Stakeholders' Views on Disadvantaged Families' Involvement and Its Implications on Children's Engagements in Primary Schools in Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the perceptions of stakeholders on disadvantaged families' involvement in school activities and how this influences children's engagements in primary schools of Tanzania. The informants for this study were parents/guardians (families), pupils, dropouts and Educational Officers. The study employed qualitative research methodology. In particular, the study uses multiple case study design that covered six schools in two Regions of Tanzania. The study findings confirm that low involvement of parents in school activities invariably affected engagement of children in school. The paper concludes with strategies on how parental involvement could be improved to enhance pupils' engagement with primary school.

INTRODUCTION

Children's engagement with school is crucial in any attempt to enhance education quality. Arguably, the quality of education that the children receive depends on their level of engagement with school which determines the amount of time spent in learning and hence the amount of human capital acquired (Knight, Shi, and Quheng, 2007). The literature identifies various things which constitute quality education. Among other things, quality education includes learners who are healthy, well-nourished, ready to participate and learn, and supported in learning by their families and communities (UNICEF, 2000). Hence this supports the argument that children's education starts with the parents and their support affects the quality of the education they receive. Yet, their level of parental support for

their children depends on their beliefs, interests and attitudes regarding education (Lloyd and Blanc, 1996; Weir, 2000; Furstenberg, 2005). These determine whether the parents will sacrifice their immediate family interests for their children's education. The various pieces of evidence suggest that most countries have worked hard to implement various strategies to realize target three of the millennium development goal which is aimed at ensuring that, by 2015, all children will have access to completely free and compulsory primary education of good quality. Indeed, the majority of developing countries succeeded in building sufficient schools and enrolling most school-age children. Yet most of them are facing problems in keeping their children in school. The evidence from Tanzania, for example, suggests that the government has introduced a number of programmes aimed at extending educational access to all children. Among other programmes are the Primary Education Development Program in 2002 and the National Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty. The statistics reveal that, through these programmes, the rate of children's engagement with school increases; for example, in 2007, the Gross Enrolment Ratio was 97.3% and the Net Enrolment Ratio was 114% (United Republic of Tanzania (URT), 2007). Despite these positive improvements, further evidence suggests the perpetuation of problems like children's non-enrolment, low attendance rates, and a tendency to drop out (Maliyamkono and Mason, 2006; URT, 2007; Oketch and Rolleston, 2007; URT, 2010). Regarding pupils' tendency to dropout, a tracer cohort from 2003 to 2009 indicated that, of 1,481,354 pupils enrolled in Grade I in 2003, only 1,059,640 (71.5%) survived the 7-year education cycle, indicating that 421,714 (28.5%) dropped out along the way. The same applied to a tracer cohort of 2004, whereby out of 1,368,315 pupils who were enrolled that year, only 948,532 (69%.3) survived to enter Standard VII in year 2010, indicating that 419,783 (30.6%) dropped out along the way. Further statistics indicate that truancy is the main reason for school dropout. For example, the evidence suggests that, between 2007 and 2009, dropouts due to truancy increased from 66.6%, to 69.5, to 76.8%, consecutively. Other reasons for dropout as indicated by the Ministry of Education statistics are pregnancy, death, illness, parental/guardian illness, lack of school needs and others.

The reasons for truancy and dropout as identified in the various Ministry of Education statistics reports and literature (see for example, Malekela and Ndeki, 2001 and Oketch et al., 2007) suggest that the tendency to disengage from school is common among children from poor households. It was anticipated that the government measures to improve primary education by providing capitation and development grants as well as abolishing school fees and all other contributions would reduce the tendency toward school disengagement among children from poor households. However, the situation did not turn out as expected. The literature cites parents and the kind of support they provide for their children as the key building block that determines the extent of their children's engagement with school. It is this circumstance that inspired me to carry out the present inquiry in order to

determine whether the nature of parental involvement among children from poor households contribute to the children's tendency to disengage from school.

Literature Review

The review of related literature consists of two subsections: (1) The Tanzanian context of families' involvement in school; and (2) theoretical background of the study.

The Tanzanian Context of Families' Involvement in School

In Tanzania Partnerships between families and schools dates back to the British colonial period (1919-1961). During this period, financially able households shared the cost of education in terms of school fees. After independence in 1967, the Tanzanian government adopted the Arusha Declaration whose main agenda was to build a self reliant nation based on the principles of Ujamaa (African socialism) and self reliance. During this period, the parents continued to pay fees until when it was officially abolished in 1973

In 1974, the government adopted the Musoma Resolution which set the goal of achieving Universal Primary Education (UPE) by 1987. Hence, the UPE policy was implemented in 1977 and it requires every child aged 7-13 to be enrolled in school. Following UPE Policy the government took on the role of providing and financing primary education from 1974-1977 with the aim of extending access to it and speeding up the government's social, economic and political changes. This was within the socialist ideologies that the government of the time cherished. As Galabawa and Agu (2001) rightly confirmed, the government's total control over education during the period of African socialism and education for Self-Reliance suppressed the community spirit of voluntarism. Hence, during these periods, there were very little community and parental involvement.

Following the 1970's economic and financial crisis, the government in the mid 80's introduced fees in all social services including education in 1993. Indeed, the efforts to encourage partnership became evident during this period and formed part of the national development goal with the aim of soliciting financial support from a wide range of education stakeholders, including parents. However, it is worth noting here that parental involvement in Tanzania is quite different from the situation in countries like Australia, Scandinavia and the UK. In government owned schools it is largely reflected through three models: Firstly, is community members' involvement whereby the community members are involved in supporting the schools by providing financial and in-kind support. They participate by providing labour for constructing and repairing school buildings, land for the construction of schools and for the teachers to farm, and building materials. However, it has been noted that community participation contributed to the inequality of education across the country, as some communities were financially able and

more motivated to support the school than others (Galabawa, 2000; Sumra, 2000; Wedgwood, 2007).

Secondly, is through the school committees which are responsible for the management and overall development of the school. *Inter alia*, their roles are: to oversee the day-to-day affairs of the school; and to communicate effectively educational information to all parents, pupils, and other educational stakeholders (URT, 2001). The literature maintains that involving parents through school committees, councils and Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) incorporates very few parents (Epistein, 2001). Hence, the need to include other avenues, including involving parents in various educational-related activities at home, which is crucial in enhancing the children's engagement with school.

Lastly, individual parents are involved in fulfilling their basic obligation to provide their children with the basic school equipment. Further forms of involvement include providing the parents with their children's academic school reports. However, there is little evidence to suggest that the reports are received and read by the parents. Parents have further been involved by providing them with the school's financial reports which are commonly posted on the school or village notice boards. Yet, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that the families and other members of the community read these reports. Similarly, schools are expected to conduct annual parents' meetings twice a year, although there is little evidence to suggest that the meetings are conducted as scheduled and that the parents attend them. Basically, in public primary schools, the parents are arguably less involved and meetings and open days are rarely conducted (Kironde, 2001; Omari and Mosha, 2008).

It is important to note that while the above involvement mechanisms are commonly applied in Tanzania, the government's commitment to education partnerships and parental involvement is poorly defined in the educational policies as supplied to us by Galabawa et al., (2001) and Omari, (2002). Further assessment reveals that, in most cases, the parents' participations is limited to matters regarding the construction of school buildings and seldom extends to education quality (Galabawa et.al., 2001). The reasons for the schools' limited efforts to involve parents in academic related matters is the belief among the educational authorities that parents and members of the community are ignorant i.e., have never attended school themselves (Galabawa et al., 2001; Omari et al., 2008).

Indeed, one can argue that, home school partnerships in Tanzania are characterized by the so-called *over-professionalism* (the contribution of parents to academic related matters has been underestimated and largely unrecognized) and a *compensatory model* whereby the school operates using a deficit model that assumes that parents are illiterate and hence ineffective in supporting their children's education (Whalley, 2001; Ravn, 2005). Partnership in Tanzania has also been operating without a thorough assessment of the parents' and community needs and experience (Galabawa et al., 2001). This suggests that there is a lack of accountability to investigate

these changing needs and experience which are crucial in establishing a responsive and flexible parent involvement mode. In effect, there is very little partnership and so-called *"bounded or conditioned"* involvement based on the argument that the parents are poor, ignorant and illiterate.

Theoretical background-Social Capital Theory
Social networks between people are valuable assets that can enable the group to cooperate and achieve the benefits that they would not achieve if working in isolation (Coleman, 1988, 1990; Bourdieu, 1986; Schuller, Baron and Field, 2000; Field, 2008). Coleman reiterated that social capital is especially valuable for the poor since these have few power and financial resources other than their capacity for collective action (Coleman, 1990). In education, the key argument is that there is a link between children's educational outcomes and their social networks. Social capital is perceived as a key to the creation of children's human capital and it serves as a magnification of other forms of capital (Coleman. 1988, 1990). Notably, the possession of a reasonable amount of financial and human resources may have little or no impact on children's schooling if social capital is lacking (Coleman. 1988, 1990). In education parental involvement is one of the forms of social capital. Parental school involvement increases parents' skills and information, which makes them better equipped to assist their children in their school-related activities.

This study draws upon Coleman's Theory of inter-family social capital which means the educational practices outside the home**.** According to Coleman (1988), inter-family social capital is reflected through various forms of relationships, including parent-teacher networks, parent-school partnerships, parent-parent networks and parent-other community members networks. Hence, in this paper inter-family social capital involves a determination of the stakeholder's views on the relationship between the school and families, communication between the schools and the families, parents' school visits, teachers' home visit, parental school meetings and parents' volunteering and how these enhance or limit children's engagement with school. The key argument under this form of capital is the need for joint efforts between the schools and families throughout the whole process of children's schooling.

Purpose, Definition of Terms and Scope of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to explore the influence of parent involvement to their children's engagement with school. More specifically the study has two specific aims: to examine stakeholders' views on how schools and the families from poor households interact; and to use the findings of the first objective to establish how the nature of parents' involvement enhances or limit children engagement with school. In this study, the term 'engagement' is used to refer to pupils' enrollment; attendees; school commitment; and dropout. It is worth noting here that although parent involvement may results

into various pupils' outcomes, this study focus on behavioral outcomes only i.e., children engagement with school. The study is further concerns with families from poor households only. Furthermore, Coleman (1988) identified two types of social capital i.e., intra and inter family social capital. This study dwells into inter- family social capital only. Likewise, disengagement to school is a result of a number of factors however, the study focus on factors related to parental involvement to children's' education.

METHODOLOGY

The study was guided by two research questions: (1)"What are stakeholders views on how schools and the families from poor households interact?" (2) "What are the implications of the existing form of home-school partnership to pupils' engagement with primary school?" to provide answers to these research questions the study uses qualitative research methodologies and employs multiple case study approach. The six case schools were selected from two of the 21 regions of the Tanzania mainland. Within these schools a sample of 25 families (11 parents with pupils who attend school regularly, 9 parents with pupils who attend school irregularly and 5 parents of pupil who dropped out), 24 standard seven pupils, 9 children who have dropped out, 6 head teachers, 6 classroom teachers and 20 Educational officers (EOs) i.e., 2 District Educational Officer (DEOs) and 6 Ward Education Officers (WEOs) constitute the embedded units of analysis. The case study regions, districts, schools, families and children were selected through purposeful and theoretical sampling strategies. At the regional and district level, two theoretically established criteria were used: regions with a large percentage of households living below the poverty line, with evidence of non-enrolment, irregular school attendance and high dropout rates. Three criteria were used in selecting a sample of the pupils: the pupils' class, gender and engagement with school. Parents or guardians of all interviewed pupils were purposefully selected. The DEOs, WEOs, Head teachers and teachers were selected by virtue of their position. *Inter alia*, they are responsible for ensuring that the children are enrolled on, attend and complete a given cycle of schooling.

Data Analysis Strategies

The transcribed information were analysed following Miles and Huberman's (1994) model of qualitative data analysis. It followed three steps: firstly, data reduction which involved re-examining the verbatim transcriptions, reducing and compressing them; secondly, data display, which involved organizing the summarized information into data display sheets. In this step, I employed a case oriented strategy which involved analysing the responses of the parents first. Thereafter, the successive cases of the children DEOs, WEOs, head

teachers and teachers were re-examined and analysed to verify the parents' responses. Finally, I draw conclusions and verified them by using observations and information from the documents. The documents were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Using this approach the researcher picks out what is relevant for analysis from speeches, districts/wards/schools' records, newspapers, letters, minutes of school meetings etc. and extracted the relevant data in relation to the research variables (data reduction), then compressed, organized and assembled it (data display), and finally drew conclusions about it (conclusion drawing and verification). The data from the documents were used to support those collected via the interviews.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented and discussed according to the six forms of parents involvement that were covered. These included Parents' relationship with children's schools, communication between the schools and the parents; the families' school visits; the teachers' home visits; volunteering; and attendance at school meetings.

Parents' relationship with children's schools

The parents were asked to explain their relationship with their children's schools. The responses from the parents revealed that 15 of the parents indicated they had a good relationship with the school, compared to ten who reported that they had a poor relationship with their children's schools. The study delved into finding out the possible reasons for either the good relationship or the bad relations. This paper reports on the reasons for the bad relationship as it is this negative relationship which is likely to affect children engagement. Three major reasons for the poor relationships were given by the respondents. Firstly, the parents reported that the teachers were less cooperative in assisting them with their children's irregular school attendance. The parents blamed the teachers for never assisting them to find ways to keep their children in school.

The second reason cited was the tendency for the teachers to use corporal punishment in school. The interviews reveal that there were several misunderstandings between the parents and the teachers when the children were whipped or given other kinds of punishment at school. This finding concurs with the data at the national level, where several misunderstandings between the members of the community and teachers are constantly reported. For example, the URT (2008) reported that, *inter alia*, the reason for the drop in the 2007 Primary School leaving examinations (PSLE) pass rate was poor school-community relationships. The report asserted that there were a lot of misunderstandings between the school and community members. The

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situation became so serious that the teachers were threatened with spears, and the report noted that one head teacher was killed by the community members. The Tanzanian national newspaper, UHURU, of Friday 25th January 2008, reported that the teachers in a school in the Morogoro region had been stoned by the families. This incidence occurred following the teachers' decision to punish 200 pupils who were accused of failing to attend school during the vacation. On 7th November 2008, Radio Free Africa reported that families in the Mbeya rural area surrounded the school and locked the teachers in their offices, trying to fight them, because the teachers had asked the pupils to collect logs from a nearby forest in order to construct a school fence. Unfortunately, two of the children fell; one was seriously injured by a log, while the other died instantly.

It is worth highlighting that parents' attitudes towards school punishment seem to suggest that there were certain kinds of family intervention with the school, although these were problem-oriented. The families visited the school to complain to or argue with the teachers about the pupils' punishment or other problems. However, the impact of these interventions on the children's schooling is not clearly understood.

The third reason found out from this study for the poor relationship between parents and schools was the poor communication between the parents and the teachers. The parents explained that the teachers never informed them when their children missed school. Others thought that the teachers never visited them or found out why their children fail to attend school. The parents condemned this tendency, arguing that, if the teachers were aware of the reasons, they could help them and hope that the children would never drop out. The families' beliefs about the role of the teachers' home visit are consistent with the findings by Mozumder and Halim (2006). Arguably, the teachers' visits to the homes of absentee pupils are a useful way of discovering why the pupils fail to attend school.

Indeed, the families' responses and the cited cases at the national level suggest that the poor relationship was due to poor communication between the schools and the families; the teachers' failure to support families with children who disengaged from school; the teachers' failure to inform the families of their children's disengagement from school; the teachers' failure to visit families whose children had irregular school attendance and/or dropped out; and the families' disagreement with the teachers' tendency to punish the pupils severely. The families thought that poor communication contributed to their children's irregular school attendance and dropout. This finding endorses the literature (e.g. Epstein, 1995; Christenson and Sheridan, 2001), which asserts that frequent, effective communication enables both the families and the teachers to share information about the children's school progress. For example, communication about the pupils' engagement with school helps the families to understand their children's school progress and enforce their attendance, thus reducing the likelihood of truancy and dropout. Indeed, the families and the school are partners in seeking to enhance the

children's engagement with school (Sumra, 2000), which can only be achieved through frequent communication.

The accounts of the families were verified by the data collected from the interviews with the teachers and EOs. Hence, this allowed the families' responses to be judged within the context of the responses by the school. These were asked to comment on the relationship between the schools and the families, and four explained that their schools have a good relationship with the families and other community members. The remaining 16 reported that the relationship was either poor, on average, or good, but with a few problems. The EOs who stated that their schools had a poor relationship with the community members cited the following reasons:

- The families who are less motivated about education and who don't want to volunteer at school, when sent to village government offices or to the police station, tend to hate the school.
- The families who have children who disengaged from school when punished tend to hate the teachers.
- The families never visit the schools (interview June – September 2008).

A comparison of the families and teachers' responses suggests that each party blame the other. For example, the teachers criticized the families for never visiting or assisting them, and vice versa.

From these responses, it is impossible to determine the precise relationship between the poor home-school relationship and the pupils' engagement with school. However, the literature cited a poor relationship between the school and the families as among the causes of the school's and pupils' failure. Arguably, a poor relationship is one of the many factors that can limit the possibility of the two parties working together in harmony, which may make it difficult to attain the various positive outcomes of home/school partnerships outlined by various researchers. Hence, a poor relationship contributes to an ineffective flow of information between school and home and, hence, is a source of poor communication and may have interfered with the families and teachers' ability to understand and provide the required assistance for the children, leading to the children's disengagement from school.

Communication between the Schools and the Families

The families were asked to explain the means that the schools used to communicate with them. Most of them stated that the school's major means of communication were letters and oral messages delivered to them via the pupils. However, most of the interviewed families explained that communication between the schools and families was very rare. Furthermore, six parents of those covered by the study noted that the schools 'were asleep', a local expression to suggest that they never communicated with them at all. On the other hand, the families were asked to explain whether they had ever initiated any communication with the school. Among the 25 interviewed

families, five stated that they had initiated communication with the school regarding their children's irregular school attendance.

The parents were further asked whether they had ever received letters from the school. The responses revealed that 19 interviewed families had not, while only seven had received the letters. The latter group was further asked to explain the gist of these letters. Possible responses suggested that three of the letters were about their children's truancy; two were about school meetings and two about school contributions. The study found out that of the 14 families studied with children who had dropped out and others who disengaged from school, only three had received letters regarding their child's disengagement from school, and the majority had not. Expressing concern about the poor communication between the schools and parents, one guardian said:

> "Irrespective of my child's poor school attendance, I have never received any information from the school″.

Furthermore, the families were asked to explain if they were aware of the various school activities, policy changes or any other school-related matters and if they had made efforts to seek various types of information from the school. The majority of the interviewed families explained that they were unaware of anything that goes on at the school. Nine explained that they were aware of a few matters, via their children. However, all of the interviewed families acknowledge that they never requested any school information from the teachers. The families were further asked whether they had been regularly receiving their children's school progress reports. The responses indicated that the majority received the reports twice a year. However, six of the interviewed families explained that they had never received any, but also never check with the school about their children's school reports.

The accounts of the families were checked against those of the teachers. These were asked to explain the means used by the school to communicate with the families. Most of the teachers explained that they use letters, the pupils and school committee members to communicate with the families. The researcher further requested copies of the letters that were previously sent to the families. In most schools, these were unavailable. In some schools, very few copies of letters (no more than two) were submitted. This suggests that either the schools never communicated with the families or there was poor record keeping. The teachers were further asked to state the means used by the school to inform the families about the children's school progress. The responses indicated that the common means were school reports, sent to the families via the pupils, although most of the teachers were concerned about the families' tendency to fail to respond to the reports. They noted that families never comment or take any measures to assist the children, even when the academic performances indicated in the reports were poor.

The stories of the children who had dropped out validate the families' responses regarding the poor home-school communication. The children

explained that they never received any communication from the school after the left:

> "After I dropped out of school, nothing happened. I never received a letter or any sort of information from the school; nobody cared″ (children's stories).

These responses suggest that communication between the schools and families was mainly by providing the families with their children's school reports and that, concerning other matters, either the schools never communicated with the families or the means of communication were unreliable. Hence, there was a gap between school and home. The findings imply that the schools rarely communicate with the families, yet there was a weak demand by the families in searching or asking for information from the school, which may have contributed to the schools' low responsiveness to providing information. *Inter alia*, the families' weak demand to secure information from the schools could be justified by the weak family human and social capital.

Concerning the relationship between home-school communication and the children's engagement with school, the data elucidated that most of the interviewed families never communicated with the schools. However, some had children who engaged well with school, while others did not. Hence, the data do not provide a precise picture of the relationships. However, poor communication may have interfered with the families' ability to understand their children's tendency to disengage from school and hence limit them from curbing this tendency. Similarly, poor communication may have obstructed the teachers' ability to understand the children's problems and to provide the required assistance to facilitate their engagement with school.

The Families' School Visits

The parents were asked if they had ever visited the school to inquire about their children's general progress or anything else. The responses show that 18 of the interviewed parents had never visited the school for any purpose, while 7 had. Of the latter, three had visited because of their children's tendency to disengage from school (two had children who had dropped out, while one had a continuing pupil who attended school irregularly) and four in order to attend school meetings. Hence, this suggests that three of the five families with children who had dropped out had never visited the school, while the other two had. Conversely, only one of the nine families with continuing pupils who were disengaged from school had visited the school, and the remaining eight had not. This means that some of the parents whose children were disengaged from school never discussed this with the schools. The parents who did not visit the schools were further asked to explain why. The interviews recorded a lack of time, old age and the fact that some parents were unaware that there was any need to visit the school.

The families whose children dropped out were further asked to describe their immediate reaction to this. It was assumed that their first action would be to visit the school. The following were commented by the parents:

> "There was nothing I could do. They were forced to leave school because I was unable to support them. In other ways, I thanked God, as they reduced the big burden of supporting them. I am living in a very poor condition. I sustain my life through undertaking daily, cheap labour. I sometime get the job but sometimes not. I carry sands, pebbles and cement bags, so that I get a little to provide my children with food. I am struggling to find food only! "

Another parent stated:

> "I did nothing; the problem is I don't have money to provide them with school equipment. I tried to call the village auxiliary police and asked them to take the children to school. They took them to school. However, they later decided to drop out of school".

As indicated in these responses, seeing the teachers was considered the last option. These two families never visited the school despite their children's decision to drop out. The first family did nothing and, in a way, saw it as a relief of the burden to finance her children's education. On the other hand, the other family communicated with the village auxiliary police rather than the school, possibly due to the tendency for the schools to make few efforts to support families with children who disengaged from school. Findings show that, all of the interviewed families with children who had dropped out blamed the schools for their lack of assistance in this matter.

The parents' responses were verified by the responses of teachers. These reported that most of the parents never visited the school, and that, when the teachers write letters to invite them (when the child has a problem), the majority never responded. Essentially, most of the interviewed EOs noted that the majority of families, after enrolling their children, never visited the school again for any purpose.

Through researcher's observations, I noted that, for the whole period of the study, in some schools, no parents visited, while, in others, very few parents did so. When counting the number of families who visited the schools during the period of the study (six months), in the six studied schools, the number did not exceed thirty. These parents visited the schools for the purpose of attending standard seven examination meetings. The researcher noted that less than five parents visited the school because of their children's schooling matters. It was further noted that the parents who visited the school did so at the teacher's request. Likewise, the above responses suggest that the few parents who visited the school did so when the children started to disengage from school. This finding supports the idea that the involvement of poor families is more likely to be teacher-initiated and that most families tend

to visit the school when there are problems with their children's education (McNeal, 1999; Christenson et al., 2001; Cooper et al. 2007). This kind of intervention is less likely to contribute to pupils' positive educational outcomes.

The responses by the parents and teachers and researches' observations suggest that the level of family school visits was minimal. Most of the families ignored the need to visit the school, irrespective of their children's disengagement from school. In this regard, the families were unaware of what was going on in the schools, regarding their own children's progress and various school information. To understand their children's school progress, the families depended almost entirely on their children's annual school report, which, in some cases, they never received, sought out nor read. Since all of the studied schools were categorized as having a larger number of children who disengaged from school, one may assume that the lack of families' school visits has contributed to this. In line with this observation, the literature maintains that children whose parents visit the school may receive more attention from the teachers. Hence, the children are more likely to remain in school and less likely to drop out (McNeal, 1999; Cooper and Crosnoe, 2007). In a similar vein, a lack of parental school visits may mean that the teachers pay less attention to the pupils, which subjects them to the risk of disengaging from school.

The Teachers' Home Visits

The families were asked whether or not the teachers had ever visited their homes, and all responded negatively. The families were then asked if they would like the schools to arrange for the teachers to visit them at home, and all of them supported this idea. The head teachers were also asked if their schools made arrangements to visit the parents, and all of them said that this was not the case. They further noted that it was difficult for them to visit the families because the schools were catering for children who lived a long way away. Observation further supports the idea that the teachers never visited the parents. In some of the studied schools, the researcher was escorted by the teachers to the families' homes. On the way, the researcher noted that the majority of the families were surprised to see the teachers in their homes. One parent commented:

> "The teachers have never visited me here at home. I have never
> seen them! I was shocked at seeing them here today."

The tendency whereby the teachers never visited the families and the families never visited the school created a gap in communication between the families and the schools, making them operate as two separate entities. The teachers related to the children, but never knew their parents. On the other hand, the parents related to their children but never knew their teachers. However, all of the interviewed families indicated that they were unhappy with this

situation and would welcome such visits. The interviewed teachers also agreed that these home visits could help to improve the children's engagement with school, but expressed concern about the feasibility of implementing such a system.

The lack of home visits is an indicator of the poor communication between the schools and home. The lack of teachers' home visits may have contributed to parents' poor knowledge of the necessity of their children's regular school attendance. Hence, this could be the cause of the large number of children who disengage from school. Likewise, the lack of teachers' home visits may have contributed to truancy, whereby the parent thinks that a child is attending school, but he/she is not. Indeed, some of the children may use this opportunity to miss school, knowing that their parents will never discover their behavior.

Parental Involvement at School (Volunteering)

The families were asked to describe the education-related activities that they performed at the school. Twenty two of the interviewed families explained that they had never engaged in any activity at school, which three families explained that they had participated in various activities, like constructing school buildings, fetching water, collecting sand, and carrying stones and pebbles for the construction of classrooms. The accounts of the families were checked against those of the EOs and head teachers. These were asked to state the kind of activities for which the families volunteer. They all explained that the families participated in the construction of school buildings, the provision of desks and working on the school farms. However, most of them criticized the families for rarely volunteering for the various school activities. They explained that the families never got involved in any activity, unless there was a push by the government.

The responses of the families match those of the teachers, suggesting that the families were involved in school construction and the provision of various school contributions. However, the level of volunteering was very low. As noted in the responses, the parents thought that the schools receive financial support from the government and hence were reluctant to participate. Hence the findings suggest that the level of parental participation in the studied schools' activities ranges from very poor to moderate. In some schools, the families failed to participate in any activity, while in others, only a few families volunteered. Other findings show that all of the interviewed families' schools had various sanctions aimed at pushing and punishing parents who do not volunteer for various school activities.

On the basis of these data, the link between the families' participation in school activities and the children's engagement with school is difficult to establish. However, all the interviewed EOs relate the families' low level of volunteering with the poor school environment. The EOs acknowledged the government funding for constructing classrooms, but explained that this had to be supplemented by community resources. However, given the socio-

economic status of the communities, the families were unable to supplement the government funds. Similarly, the families rarely volunteered or provided in-kind contributions. As a result, the children's schooling suffered.

The researcher's observation revealed that the pupils studied in poorly-furnished, dilapidated classrooms. In one school, there were insufficient classrooms, so the pupils studied in a shed created outside the other classroom. Furthermore, the researcher noted that the majority of the pupils in all six of the studied schools sat on the floor, on the ground and on logs, as there were not enough desks. Similarly, other pupils sat on stones which served as chairs and wrote on desks constructed by placing pieces of old timber on top of piles of stones.

All of the interviewed EOs explained that, in their school, there was a critical shortage of various school buildings and that the existing facilities were of poor quality. The schools suffered from a shortage of classrooms, teachers' houses, desks, libraries, textbooks, pit latrines, and other teaching and learning facilities. Researcher's observation further revealed that some of the facilities that were available were in a very poor condition. Hence, poor parental and community involvement affect the availability and quality of the schools' infrastructure. This contributed to a poor quality school environment, which might have contributed to children's disengagement with school. These findings concur with the literature. Arguably, parental and community involvement affect the availability and quality of the schools' infrastructures (Sumra, 2000; Galabawa, 2000; Kendall, 2007; Vuyisila, 2007; Mozumder et al., 2006).

Attendance at School Meetings

The families were asked whether they had attended school annual meetings. The responses indicated that the parents rarely attended school meetings. Among the 25 interviewed parents, 21 stated that they had never attended any school meetings. Four parents explained that they had attended a few meetings. The parents who never attended the meetings were asked to explain the reasons for this. Most of them pointed out that they had not been informed about the meetings. The following response echoes the responses of other families:

> "I have never attended any school parent meetings. I have never been informed about them. If they informed me, I would attend."

The families' responses suggest that most of them never attended school meetings. These families stated that they had never been informed about the meetings, and did not know how the school passed on information about them. The families who attended the meetings explained that the school used three major methods for sending out information about the school meetings: letters which were commonly sent to the parents via their children, asking the pupil to inform their families and through the school committee members.

Surprisingly, when asked to state whether the meetings were useful or not, all of the interviewed families thought that the meetings were very useful. The researcher further asked the families to state the anticipated benefits of school meetings. The families believed that, through the meetings, they would be informed about various school matters and that these meetings would enable the families and the teachers to discuss matters regarding school developmental plans. Despite the stated benefits of the parent-teacher meetings, and the families' indication that these meetings are necessary, the responses revealed that the families rarely attended them and, in some cases, the meetings were never conducted as required. Sometimes, no school meetings were held for several years.

The families' responses were checked against those of the EOs. The head teachers, when explaining how the schools communicate with the parents, stated school meetings as one of the strategies. They further noted that the school meetings were held twice a year and that they use letters, the pupils and the school committee members to inform the parents about the meetings. However, in some of the studied schools, they explained that the meetings were rarely held. Regarding the level of attendance at the school meetings, the findings revealed that it was very low. The researcher observed that, in one school, the teachers asked all of the parents with children in standard seven to attend a meeting about the children's final examination preparation. Among the 66 parents who were invited to attend, only 15 (23%) did so, and the remaining 51 (77%) did not.

The findings suggest that the meetings were either not held or held but the means of informing the families about them were unreliable. Likewise, among those who received the messages regarding the meetings, the level of response was very low. Other responses suggest that most of the families never attended the meetings because they were afraid that they would be asked to contribute to the school. Through the document search, the researcher reviewed the past school meetings' agendas. It was noted that, in most cases, the agenda was related to contributions to the construction of school buildings. A DEO further commented:

> "In the rural remote areas, when there is a meeting, the attendance is extremely low. The parents are afraid to attend the meetings because they think that all meetings are aimed at asking them to make a financial contribution to the school".

Discussing matters related to school contributions enables the schools to increase the number of classrooms and facilities that will allow greater access to more children. However, it is beneficial to include other interesting matters; for example, those that will enable the families to use the resources they have to support their children's education. Indeed, the construction of more school buildings without the families' willingness to send their children to school is nonsensical. The buildings might be constructed but, in the end, there will be no pupils to use them. One DEO pointed out that there was a case where the

district decided to close down some of the schools, since they had sufficient classrooms and teachers, but the families had decided to migrate from the area with their children, leaving the school behind. It is worth remembering that families have many responsibilities, and hence will never participate in school activities unless they feel that this would be interesting and that there will be positive returns on their investment of time (Coleman, 1991). Discussing the same matters at every meeting may limit the parents' attendance. Further findings suggest that some of the parents who attended the meetings did so unwillingly, due to a fear of the measures that would be taken against them. One parent stated:

> "I attend the meetings because education is necessary, but I am also scared of being sent to prison or of any kind of harassment by the village leaders. I am always insisting that my children should attend school and, when I receive a letter telling me that there is a meeting, I never miss it, even if I am ill".

Although this study has no data to prove it, it is argued that the tendency of families to attend the meetings through fear of the government measures would not have much impact on enhancing their children's engagement with school. The findings suggest that the low level of parent attendance at the school meetings could have affected the children's engagement with school. Since the main agenda of these meetings was the contribution to the school's development, then a failure to attend them means a failure to implement the various construction plans. The poor attendance at the meetings affected the school's ability to mobilize school support and construct school buildings. In all of the studied schools, the EOs declare that there is a shortage of classrooms and other school buildings.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

This paper has presented qualitative findings which portray: a 'poor relationship' between the schools and families; poor communication between the families and the schools; incidences where the families never visited the schools and the teachers never visited the families; and incidences where poor household families hardly participated in their children's education by volunteering or attending school meetings. Indeed, the findings portray a poor culture of parental involvement in school activities. This has negative implications for children's engagement with primary school. The findings have serious implications for policy and practice. The results point to an urgent need for the relevant bodies in Tanzania to train and encourage the various stakeholders regarding the need to build good relationships between the schools and the families as a long term strategy for improving quality primary education. Parents and teachers should be encouraged to understand

that children's educational success is a result of the joint efforts between the two parties. In line with the school committee approach, there is a need to consider the means that will provide more room for individual parents' participation and these can be imbedded in the curriculum. This could involve preparing a plan whereby the teachers visit the parents and the parents visit the schools. Arguably, in situations of poverty and illiteracy, measures encouraging wider parent participation are highly recommended (Kendall 2007).

The study findings also point to the need to strengthen home/school partnerships by encouraging the families to come onboard and participate in various educational activities. This could be achieved in two ways: firstly, by establishing reliable means of home/school communication. Schools should establish reliable means of dyadic communication between the two parties. Also, there is a need to ensure that the means of communication are well known and accepted by the families and, rather than communicating only when the pupils experience problems, home/school communication should be integral to school activities. It is worth devising ways of communicating that will be understood by the family members who have never attended school. Also, the schools should communicate with the families on all matters.

Secondly, the schools should hold meetings and encourage the families to attend them. In this study, most of the families explained that school meetings are necessary, but they never attended them because they were unaware of them or the meetings did not take place. In that regard, it is necessary to fortify the means that the schools use to inform the families about these meetings and hold them as scheduled. Equally important is the need to remove any obstacles to the families attending the meetings. The school meeting agendas should cover various matters, as opposed to the current situation whereby the main focus is on the parental contributions to school construction. The parents could be motivated to attend meetings by removing the threats and punishments made against those who fail to attend. Instead, the parents should be informed that school meetings are necessary to enhance their children's schooling. Conversely, the school meetings should be used as a means of widening the opportunities for parental involvement in the school's decision making as opposed to the current arrangements whereby the meetings are used to deliver the school committee's decisions to the parents.

The findings were produced by a qualitative analysis. Future research which takes a quantitative approach and involves a bigger sample size and more regional coverage is suggested. Such a study should be based on the critical issues which have been raised by the various stakeholders in this case study.

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