and students' performance (Pajares, 1992; Zheng, 2009). In this regard, understanding pre-primary teachers' beliefs in the context of this study provides an opportunity for building a strong early reading foundation that may predict future reading, school and life success (Mayo, 2010; Snow *et al.*, 1998).

Despite the plethora of research on the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their instructional practices, little is known about the subject in the context of learning and teaching to read in Kiswahili. Moreover, knowledge about the interplay between the teachers' beliefs and curriculum intentions about teaching and learning in the context of pre-primary education in Tanzania, is largely lacking. Although previous researches have yielded important insights in the field that inform the present study, they are of limited generalisation, let alone directly apply to Tanzania, a Kiswahili speaking country, with a different socio-cultural context. The point here is not to deny the convergence or commonalities that may exist in teachers' beliefs and practices about reading, but rather to underscore the view that teachers' beliefs, teaching practices and curriculum intentions are socio-culturally embedded. Thus, they are better understood when studied in the context within which they exist (Afflerbach & Cho, 2011; Mansour, 2009; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1996).

Aim of the Study

This study explored pre-primary teachers' beliefs about learning and teaching to read in Kiswahili and how these beliefs are related to instructional practices and reading curriculum intentions. The understanding of these relationships is a stepping stone towards improving instructional practices, instituting curriculum reforms and engendering effective implementation of the curriculum, hence enhancing learning outcomes in the Tanzanian context. To achieve this purpose, the study was guided by the following questions:

- 1) What beliefs do pre-primary teachers hold about teaching and learning to read Kiswahili?
- 2) How consistent or inconsistent are teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning to read Kiswahili with their instructional practices and the reading curriculum intentions?
- 3) In case there are inconsistencies, what factors explain them, and what possibilities exist to alleviate or harmonise them for the betterment of pre-primary reading instructional practices?

Theoretical Ground

The study was inspired by the Vygotskian socio-cultural theory and its allied activity theory. Teachers' beliefs and their classroom instructional practices and curriculum intentions are better understood when studied with a theoretical orientation that recognises the influence of social-cultural dimensions of teachers' beliefs and practices (Borg, 2006; Clark & Peterson, 1986; Cross, 2010). Also, it requires a framework that takes cognisance of the dissonance that may exist between teachers' beliefs, their instructional practices and curriculum intentions, and that dissonance is mediated and played out within the contexts in which it exists (Borg, 2003; Borg, 2006; Cross, 2010). The study of teachers' beliefs and instructional practices "without an awareness of the contexts in which these occur will inevitably provide partial, if not flawed" understanding of teachers' beliefs and their instructional practices (Borg, 2003, p. 106). In this cognisance, the Vygotskian socio-cultural theory and its allied activity theory offered a potential framework for understanding and explaining pre-primary teachers' beliefs, curriculum intentions and instructional practices in relation to socio-contextual factors within which teachers work.

Study site

This paper is an extract from a PhD study, which was completed in 2014. The study was informed by a qualitative research approach, hermeneutic phenomenology methodology, in particular. The choice of this approach was based on the assumption that pre-primary teachers would have multiple beliefs about teaching and learning to read Kiswahili. The study was conducted in Tanzania in two districts, Rombo and Mwanza, which are located in Kilimanjaro region. The districts were purposively selected because they varied greatly in the Kiswahili reading performance test as reported by a series of Uwezo literacy and numeracy household-based annual assessments targeting children aged 5-16 years. The Uwezo (2010) study, for example, involved 38 districts of Tanzania. Of the districts, Rombo performed highly, ranking first whereas Mwanza ranked number 36. The concern for variation was to generate rich information for a comprehensive understanding of the research questions (Patton, 2002).

Participants

Twenty-one government-owned pre-primary classes, attached to primary schools were involved in the study. Three steps informed the selection of the participating classes. Firstly, two divisions from each participating district were selected. The District Education Officers of the selected districts were consulted and asked to nominate two divisions: one considered effective and the other the least effective in promoting pupils' acquisition of reading competencies. As a result, four divisions were nominated based mainly on Standard IV examinations performance. Secondly, four wards—two from each division—were selected using the criteria used in selecting the divisions. At this step, the division education directors were involved in the nomination of the wards of interest. Thirdly, 21 primary schools from the

selected wards were conveniently selected to participate in the study. All the pre-primary classes of the selected primary schools were purposively sampled.

Twenty-one pre-primary teachers from the selected pre-primary were purposively selected to participate in the study. Their selection was based on the fact that they were teaching the selected pre-primary classes. Of the participants, ten held a primary education whereas 11 held ordinary level secondary education. Only six participants were trained as primary school teachers with Teacher Grade III 'A' certification. The majority of the participants had never attended any formal teacher education training. The majority of the participants had more than one year of pre-primary teaching experience, six of them had taught in primary schools for more than 10 years. Only one participant reported to have taught for a period of less than a year.

Methods used to generate data

The study triangulated semi-structured interviews, direct classroom observation, and post-observation interviews to generate information. This is in line with Pajares (1992), who contends that, "...reasonable inferences about beliefs require assessments of what individuals say, intend, and do...not to do so calls into question the validity of the findings and the value of the study". Twenty-one semi-structured interviews were held with pre-primary teachers. The interviews were conducted in Kiswahili, the medium of instruction in the majority of public pre-primary schools in Tanzania. All the interviews were conducted in the classrooms after pre-primary pupils had left the classes. Interviews lasted for about 45 to 60 minutes. All interview proceedings were audio-recorded upon participant's consent for preservation of the participants' actual words.

Twelve pre-primary teachers (three from each selected ward out of 21 were observed in at least two actual reading lessons. The focus of observation was on the physical classroom setting, teachers' behaviours, instructional activities, and materials employed during reading lessons. The decision to observe this number of teachers was based on convenience reasons. Nevertheless, purposive-stratified sampling strategy guided the selection in which four main representational parameters were of interest: ward, sex, teacher education background, and years of pre-primary teaching experience. The prime reason for this sampling frame was to gather as rich information as possible from teachers with varying backgrounds to generate a comprehensive picture of reading instructional practices.

Observations lasted for about 25 to 50 minutes. The lessons were video-recorded. The researcher was aware that his presence in the classroom and recording might problematise the 'normalcy', 'naturalness' and 'authenticity' of the data to be generated (Health *et al.*, 2011), which could invalidate the results and conclusions. To minimise this effect, observation was done in more than one occasion, which might have lead to habituation. On top of that, the researcher had several conversations with the teacher prior to actual observation. This might have led to familiarisation between the researcher and the teachers and, thus, reduce the observer's effect.

Classroom observation was complemented by post-observation video-stimulated interview (PVI). PVI was done shortly after the classroom observations. Each of the teachers observed was shown a video clip of his/her lesson retrieved from a digital video-camera and asked to describe and comment on his/her actions and decisions during the lesson. PVI served two purposes: Firstly, to clarify some of the instructional practices observed to the effect that the research felt a gap in understanding based on classroom observations alone; and, secondly, to explore beliefs and reasons underlying teachers' actions and their associated meaning from the participants' perspective.

Data analysis

Data analysis in this study was inspired by the abductive analytical approach, a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning aimed to analyse empirical material. In this regard, themes were first deductively derived from research questions and insights from the theoretical framework that guided the study, and previous literature related to the subject investigated. Thereafter, data were approached inductively. This approach allowed unanticipated themes to emerge but also helped to determine whether the deductively derived themes were supported by the data from the field. A list of themes from each participant's verbatim transcript was made. Then, a cross-case analysis was done. Similar themes were clustered together. This process involved a spiral-like movement, entailing going back and forth between the theoretical framework and data to refine the created nodes. Transcripts were reread for coding. Coding was done by identifying text elements—words, sentence (s), and or paragraph (s)—from each transcript and dragging-and-dropping them into respective nodes. All the coded data extracts were reviewed to determine whether they formed a coherent pattern. Coding was supported by NVIVO.

Findings

The analysis of data indicates that teachers held a variety of beliefs about pupils' learning to read and the teaching of reading as presented below:

Beliefs about teaching and learning

Pre-primary pupils learn to read through direct and systematic instruction

All the teachers believed that pupils learn to read through direct systematic instruction of letters, syllables, and word and sentence-level reading. All but one teacher claimed that teaching following that order or sequence helped pupils learn to read as this process involved moving from simple to complex skills (sentences). For example, one of the teachers said:

I think pre-primary children should first be taught the letters of the alphabet followed by syllables, words then short sentences (one or two word sentences). This makes it easier for them to learn...yah, from simple to difficult.

Teachers claimed that the teaching of letters and syllables helped pupils read unfamiliar words. One teacher justified the sequence as effective as she compared it with previous practices whereby the teaching of reading employed the whole word rather than word components.

To the contrary, one experienced teacher believed in a reading instructional approach that involved the whole word or sentence. She claimed that the whole word or sentence instruction enabled the pupils to learn to read directly. According to her, the teaching of word components, for example, letters and syllables was unnecessary and confused the pupils. She also claimed that it took time for pupils to learn to read the whole sentence and understand the idea when they were first taught to read the word components. Besides, according to her, reading a text requires reading a whole word or sentence and not letter-by-letter or syllable-by-syllable.

Learning to read vowels and syllables first is 'crucial' for a pre-primary pupil to learn to read

During interviews, teachers were asked what they believed were the most important basic skills for a pre-primary pupil to acquire with regard to reading so as to become successful readers eventually. In response to this question, all the teachers with the exception of one, who believed in the whole sentence instruction (as described earlier), cited letter knowledge (sounds and names) and syllables as the most important skills for a pre-primary pupil to learn to read. Nevertheless, it was noted that the teachers placed much emphasis on the five vowels ('a', 'e', 'i', 'o', 'u'), claiming that they were the most important as they appear in almost all Kiswahili syllables, which form words. Vowels were also important as they could stand alone as syllables. One of the teachers, for example, said:

Vowels are very important for a pre-primary pupil to know...learn to read...they can stand alone as syllables and are combined with all other letters to form syllables. This means that they appear in all syllables and words. The first thing I start with is to make sure that they learn the vowels. Letting them master them makes me feel confident that they will learn to read unfamiliar words and sentences.

In addition to letters and syllables, teachers held that upon pre-primary completion, a pupil should also be able to read some words commonly used at school and at home, and a few short sentences (one or two words sentence), for example, "anapika" (he/she is cooking), "baba analima" (Father is cultivating). They claimed that being able to read some words made of syllables that have been taught, and short sentences helped pupils learn to read complex words and sentences in higher grades.

Practising writing consolidates learning to read

Nearly all the teachers emphasised the fact that pupils should write what they have read because writing consolidates reading and indicates that the pupil could read what he or she has written:

You pronounce it repeatedly and then you ask pupils to pronounce as a whole class, in columns, followed by each desk. Thereafter, you select a few individuals. After reading

out aloud practices you write on the chalkboard for pupils to see what they were pronouncing...they read it. This is followed by handwriting practices. You ask them to pick a piece of stick and imitate writing the letter in the air following your demonstration....The next day they practice writing it on small boards...writing activities after reading are important. A pupil cannot write if he or she cannot read what he or she writes. These activities [reading and writing] should go together.

However, the teacher did not explain clearly how the integration of reading and writing supported learning how to read.

A classroom rich in print materials support learning to read

During interviews, teachers were asked to describe an ideal reading classroom environment that they believed would support pupils' acquisition of reading skills. The study findings show that, teachers believed that learning to read required a classroom environment rich in print teaching-learning materials. Teachers cited materials such as pictures of different things, cards printed letters, syllables and words, and alphabet and picture books. They said that print materials such as pictures drew pupils' attention and supported learning to read letters and words. "Pictures help a lot. They attract pupils", Teacher Joyce said, "If you show them pictures, they will not even make noise". She further explained that pictures supported pupils understanding of things not available in the pupils' environment as she said, "Pictures help to illustrate things which are not in our environment".

Teachers further claimed that print materials displayed on classroom walls stimulated pupils to practise reading even in the absence of the teacher and helped them remember what they had been taught. As one of these teachers explained:

Also I think that...classroom walls should display letters of the alphabet, words, and even sentences...children can practice on their own...they can read. That helps them remember...ahaa this is what we learned yesterday.

Both positive and punitive feedback support learning to read

Findings reveal that teachers believed that positive and punitive feedback during reading instruction supported learning to read. The majority of the teachers reported that positive feedback such as praise, clapping of hands, smile, and issuance of tokens encouraged children learn to read. They commented that when children were provided with such positive feedback following correct responses, they felt happy and became motivated to work even harder the next time. One teacher further explained that positive feedback was useful not only to a child who responded correctly but also to one who made an effort. In addition, teachers believed that positive feedback was also useful for children who lagged behind in reading. They expressed that when those children saw others rewarded, they were encouraged to work hard so that they would also be rewarded. Some teachers were of the belief that, in case a child made a mistake, feedback should be provided in a positive way; they felt that negative feedback such as verbal

and physical punishment would create fear among pupils and, thus hinder the children's learning. The statement below illustrates the teachers' belief about positive feedback:

When a child reads correctly he or she has to be motivated. Motivation does not necessarily require buying something such as sweets. Motivation can be verbal praise. Let me tell you one secret: young children like to be praised even when they are wrong. Even if he or she is wrong you just say he or she has tried. Next time he or she will improve more. But when you tell them that he or she is wrong you discourage the pupil, he/she will feel bad and think that he or she cannot make it. But when you praise even for a small thing for sure the pupil will do something better next time.

Furthermore, some teachers commented that punishment was also important in helping pupils work hard and focus on the lessons. They held that some pupils ignored participating in lesson activities and, just played. To help them gain focus on the activities, teacher remarked, they have to be punished.

Some teachers believed that some children experienced difficulties to learn to read because of their laziness. So for those pupils punishment was proper. One teacher, for example, stated, "A child becomes careful when he is pinched a little bit. He has to be pinched though not severely. Next time when you ask them to read... will not make a mistake... will read correctly". Another teacher offered further insights regarding the usefulness of punishment by recalling her experience with her own child:

One of my children had reading problems in his first years of schooling. Despite that he was retained in the first grade for two years so that he could learn to read, yet he still could not read even a word. His teacher informed me about that. I asked myself why; I could not understand the reason. But I think it was because of laziness. I started teaching him. What I did was use pictures paired with words and a stick, stick and pictures...beating him with a stick until he learned to read. He is now at the university. What do you think helped him to learn to read, the stick...he was lazy...he needed the stick...without the stick things could have become worse.

One of the teachers was of the belief that punishment was useful; however, it could be effective if negotiated between the child and teacher. She believed that punishment worked well when negotiated by the teacher together with the child in a calm way. To her, negotiation enabled the child to understand his or her mistake and accept the punishment, hence pave the way for improvement to evolve as the following statement from one of the teachers illustrates:

When a child does something wrong, he or she has to be punished; however, this should come after negotiating the punishment with the pupil. When the child makes a mistake you ask him or her, what have you done? If I punish you will it be me or you will have punished yourself? How many sticks? Then you punish him and ask him or her not to repeat the mistake. Next time he will work hard.

Children should be assessed on the letter name knowledge, syllables, words and ability to read sentences

Nearly all the teachers believed that the mastery of letter name knowledge, syllable, word and sentence level reading was important for children to learn to read. Thus, children should be assessed on those skills to determine their levels of mastery. The teachers further commented that children could be assessed on the basis of the daily classroom observation based on the correctness of their oral responses and through administration of end of term or year examinations. They also reported that dictation could be used to assess pupils' reading progress. They also believed that a pupil cannot write, for example, a spoken word if he or she has not mastered to read it. The quotations below represent the teachers' sentiments on assessment:

It is important for children to know the letter names, syllables, some words and sentences at the pre-primary. When you teach, you assess them. As you teach, you ask them to read orally. Doing so gives you a picture of who can and cannot read. After all, you are with the children everyday so you should know who has mastered what and who has not. Sometimes, you can also give them examinations at the end of the term or year based on what you have taught. For example, at the end of this year, I will administer an examination. I will write some letters, syllables, words and short sentences on the chalkboard and ask children to read one after another.

Relationship between Teachers' Beliefs and Instructional Practices and Curriculum Intentions

This section describes the relationship between teachers' beliefs, practices, and curriculum intentions with regard to teaching the reading of Kiswahili in the pre-primary class. To establish the relationship, beliefs held by each teacher observed were sorted out and compared with his or her instructional practices, and curriculum intentions related to teaching and learning to read, materials, and assessment techniques. Generally, teachers' beliefs, their instructional practices and curriculum intention were not always consistent as the following sub-sections demonstrate.

Teachers' expectations, instructional practices and curriculum reading goals were in match

The analysis of data indicates that teachers' beliefs of what was important for a pre-primary pupil to learn were consistent with the curriculum objectives for early reading. Almost all the teachers held the view that at the end of pre-primary education, a pupil should know the letters of the alphabet, syllables (V, vowel alone, and CV, consonant + vowel) and should be able to read at the word and short- sentence level. This was in line with their classroom instructional practices and mandated curriculum intentions.

The analysis of interviews delineated that all the teachers with the exception of one indicated that knowledge about letters and syllables was the most important for a pre-primary pupil to acquire to become a successful reader. This belief was in alignment with their instructional

practices. Their lessons paid considerable amount of time teaching letter names and syllables. During interviews, nearly all the teachers said that syllables were the most important for a pupil to learn to read. During classroom observations, it was noted that almost every time teachers entered their classes they revised the syllables taught. They required the pupils to read out aloud the syllables printed on the pieces of papers or written on the chalkboard or displayed on a wall. Although the curriculum does not identify the most important skills a pre-primary pupil should acquire, it advocates for the teaching of letters and syllables.

Teachers' beliefs about direct and systematic instruction, instructional practices and curriculum

During interviews, all the teachers except one indicated that children learn to read through direct and systematic instruction, instruction proceeding from the teaching of letters, syllables to word and sentence-level reading. They believed that for children to learn to read they should be taught first the five Kiswahili vowels ('a', 'e', 'i' 'o' and 'u'), sounds and their form. Thereafter, they should learn to read the consonants followed by syllables after they have been taught how to combine the consonants and vowels. This should be followed by reading individual words and short sentences. The analysis of the lesson plans and classroom observations revealed that these beliefs were evident in the teachers' instructional practices. All the teachers observed taught reading skills directly and systematically. They first taught pupils the letter-sound relationship followed by instruction on blending the letters to form syllables, and then blending the syllables to form and read words. Thereafter, they instructed the pupils on reading one and/or two words sentences.

The curriculum advocated for reading instruction proceeding from letter- sound relationship to sentence reading. This was evidenced by how the reading content was sequenced and the teaching-learning strategies the curriculum advocated. For example, the curriculum stipulated: "Using syllable cards the teacher to guide children to blend syllables to form words....Using word cards, the teacher should guide children to read the words" (MoEVT, 2005, p.9).

During interviews, however, one teacher offered explanations, which indicated inconsistency between her belief and the curriculum intentions. She believed that pupils learn to read better when reading instruction involved a whole word or sentence rather than proceeding from letters to sentences. She also contended that a whole sentence instruction enabled pupils to learn to read and understand easily. For her the teaching of letters and syllables was unnecessary. According to her, it took time and delayed the pupils' acquisition of reading and understanding of the sentence. Nevertheless, in her lessons it was noted that, although she taught sentences, her previous lessons indicated that instruction proceeded from letters to sentences. This suggested that she taught letters followed by syllables and words, and then sentences. The main reason she cited for this discrepancy between her belief and instructional practice was related to the influence of the school inspectors and the syllabus. She said that school inspectors expected her to teach according to the syllabus. Thus, she feared they would berate her if they found her teaching contrary to what is stipulated in the curriculum.

Integration vis-à-vis separation of reading and writing

All the teachers upheld the view that reading and handwriting activities go together. Nevertheless, there was a slight variation on which activity should come first. The majority of the teachers expressed that reading activities should precede writing. During interviews, one of the teachers said:

You teach them [reading and writing] together, reading first then writing...children have to learn to read, for instance the letter...practice it by singing. Thereafter, they have to write in the air...for one week singing and writing in the air, then [writing] on sand or imitate writing on their cloths.

Only two teachers believed that writing should precede reading activities. For example, one of the teachers said during an interview that reading and writing go together. For her, however, writing should precede reading activities: *"I think pupils should learn to write first before reading"*. This was evident in her class. It was observed that after a brief review of the previous lesson, she wrote syllables of that particular lesson on the chalkboard. Thereafter, she asked pupils to copy what she wrote on the chalkboard into their exercise-books. This was followed by reading out aloud practices. When asked about this approach, she explained that the pupils should read what they have written because it might be difficult for them to read before knowing to write. Despite these variations, the integration of reading and handwriting activities was observed in all the classes and was consistent with teachers' sequential preferences. The following observation notes exemplify how one teacher integrated writing and reading activities:

She distributes pupils' exercise-books. Then, she writes syllables 'na', 'ne', 'ni', 'no', and 'nu' in five lines on the chalkboard. Having finished, she requires pupils to copy what she has written on the chalkboard into their exercise-books. The teacher passes around to check and correct pupils' works...This is followed by reading out aloud practices.

Teachers' beliefs and practices about integrating reading and writing, however, were inconsistent with the official curriculum in place. The way the curriculum content was organised demonstrated that reading and writing were treated as two independent topics: each assigned its own number of periods, 44 and 43, respectively. This indicated that pupils were to be taught first to pronounce letters, read syllables, words, and sentences, with writing instruction proceeding in the same order afterwards.

Whole-class instruction vis-à-vis individualised instruction

The analysis of interviews demonstrated that almost all the teachers emphasised individualised instruction. This was consistent with the curriculum, which placed less emphasis on whole-class instruction. Nevertheless, observational data revealed that all teachers engaged pupils in whole-class instruction most of the instructional time.

Moreover, it was noted that nearly all the teachers held the view that some pupils experienced learning to read difficulties and the pupils could be helped through a variety of strategies such as within-class ability mixing, within-class age and ability grouping, supplemental practices, and retention. The curriculum, however, was silent on learning to read difficulties and strategies to help pupils with such experiences.

Some pupils are 'unteachable', a belief translated into practice

Interview material suggested that some teachers held a belief that some pupils were unteachable no matter what the teacher did. This presumption signals teacher's low-expectation. Observational data revealed that this expectation was translated into practice. Teachers seemed to pay little attention or less motivated to help pupils whom they expected little from them. This was exemplified by some teachers who dismissed the pupils from the tasks following incorrect responses as exemplified by the following remark: "What are you reading! Sit down, you are wasting our time". Similarly, another teacher remarked: "You know nothing, sit down".

Beliefs and classroom practices about print-rich classroom environment and learning to read

During interviews, some teachers described an ideal reading classroom environment as the one with picture books and other print materials such as pictures, and cards with printed letters, syllables, words, and sentences. A few teachers further underscored the importance of print materials displayed on classroom walls. They contended that these materials stimulated pupils' interest and motivation to practice reading. They also believed that pupils' continued exposure to such materials improved their memory of what they have been taught, hence acquisition of reading skills. During observation, it was noted that all the classes had no picture books; only a few had one copy used by the teacher for reference purposes. Similarly, only a few classes had print materials displayed on the walls. Although the curriculum urged teachers to use different teaching-learning resources such as pictures and cards with printed letters, syllables, words and sentences, it was silent on books and the importance of creating a print-rich classroom environment in relation to learning to read.

Stated instructional time miss-match with teachers' classroom instructional time

Furthermore, teachers stated that the acquisition of reading skills at the pre-primary class level was more important than other subject areas' skills the young learners were expected to acquire during this basic stage of learning. As such, they held that imparting of such reading skills required more instructional time than learning activities for other subjects. Teachers translated this into their classroom instructional practices as it was proven during the observation of their classroom activities. All the teachers manipulated the schedule in attempt to get some more time for reading instruction. The lessons observed lasted for about 25 to 40 minutes. This was in

disagreement with the 20 minutes block suggested in the official curriculum that is supposed to guide their teaching practice.

On-going assessment matters but not practiced

Teachers' beliefs about the assessment of pupils' progress concurred with their instructional practices. Nearly all the teachers held the view that pupils should be assessed on their letter knowledge, syllables, word and sentence- level reading. The modality of assessment they cited included both ongoing, in-classroom observation, and summative examinations, at the end of the term or year. The teachers did assess the pupils' daily reading progress on the basis of the correctness of their responses during lesson activities. Besides, they claimed that they knew their pupils because they had been with them for a considerable time.

Although not self-evident, teachers seemed to practice on-going assessment. This was partly in alignment with the curriculum assessment requirements. The curriculum advocated for ongoing assessment based on daily teacher's observations. It also urged teachers to keep records of each pupil from the day he/she joined pre-primary education through completion:

...the [pre-primary] child is assessed by observing a child's actions from the day he/she joined pre-primary education to the time he/she finishes and is enrolled in standard one. The teacher therefore is supposed to institute a record keeping system. (MoEVT, 2005, p. vi).

In other words, continuous assessment of pupils' progress is supposed to be based on daily observations and record-keeping. In fact, continuous assessment was frequently mentioned by teachers and seemingly practiced. However, keeping progress records for each pupil was neither stated nor practiced by the teachers. It was evident that nearly all the teachers failed to keep individualised progress reports for the pupils on the pretext of the huge number of pupils and lack of time to do so. Additionally, teachers administered end of the term/year or pre-primary education examinations. These kinds of examinations could be described as replicas of the primary examination system. The curriculum, however, does not advocate for such examinations, as it instead states: "*In pre-primary education a child is not examined as in primary school*" (MoEVT, 2005, p. vi).

On the whole, there were both match and mismatch between teachers' beliefs, their instructional practices and the curriculum intentions. Many teachers' belief statements, however, seemed to be consistent with their instructional practices compared to curriculum intentions.

Factors influencing teachers' beliefs and instructional practices, and their relationships

Findings reveal that teachers' beliefs and practices were influenced by a number of factors ranging from their own experiences through sociocultural:

Teacher's own experiences and background

Own experiences involve teachers' teaching experience and their experiences as students. Almost all the teachers, regardless of their background, believed that the years spent on teaching pre-primary and primary school, have influenced their beliefs about teaching and learning to read. They explained that, although they had never attended any pre-primary training and teaching reading the time they had spent teaching had helped them understand pupils and different instructional strategies to employ during their reading lessons. One of the teachers, for example, said:

Experience matters, for sure, it does. I have been teaching this class [pre-primary class] for many years now. I have learnt a lot. I know what I should do. I understand what strategies to use to help pupils learn to read. I can do everything; there is nothing that I cannot do. You know as you teach you understand what to do to help children learn to read.

Another teacher expressed using her grade one experience in teaching reading at pre-primary class as she stated:

I have not attended any pre-primary teaching course. But I teach them [pre-primary pupils] and they learn to read. I just use my grade one teaching experience. You know...I taught grade one for more than four years. I also taught other grades in primary school. This experience helps me a lot. I can't imagine how I would teach without this experience.

The study further found that nearly half of the teachers reported that their prior learning experiences as pupils have influenced their beliefs and classroom instructional practices about teaching and learning. Teachers reported that they still remembered what and how their first grade reading teachers taught them. They felt that the strategies their teachers employed were effective. Thus, they applied them in their lessons, as one of them said:

...from that time, I still remember how my grade one teacher taught me; the teaching-learning materials, classroom strategies, use of songs to teach letters, for example, ...I have not forgotten the way she was teaching from the time she entered the class through the end. That is what I am doing today though the environment is not the same as the previous one.

Another teacher mentioned that she did not have a pre-primary education syllabus for guidance. As such, her practices were mainly guided by the pre-school training she had attended:

I don't have a syllabus...I teach according to how I was taught in the pre-school training course that I attended. I start to teach children the sounds of letters, followed by shapes and names and then I proceed to the syllables, words and sentences. This is the way I was taught.

Immediate classroom context, classroom teaching practices, and collaboration

Analysis of data revealed that the majority of the teachers cited classroom situation-related factors to influence their beliefs and practices. These factors included lack or scarcity of teaching-learning materials, pupils' age and abilities, large classes, time constraints, and absenteeism. Nearly all the teachers cited lack of teaching-learning materials as one of the factors, which influenced their beliefs and instructional practices. They frequently mentioned that they lacked pupils' textbooks and picture books, syllabus, teacher's guide, and letter cards. According to them, lack of those materials constrained their instructional practices and pupils' acquisition of reading skills. They expressed that availability of books, for example, would reduce "talk-chalk" approach they engaged in most of the time as they would engage children to read books. One of the teachers, for example, remarked:

We don't have books...lack of books is a problem. You can't teach as you want. You are forced to stand up there all the time and sing or just tell them to read what you have you written.

In a lack of materials situation, teachers reported to draw on their own experiences and creativity. They also mentioned that they used grade one syllabus and textbooks and others to decide what and how to teach. One teacher, for example said:

The big problem that makes things [teaching] difficult is lack of materials. There are no books for this class, even a teacher's guide...you have to crack your head. We use primary school textbooks and others that we find in our own.

It was further noted that, almost all the teachers cited a big number of pupils in a class as another factor that influenced their instructional practices. They said that big class sizes constrained individual pupils' reading practice time. Consequently, teachers employed a whole class instruction and/or sampled a few pupils for individual practices. They also manipulated their lessons' schedules in attempt to have more time for individual reading practices. They also indicated that large classes affected assessment procedures in a similar way. This is reflected in the following quotation from one of the teachers:

The time is too short that is why you may extend your Kiswahili [reading] lesson to another lesson...The class is too big to allow individual practice for every child. I would want every child to practice. But with this class size with more than seventy pupils, I cannot, I just do what is possible. For instance, I ask three pupils from each column to read. I don't like it, but what to do. That is the thing. We are told that the required number in this class is twenty five, but mmh! ...may be in private schools.

Teachers also indicated that their beliefs and practices were influenced through collaborating with other teachers. Learning from other teachers was also mentioned by almost half of teachers as one of the factors that influenced their beliefs and practices. They expressed that their interaction with other experienced and trained teachers in and out of the school contributed to their beliefs and their teaching. The majority of untrained teachers revealed that when they encountered difficulties with regard to teaching, they consulted their experienced colleagues in the school for advice. One of the teachers further revealed that she sometimes visited a nearby

school to observe how the trained teacher taught their classes. She acknowledged that such practice helped her learn a variety of teaching strategies and materials. Teachers expressed that sharing ideas with others was like training, as one of them said:

I have not attended any [formal] teacher training but I teach. I get training here at school. When I face some difficulties in teaching, I ask experienced teachers [grade I teachers] who tell me where to start and end...don't teach that, they will be taught at grade one.

A few teachers acknowledged that their instructional practices were mainly influenced by the pre-primary syllabus. These teachers revealed that they taught what was stipulated in the syllabus, however, with slight variation due to classroom conditions and what they believed to be important and appropriate for pupils. One of the teachers, for example, said: "I teach according to the syllabus though not exactly the same. There are some constraining factors such as lack of materials and the number of pupils in the class....Sometimes you have to reorganise the content for pupils to understand".

Teachers further reported that reading instructional time was limited because of many subjects that must be taught as stipulated in the syllabus. Each subject was allocated 20 minutes. According to the teachers, learning to read was important. Thus, they felt that it needed more instructional time than other subjects. But the teaching of other subjects constrained the teaching of reading. As a result, teachers recommended that time for the reading lesson should be increased from 20 to at least 30 to 40 minutes in a day. They further remarked that pre-primary subjects, other than Kiswahili activities should be given a very little time in a week, as one of the teachers said: "...other subjects should be given little time in a week..."

School inspectors and parents' expectations, and economic-related factors

Analysis of data revealed that teachers' beliefs and their instructional decisions were influenced by school inspectors and parents' expectations. They also seemed to be influenced in a way by a broader economic position of the country. Some teachers acknowledged that they were teaching according to the syllabus so as to meet the demands of the school inspectors. Nonetheless, some teachers revealed that they were told by school inspectors that the syllabus should not restrict them, but rather they use it as a guide. Teachers mentioned that school inspectors urged them to teach according to the environment and classroom conditions (e.g., number of pupils, availability of teaching and learning materials), and creativity. For example, one of the teachers said, "...even the (school) inspectors tell us that we should not depend too much on the syllabus but rather use it as a guide".

Discussion

Overall, teachers' beliefs and observed instructional practices about learning and teaching reading Kiswahili at the pre-primary class could be described as phonics-syllabic or bottom-up approach. In similar vein, Trudell and Schroeder (2007), Bhalalusesa *et al.* (2011) and Dubeck *et*

al. (2012) consider phonics-syllabic instruction as suitable for teaching children how to read in Kiswahili. Trudell and Schroeder (2007), for example, assert that teaching letter-phoneme conversion or syllables in early stages of learning to read in shallow orthographies (Kiswahili in this context) speeds up reading acquisition. This is partly due to the close correspondence between the sounds of the language and its graphemes. Indeed, Abadzi (2013) contends that decoding may be achieved in 3-4 months when the basic forms in syllabic scripts...in consistently spelled languages are taught (p. 2).

Phonics-instruction, however, might fragment reading as a meaning-making activity when overdone. It might reduce reading instruction to memorisation rather than teaching reading meaningfully and for a purpose. Reading instruction need to be organised in such a way that reading is meaningful and necessary for something, “relevant to child’s life”, and use of natural methods such as play to teach (Vygotsky, 1978). The majority of the teachers in the current study rarely cited and engaged pupils in playful reading activities. Some of them cited play as one of the possible causes of learning to read difficulties as it led pupils to pay little attention to the teacher and the lesson activities. Only a few teachers were observed teaching in a manner that could be described as meaningful. These teachers engaged pupils in, for example, dramatic play, letter games, used real objects and connected what they were teaching with the pupils’ everyday life experiences.

Teachers’ beliefs and practices could also be attributed to ‘narrow’ teachers’ conceptualisation of reading. When synthesised, data suggest that teachers conceptualised reading as decoding; identification and recognition of letters, syllables, and words. There was little evidence to establish that teachers viewed reading as a meaning-making activity. Teachers’ conceptualisation of reading seemed to have influence on how they taught. The majority of the teachers paid due attention to memorisation of letters and syllables with little emphasis on teaching for meaning. Only a few teachers engaged pupils in reading activities that could foster meaning-making. Of course, at pre-primary class level, pupils are not expected to engage in comprehending large and complex texts. This, however, does not preclude teachers from conceptualising and practising—like reading as a meaning-making activity.

The findings further, indicate that there were both match and mismatch between the teachers’ beliefs and the classroom instructional practices. This finding is in accordance with previous research in the field, which has reported that teachers hold beliefs about the learning and teaching of reading and that such beliefs tend to be related to their classroom instructional practices. A study by Kostopoulou (2005) in early childhood education settings in Coventry and Birmingham in the United Kingdom, for example, found that all the participants had a set of beliefs about play as a key practice in the teaching of reading. These beliefs were translated into instructional decisions that teachers made.

The current study further found that teachers’ beliefs were not always related to their instructional practices. Inconsistencies and the gaps between teachers’ beliefs and instructional practices are in sync with the activity theory’s notion of the existence of tensions and overlaps between the activity components (Engeström, 1987; Cross, 2010). The theory proffers that dissonances are an inherent aspect of activity as they emerge within the components of activity themselves or between components (Engeström, 1987; Cross, 2010). Similarly, this finding

confirms previous research findings in abundance, which has demonstrated that teachers' beliefs and their instructional practices are not always consistent (see, for example, Duffy & Anderson, 1984; Fang, 1996; Kostopoulou, 2005).

A number of factors could be attributed to inconsistencies: lack or scarcity of teaching-learning materials; big class size; little time allotted for reading instruction; and mandated curriculum. Teachers in this study frequently asserted that teaching-learning materials such as books, pictures, letter cards were largely lacking. Also they cited big classes to have influence on their practices. Even though they might have wanted to use materials and engage pupils in a playful way or individualised instruction, lack of the materials and the number of pupils in the class might have led them to engage into practices that were not in alignment with their beliefs.

One teacher believed that whole word and sentence instruction helped children to read better than instruction proceeding from letters to the sentences. However, this belief was rarely consistent with what she actually did in the classroom. She claimed that school inspectors would not understand if they found her not teaching according to the mandated curriculum. This is suggestive that her inconsistencies were influenced by the mandated curriculum through school inspectors who were there to enforce the implementation of the curriculum. This echoes Bhalalusesa *et al* (2011) study in which one of the participants reported, "...the teacher had to follow the syllabus to the letter because if the inspector finds that you are doing something different, he will not understand".

As with teachers' beliefs and instructional practices, the study found that teachers' beliefs matched with curriculum intentions, although not always the case. The way the content was sequenced and the teaching- learning strategies recommended by the curriculum seemed to suggest that the curriculum advocated for a direct and systematic reading instruction proceeding from letters, syllables, words and sentence-level reading. This was in line with the beliefs of the majority of teachers. This could be attributed to the fact that the curriculum is developed centrally by the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE), a governmental agency, to inform teachers of what and how to teach. Thus, it was not surprising to note that the beliefs of the teachers matched with curriculum intentions.

What was somewhat surprising was that, teachers' beliefs were not always in alignment with the curriculum intentions. Teachers' beliefs about whole word and sentence instruction, for example, were incongruent with curriculum intentions, which advocated for a progression of instruction from letters through sentences. Moreover, teachers offered explanations which denoted their beliefs to the effect that reading and writing should be taught concomitantly. Some advocated for reading activities first then writing whereas others believed in the opposite. Regardless of the progression, teachers' beliefs about teaching reading and writing concomitantly are in disagreement with the way the curriculum content is organised. Reading and writing in the curriculum in place are treated as two independent topics: each assigned a number of periods and instructional time with reading topic preceding writing. Similar organization is observed in the recently developed pre-primary curriculum.

Some teachers' beliefs in this study surpassed curriculum intentions and the vice-versa. Similar with what Shukia (2016), teachers believed that some pupils were unteachable, and experienced

learning-to-read difficulties due to laziness, immaturity, mother-tongue effect, lack of parental involvement, and mental impairment. Moreover, they cited supplemental practices, retention, and within-class ability grouping/mixing as instructional strategies they believed might help pupils experiencing learning to read difficulties. They also cited that some children needed positive and punitive feedback to help them learn to read. Yet, the official curriculum was silent on these aspects. Likewise, the new pre-primary content draft has limited content to guide teachers to deal with children experiencing learning to read difficulties.

The mismatch or gaps between teachers' beliefs and curriculum intentions could be attributed to unavailability of pre-primary curriculum and teachers' guide in schools and teachers' own experiences and beliefs. The majority of the teachers reported that they have never seen the curriculum and teaching guide. Unavailability of the curriculum could be attributed to lack of the supply of curriculum by the responsible ministry, the MoEVT, and enough funding specifically earmarked for pre-primary class, which the schools could use to buy curriculum copies. Available information suggests that there are no funds allocated for a pre-primary class from the government despite being an integral part of the formal public education system (HakiElimu, 2016). These classes have been depending on the parents' contributions for teachers' salaries, pupils' porridge, and teaching-learning materials. And yet, the teachers reported that the majority of the parents were not paying their contribution as expected. With the introduction of fee-free basic public education, it has been reported that the majority of parents have withdrawn their contributions. This makes it even harder to operate pre-primary classes (HakiElimu, 2016). Besides, the amount parents paid before was too negligible to meet all the needs.

Unavailability of the curriculum suggests that teachers were unfamiliar with the pre-primary curriculum intentions. As a result, they relied on their own experiences, background, and beliefs. From the socio-cultural and its allied activity theory perspective, a teacher—as an ontogenetic subject—acts as a mediator between the microgenetic activity, teaching reading in this case and the curriculum intentions. The experiences of these teachers, their background and beliefs form the basis for accepting, resisting, and renegotiating the curriculum intentions and the nature of engagement in the teaching and learning processes (Cross, 2010).

Nespor (1987) contends that the context and environment within which teachers work, and the many problems they encounter are 'ill-defined'. These problems, among others, include lack of clear goals, procedures and guidelines for attaining the goal or goals. These circumstances might require the teacher to go beyond the information available in attempt to find ways to overcome the situation. As a result, teachers consciously or intuitively develop beliefs to guide their instructional decisions (Borg, 2006; Kagan, 1992), which might not reflect the mandated curriculum guidelines, or effective evidence-based practices. In this regard, one could reasonably argue that, teachers in the current study encountered 'ill-defined' problems or uncertainties including lack of teaching-learning materials, big classes, and pupils who experienced learning to read difficulties with no clear guidance on how to manage them. As mentioned elsewhere in this paper, the curriculum investigated the draft curriculum in place, for example, did not mention anything related to learning to read difficulties and how the teachers should go about helping pupils with such experiences. From the social cultural theory

point-of-view, this suggests that teachers, as ontogenetic subjects, brought their own experiences, background and beliefs to the teaching of reading setting in the absence of 'appropriate' curriculum guidance. This might have led to the inconsistencies and gaps between the curriculum intentions and teachers' beliefs. This leaves a hole for attainment of the curriculum goals.

Lack of professional development programmes related to the curriculum at stake could also explain the gap and inconsistency between the teachers' beliefs and the curriculum intentions. The majority of the teachers in this study had never attended any teacher education training let alone specialised pre-primary training.

Implications

Implications for decision-makers: Teachers frequently cited a variety of contextual factors to have bearing on their teaching practices. These factors might also interrupt the relationship between the teachers' beliefs and practices and curriculum intentions. Thus, these factors need to be addressed for teachers' beliefs and practices to be consistent with their curriculum intentions. Initiatives, for example, could involve the enforcement of 1:25 teacher-pupil ratio policy and coupled with the recruitment of assistant teachers as stipulated in a national guideline. For effective implementation of the newly-established pre-primary curriculum, it is high time the government enforced these policies considerably. In addition, the government, district education officers, and schools in co-operation with other stakeholders might think about recruiting and training adults living near the schools to be paraprofessional teachers to assist regular teachers in implementing the curriculum.

The findings have demonstrated that teaching-learning materials, including print materials and curricular materials were largely lacking. This might have affected teachers' beliefs, instructional practices and their relations with curriculum intentions. Thus, there is a need for the government through its ministries responsible for education and other stakeholders to work collaboratively to distribute adequate materials including curriculum and teacher's guides and or encourage the development of materials from local context.

Implications for curriculum developers: Lack of relationship between teachers' beliefs, instructional practices and curriculum threatens the effective implementation of the curriculum. This might lead to poor learning outcomes. Thus, there is a need to establish the relationship. To establish the relationships, one possible direction could be towards exploring the teachers' beliefs prior to curriculum development and during reforms with an intention of harmonising teachers' beliefs and experiences with curriculum intentions for effective implementation of curriculum. This should go hand-in-hand with communicating curriculum expectations to teachers and ensuring that each teacher has the curricular materials to support curriculum implementation.

Implications for teacher educators: The findings indicate that teachers' beliefs and instructional practices revolved around the systematic phonics-syllabic approach with little emphasis on meaning-making reading activities and other pre-reading skills such as phonological awareness and teacher-pupil book reading. This is a narrow view of reading. The ultimate goal of reading

is to grasp the text rather than letter or word recognition. Teacher educators need to broaden teachers' conceptualisation of reading and beginning reading instructional practices.

It was noted that, some beliefs were consistent with instructional approaches. Some beliefs and their associated practices (e.g., use of punitive feedback, paying little attention to a pupil in association to a belief that some pupils are unteachable, lazy, etc.), however, might be detrimental to learning to read. Thus, they might need to be made explicit and reflected through pre-service and collaborative in-service teacher training.

The alignment between teachers' beliefs, practices and curriculum intentions suggests the possibility that teacher educators might affect pre-primary teachers' instructional approaches and promote curriculum implementation by influencing teachers' beliefs consistent with curriculum, and effective theoretical and research-based early reading insights discussed through continuing professional development programmes. On the other hand, the mismatches between teachers' beliefs, practices and curriculum intentions as a result of social-contextual factors inform teacher educators and curriculum developers about the complexity surrounding curriculum implementation. Teacher education and training programme sought to be aware of and consider raising these complexity and constraints at the same time usher in possibilities, in the course of training.

Furthermore, findings suggest that experiential learning played an important role in influencing teachers' beliefs and practices. This might be a useful insight for teacher educators to consider in designing practically-oriented teacher training programmes, which encourage observational learning, collaboration, reciprocal scaffolding, and peer tutoring. Ongoing collaboration with colleagues and supportive environment, if well thought of, might as well foster teachers' self-examination and reflection on their beliefs, practices and curriculum intentions after training especially and importantly in the context where professional development programmes are largely lacking.

It is, however, important to note that shaping or changing teacher trainee beliefs is a challenging task. Some teacher's pre-existing beliefs, especially those developed through teachers' own experiences, are resistant to change even in the face of conflicting evidence. The trainees may leave the programme with the same beliefs unless they are made explicit and reflected upon. This suggests a need to uncover teachers' beliefs during training and might require follow-up and support after training. Professional development programmes, which ignore trainee teachers' prior beliefs, are likely to be less effective (Borg, 2006; Kagan, 1992). Reflective ongoing teacher training programmes is a gateway to, harmonisation, expansion and or consolidation of teachers' beliefs, instructional practices and curriculum intentions.

Conclusion

The study has revealed that, teachers held various beliefs about teaching and learning to read. However, the beliefs were not always consistent with their respective classroom instructional practices and curriculum goals. Some teachers' beliefs are consistent with research-based effective teaching approaches while others are a doubt. Inconsistency between teachers' beliefs

and curriculum goals threatens effective implementation of the curriculum. This is a threat to attaining curriculum goals. Ongoing in-service training programmes and support have the potential in shaping teachers beliefs and informing teachers of the curriculum intentions and providing them with an opportunity to reflect upon their beliefs and curriculum intentions, hence harmonisation or minimisation, if not alleviation, of the inconsistencies between the two.

Future Research

The present study explored the relationship between teachers' beliefs, instructional practices and curriculum intentions. Subsequently, there is a need to examine the impact of the same on pupils' reading achievement. Future research may examine the effect of teachers' beliefs, practices and curriculum intentions on pupils' reading development.

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