

# Parental Engagement Approaches on Literacy Skills Development in Tanzanian Primary Schools

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## Abstract

This study explored approaches employed by parents in developing primary school children's literacy skills in Tanzania. The study employed qualitative case study design. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were the methods used to collect the data. Purposive sampling was used to select 44 participants for the study. Thematic analysis through NVivo software-12 was used to analyse the data. Findings revealed that parents in high-performing schools were highly engaged in their children's literacy development through regular parent-teacher communication, parent-teacher trust and parent-teacher cooperation. However, parents in low-performing schools were less engaged due to a lack of awareness about children's literacy skills development and hectic schedules on socio-economic activities. The study recommends that teachers should encourage parents to engage in developing literacy skills for their children due to its potential merits to the children's educational achievements in current and future endeavours.

**Keywords:** Parents; Parental engagement; Primary Schools; Pupils; Literacy skills.

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## 1.1 Introduction

Children's proficiency in literacy skills serves as the keys to opening the door for other academic endeavours and presents them with new opportunities far ahead in life (Wilder, 2014). Literacy skills in children allow them to express their knowledge and thoughts and participate in educational undertakings (Abuya et al., 2015; Niklas & Schneider, 2013). In Tanzania, children are reported to reach up to grade seven unable to read or write a simple sentence (UNICEF, 2019; UWEZO, 2017). Tanzania's current education system stresses that teachers in primary schools are primary educators in children's learning, with little emphasis on how parental engagement approaches. The government of Tanzania currently provides fee-free and accessible basic education to every school-aged child. Similarly, it has also continued to employ teachers and build classes to enable primary school pupils to learn comfortably (Kigobe, 2018).

Children's development of literacy skills depends on their early experiences and parents' readiness to offer a home supports literacy learning (Bartoll et al., 2022; Jaynes, 2017; Niklas et al., 2016). Parental engagement is deemed imperative in developing primary school children's literacy skills, one of the most vital life competencies that all people should possess. Effective parental engagement builds children's literacy skills that serve as a solid foundation for their current learning and subsequent education levels (Bierman & Sheridan 2022). The role of parents in children's literacy development is exceptionally significant than any other family background variables (Crosby, 2021). Parents' delight and genuine interest in their children's literacy learning have also lifelong impacts. For instance, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2012) when parents read to their young children regularly, their children are more likely to have proficiencies in literacy skills than those who do not.

In Tanzania, the policy on children's education has addressed the necessity and importance of parents combining their efforts for children's literacy skills development (Anney et al., 2016; MOEVT, 2014). Similarly, the Education Sector Development Plan of 2016/17 to 2020/21 in Tanzania. Its fourth objective advocates the development and implementation of parenting, communication and education campaign on support and engagement in primary education through reinforcing and committing to early investment in learning Joseph (2014).

However, pervasive low literacy abilities among primary school children both globally and locally are reported (Anney et al., 2016; Murray, 2021; World Bank, 2018). Mosha, (2012) argues that low literacy performance is still a challenging issue in Africa, despite numerous efforts done by different African

governments to eradicate it. Currently, there are graduates from kindergarten to university level with very low literacy levels. MoEST (2014) reports that 5,200 of the total primary school leaving graduates all over Tanzania Mainland were unable to read, write and count. Similar studies report that to write dictated words, write short stories, perform simple mathematics, and read sentences (Anney et al., 2016; UNESCO, 2017). Such a situation leaves numerous questions unanswered as to what and how parental engagement in developing literacy skills among children is enacted or implemented. Therefore, the current study was imperative to explore the existing parental engagement approaches in developing literacy skills in primary school children in Tanzania.

### **2.1 Theoretical Framework of the Study**

The family literacy theory guided this study. The theory informs that children's development of literacy skills is embedded in their daily interactions with their parents. Parents are the instant and first persons to teach their children literacy before and after school enrolment and therefore they can share the best ways of acquiring the expected skills of their children (Nkhata et al., 2019). Parents and caregivers support their children's literacy development by encouraging them engage in stimulating literacy activities (Yao, 2015). The family literacy theory sought to answer and provide a frame of analysis regarding parental engagement approaches in promoting primary school children's literacy skills in the Tanzanian context. It informs how parents engage in various approaches that are important in promoting literacy skills among primary school children.

### **3.1 Methodology**

A qualitative research approach was employed to guide this study which is in harmony with the interpretivism paradigm. The approach is used to realise social phenomena from the perspective and experience of parents' and teachers' views and understandings (Cohen et al., 2018). The qualitative approach assisted the researcher to realise participants' knowledge and experiences about the approaches used by teachers to engage parents at home and school. This study employed a multiple-embedded case study design. The design was appropriate for the study because of the following reasons. First, multiple embedded case studies allow flexibility and triangulation during data collection which increased the rigour of the findings from multiple sources and sites. Second, it enabled the inclusion of various units of analysis such as parents, primary school teachers, standard three pupils and head teachers.

Purposive sampling was used to sample information-rich participants (Ishak & Bakar, 2014). The sampling strategy guided the researcher in the selection of district, ward, sex, teachers and number of years of teaching Grade Two in primary school teaching experience. Therefore, the study included 44 participants, comprising four head teachers, eight primary school teachers, sixteen parents of standard 3 pupils, and sixteen Grade three pupils (aged 6-10 years) from four primary schools in two districts in Tabora region, Tanzania.

Moreover, parents were purposively sampled to participate in the study since they are the children's first teachers. Therefore, they were capable of providing helpful information on the approaches that support children's development of literacy skills. Standard two teachers were selected purposively based on their daily responsibilities of dealing with the involved children in this study. These teachers from each chosen school are the ones who also deal with parents. Therefore, they were expected to have information and awareness on the approaches used to engage parents in developing children's literacy skills. The inclusion of standard three pupils in the study was because they could provide valuable information on how their parents assisted them in developing literacy skills at home when they were in standard two.

### **3.2 Data collection**

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Semi-structured interview was chosen as it supported in exploration of the participants' feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and experiences based on its rigour and strengths (Yin, 2014). It enabled the exploration of the participants' feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and experiences on the parental engagement approach in developing children's literacy skills. The researcher interviewed pupils and their parents, teachers, and school head teachers about their approaches to helping primary school children develop literacy skills. Consent to interview them was sought and confidentiality was assured. Interviews were conducted in the school setting. The interviews with teachers were conducted in offices and outside offices under the shade of trees. Some teachers were interviewed in offices that were noise-free and others were interviewed under the shades of trees depending on the nature of the school compound. Equally, interviews with children were conducted in their respective schools outside classrooms either under shade trees or in specially prepared classrooms upon an agreement regarding convenience, comfort and privacy. Interviews with parents were also conducted at school in special offices before the appointments. Focused group discussions were conducted with parents. All discussions were recorded by the researcher using an automatic digital recorder which was set by the researcher. The researcher discussed the subject matter with participants and suggested an opportunity for any latecomers to join in the group discussions. Trigueros and Sandoval (2017) suggest that a group session may last from 45 minutes to two hours. In this study, the duration of focus group discussion lasted

between one and one and half hours as.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was performed on the data collected through focus group discussions using the NVivo software version 12. The recorded audio was meticulously transcribed. Subsequently, the transcripts in softcopy were imported into the NVivo software for analysis. The imported transcripts were read and reread to become acquainted with the data. Later, codes were created by dragging words, phrases, or sentences into the NVivo software's respective nodes. Similar codes generated themes on approaches that support parental engagement in developing children's literacy skills. A researcher read the transcripts several times to ensure that the generated themes corresponded to what respondents reported, and then the researcher defined and named the emerging themes. Finally, all emerging themes were reported, along with some evidence in the form of quotations.

### 4.1 Findings and Discussion

This section reports the findings based on an analysis of focus group discussions and individual interviews. A careful thematic analysis of the transcribed data yielded the following themes based on the objective of the current study which focused on exploring the parental engagement approach to developing their children's literacy skills in primary schools in Tanzania. The generated themes are presented in the following section

#### 4.1.1 Parent-teacher communication

The parent-teacher communication was revealed to contribute to the literacy development of primary school children in higher-performing schools, unlike the low-performing schools. It was found that in parents who regularly visited schools their children performed better in literacy skills. This is because it became easier to monitor their children's learning progress. Teachers confirmed that when summoned such parents, they responded positively, with readiness to discuss various issues, about children's literacy. Commenting on this, one of the participating teachers said:

I am in this school for fifteen years now. Sincerely parents here are very hard to engage in school matters. We are always trying to communicate with parents regarding children's behaviour and learning but their responses are discouraging. (Interview, Teacher, from LPS-TMC).

Similarly, another parent added that;

I frequently visit his school and speak with teachers to stay informed about what he is doing and progressing. I assure you this approach is working because I always respond when the teachers summon me to discuss any issue concerning my child, who occasionally skips class. We talk about it and then warn him not to miss classes (Interview, Parent from HPS- TMC).

Also one of the teachers had the following to say:

In our school parents are very reluctant when it comes to attending their children's academic affairs. Parents are always not ready and flexible in seeing what is going on in school. Therefore, we are left with children to help them regardless of the attachment impact between children with their parents (Teacher, Interview, LPS, UDC).

Furthermore, teachers reported that parents were assigning too many household chores to their children. Such a situation led children to have less time at home to learn literacy skills. It was also recounted that children developed literacy skills when their parents took the teachers' advice. Pupils affirmed these findings from parents and teachers during interviews. Most pupils in high-performing schools revealed that their parents visited their schools and communicated with their teachers about various learning issues, including literacy development. One of the teachers commented:

Most of the children here are doing a lot at home. By the nature of the families around here, children are staying with their guardians, especially their grandmothers. When children are at home they are expected to support more on the household chores than revising what was taught at school. This kind of habit affects children in getting academic support and at the same time-lagged in the development of literacy skills (Teacher, Interview, from LPS- UDC).

Notwithstanding, teachers in most low-performing schools were reluctant on advising parents on how to monitor their children's learning. This is demonstrated in two quotes from participants:

I would like to share with you that parents should conduct follow-ups on their children's school issues. I mean that they should not wait for teachers to summon them. The majority of parents in this school do not recognize any misconduct committed by their children, nor do they recognize their children's learning progress in terms of literacy skills (Teacher from LPS- UDC).

This was affirmed by parents who participated in a focus group discussion. The following was quoted:

We prefer to be called via formal ways rather than oral communications which are given to us through our children. On a serious note, we are not comfortable. If teachers need to give us proper information, it is better to put it into writing. Most of us will respond as quickly as possible. We are aware that some of our fellow parents are not engaging positively in school matters may be

because of this kind of practice. We propose to teachers use official ways regarding any information that will need parents' attention. Also, measures should be taken against parents who do not comply (FGD, Parents from LPS, UD).

Another parent supported:

...I think teachers should consult the parent once they see that a particular child is not doing better. I remember when one of my children was in Standard One, he could not read properly. However, his teacher communicated with me several times regarding the matter and finally my child managed to read even better than other children who were in standard Two. All these were because teachers were frequently involving me in my children's progress through formal information. I would like to advise teachers to remain close to children. Also, they should keep us informed on our children's progress (Interview, Parent HPS, UD).

The above findings indicate that parents in the schools visited were not comfortable with the ways teachers used to connect with them, particularly by sending oral information to children. Parents were not happy with such kind of communication because children sent to school were still very young to deliver the correct information as received from teachers to their parents. Most of the parents acknowledged that they were expecting to be provided with specific and direct information from schools related to their children's learning as a prerequisite for effective parental engagement and not otherwise. The extracts imply that communication between parents and teachers, particularly school visitation, can improve pupils' academic success, including literacy skills development in primary schools. In that sense, the status of the teacher-parent communication determined children's literacy development in visited schools.

#### **4.1.2 Parent-teacher support**

Parent-teacher support was found to facilitate children's development of literacy skills. It was revealed that parents in high-performing schools assisted their children at home by giving them writing and reading assignments and checking their exercise books. They ensured that learning took place at home in natural settings. Similarly, parents purchased school learning materials such as books and exercise books for their children. during the interview, it was reported that:

On my side, I purchased some books for my children. I usually assign reading and writing assignments to them. I also check their exercise books every day to see how they are doing (Interviews, Parents from HPS, UDC).

The findings also indicated that teachers supported primary school children in developing their literacy skills at school. They assisted children who could not master literacy skills through remedial classes. Each teacher in standards one to three was required to ensure that every pupil in their class could read, write and count correctly. This was explicitly uncovered during interviews with participants. One of the teachers had the following comment:

I provide classroom assistance; for example, on some days, I prepare five to ten sentences for the pupils to read aloud individually. In addition, I assist them in revising the material by assigning numerous literacy exercises. I check every one of their exercise books, even in subjects, I do not teach. When I see that my pupil did not perform well in any of the subjects' exercises, I try to assist him or her (Teacher, HPS, TMC).

Another participant also commented that:

We ensure that all pupils are proficient in reading, writing and counting. For instance, we have scheduled every teacher to teach pupils in standards one to three who do not know the 3Rs during remedial classes, which normally begin at 3 p.m. every day. In the beginning, we had thirty pupils, and now only ten pupils have remained in the programme. We hope that soon we will solve children's illiteracy strain (Headteacher, HPS, TMC).

These excerpts imply that children's learning requires a collaborative effort from various stakeholders, with teachers and parents at the front line. When primary school pupils are effectively supported both at home and school are more likely to develop and master literacy skills, and as a result, they enjoy their time at school while also flourishing academically. Primary school pupils are unlikely to develop literacy skills without unified parent-teacher support.

It is evident from the quotes that teachers' parents' support in terms of encouraging children to study hard was one of the significant tools in assisting children to perform better in class and this was associated with their future education success especially the development of literacy skills. Likewise, the majority of participants believed that if parents supported their children in terms of teaching the skills to children, it will motivate children to learn and master very easily. Moreover, the captions show that when parents engage, their investment assists children to learn and acquire skills. Therefore, teachers, parents and other educational stakeholders need to support children's learning.

#### **4.1.3 Parent-teacher cooperation**

Compared to low-performing schools, it was demonstrated that many primary school pupils in visited high-

performing schools could develop literacy skills because parents and teachers courageously collaborated to assist them in developing the skills. Pupils' inability to read, write and perform simple arithmetic operations like addition and subtraction were earlier identified. Immediately after realising pupils' literacy challenges, they set strategies, including parents, to assist their children by providing writing and reading activities at home. Similarly, the collaboration allowed teachers to learn about their pupils' behaviours. Consequently, pupils' performance in literacy and other skills improved. One of the participants had the following to say:

...Yes, because I work with teachers, my daughter's academic performance is flourishing. Sure, I see progress in my child's reading and writing abilities. She is always the first in the exams. This is the reason I am always willing to go above and beyond to support teachers' efforts in educating my child (Parent C from HPS, UDC).

The quotation above indicates that parents boldly reported that their cooperation with teachers facilitated the reduction of the number of illiterate children. This means that they ensured that children were supported to master basic literacy skills. Parents confirmed that their children were aware of the importance of education because they worked together to make sure that the development of literacy skills is achieved and children were ready for all school matters.

During a focus group discussion with parents, one participant was quoted saying:

We have a great working relationship with the teachers. This is due to the school's consistently high performance at the regional level, where it is ranked first in terms of school performance. When we are summoned, we do not hesitate. We have reason to rejoice. We have a few children who cannot read or write because of parent-teacher cooperation. We are always willing to come to school and discuss issues concerning our children when we are requested to do so (Parent C from HPS, UDC).

The findings indicate that parents and teachers in the majority of high-performing schools unlike their counterparts were able to identify children's literacy problems such as the inability to read, write and do simple arithmetic operations like addition. This was one way of identifying children's literacy skills and weaknesses. After knowing children's literacy problems, they set strategies including parents to help children at home to learn such literacy skills because it was believed that parents were the first teachers to their children. Setting strategies assisted children in one way to develop their literacy skills.

Teachers affirmed these observations. As one commented:

As a class teacher, I usually cooperate with parents on various issues. Involving parents allows me to understand the pupils' behaviour. Knowing them could enable me to devise strategies for assisting them. Likewise, there are numerous advantages to parents participating fully in school roles. For example, it is easier for me to identify pupils' flaws before things get messy (Teacher A from HPS, TMC).

Nevertheless, the situation was different in low-performing schools. Parent-teacher cooperation was inadequate despite its importance in developing primary school children's literacy skills. The following teacher demonstrates this.

Cooperating with parents is vital as it allows me to understand the pupils' behaviour so that I can set strategies for assisting them. However, most parents are reluctant to accept school invitations. You can imagine that some parents have sent their children to school, and they have never come here or communicated with us since their children were in grade one until now. This type of parenting does not inspire us and even their children as well (Teacher D from LPS, UDC).

Some parents in low-performing schools expressed that they could not cooperate with teachers concerning their children's education, including developing literacy skills, because they were busy with their socio-economic activities. They claimed to have a hectic schedule, so they could not attend their children's school regularly. The following quoted voices demonstrated this:

...you know how time-consuming my job is. I have to be in the office every day, which makes responding to school matters difficult. When parents and teachers work together, I know that the child can be more active and responsible. Children will have no place to hide because parents will follow up at home just as teachers will at school (Parent D from LPS, UDC).

The quotation shows that the majority of parents were not ready to attend to their children's school matters. Even though teachers volunteered to carry out extra classes to improve their school academic performances, some parents inhibited their children, especially girls from attending such classes. Instead, they assigned them to work to perform at home. Moreover, in contrast to high-performing schools, a lack of parent-teacher cooperation in low-performing schools resulted in a high rate of illiteracy among primary school children. Good cooperation between parents and teachers is critical in improving pupils' literacy skills.

The parents take a crucial stand, when it comes to their children's development and education as a whole, as the parents themselves are the ones to take care of the overall children's physical and intellectual development, till the point they get independent and ready to face the challenges of the society they live in. The

communication between parents and teachers, particularly school visitation, can improve pupils' academic success, including literacy skills development in primary schools. The findings of this study are consistent with those of Palts and Harro-Loit (2015), who conducted a study on parent-teacher communication patterns in Estonian primary schools regarding activities and positive-negative attitudes. Parents of primary school children who volunteered for focus group discussions were included in their study. They discovered that parents who had little communication with teachers were primarily concerned with grades and health, whereas active parents discussed the feedback and evaluation system to improve their children's academic success, including literacy development. Murray et al. (2015) researched parent-teacher communication and parent involvement patterns in Australia. Their study exposed that parents who participated in home education activities were more engaged in their children's early childhood education and school environments and had more regular communication with teachers. They also rated teacher-parent effectiveness higher. Regular communication between parents and teachers positively impacts the development of pupils' literacy skills. According to Yıldız and Yılmaz (2021), family-teacher communication is the backbone of joint home-school efforts and is critical to children's development and literacy learning in Turkish preschools. These findings suggest that the status of parent-teacher communication may impact pupils' academic progress, including the acquisition and development of literacy skills across populations and class levels.

Some authors Hemmerichs et al. (2017), argue that parental involvement in literacy activities could lead to worse or better reading skills in primary school children. Early parents' interventions in literacy activities at home improve their children's reading literacy abilities. Similarly, Zemichael et al. (2017) exposed that children who received parental supports perform better academically and learn more diligently. This implies that parent-teacher support is critical in improving pupils' literacy skills irrespective of class level.

Teachers reported that parents were not ready to attend to their children's school matters and therefore lose the cooperation between them and teachers. The current study's findings are consistent with those of a longitudinal study conducted by Cook et al., (2018) on parent-teacher relationships in the first year of school and their association with children's academic skills in Norwegian schools. They discovered that children in grade one who had excellent cooperation from their parents and teachers had better social and academic skills, including literacy skills. Children in grade one also had fewer negative behaviours than children whose parents and teachers did not cooperate. In a similar vein, Javier and Jubay Jr (2019) maintained that the parental engagement approach increases students' level of performance in vocabulary, which is significant in writing skill proficiency.

## 5.1 Conclusion and Recommendations

Parental engagement intervention is important in children's learning. This study revealed that different approaches were used in the process of engaging parents in the literacy skills development of their children however the approaches could not fit all poor and high-performing children's parents. Those approaches were mostly perceived positively by parents from high-performing schools. On the contrary, parents who were not positive with the parental engagement approach, especially to the low performing, children also performed very low in literacy skills. Factors such as a lack of awareness about children's development of literacy skills and hectic schedules contributed to their disengagement. In collaboration with other education stakeholders and teachers should use the approaches that will suit all parents so that they can be confident in the use of the approaches that will guide them to engage in their children's educational endeavours, including developing literacy skills. Moreover, parents and guardians should fulfill their responsibilities by supporting their children's literacy skills learning through providing reading and writing activities at home and communicating with teachers regularly to receive feedback on their children's academic progress.

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