

# Parental Engagement Approaches to Primary School Children's Literacy Skills Development in Tabora Region, Tanzania

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## Abstract

*This paper employs a qualitative case study design to explore parental engagement approaches in developing children's literacy skills in primary schools. Focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were used with purposive sampling to obtain 44 participants. It was revealed that parents in high-performing schools were highly engaged in their children's literacy development through regular parent-teacher communications, parent-teacher trust, and parent-teacher cooperation. Parents in low-performing schools, on the other hand, were less engaged due to the lack of awareness of their children's literacy skills development and hectic schedules on socio-economic activities. The paper recommends that teachers use encouraging and friendly approaches to parents so that they can feel comfortable engaging in developing their children's literacy skills.*

**Keywords:** *high-performing schools, literacy skills, low-performing schools, parental engagement approaches, parent-teacher communication*

## Introduction

The development of children's literacy skills appears fundamental across the globe. Wilder (2014), for example, describes it as the key to opening the door for children's academic endeavours and presenting them with new opportunities far ahead in life. Similarly, Abuya et al. (2015) and Niklas and Schneider (2013) note that literacy skills in children allow them to express their knowledge and thoughts in educational discourses. Globally, there is a consensus among education stakeholders that literacy skills exposure establishes a foundation for children's development, learning and future life achievements. Despite its importance, reports across regions indicate that introducing literacy skills to children is not easy for teachers alone and therefore, parents are also needed to play their role in forming a child's literacy development (Tabroni, et al., 2022). For instance, Martins and Capellini, (2019) found that students in Manila were lacking fluency and comprehension

skills. Such global evidence informs that the home environment should remain a foundation for enriching such skills in young children (Davids, 2020).

In Tanzania, children's literacy experience is less convincing. Available evidence indicates that some children who complete grade seven are unable to read and write simple sentences (Ngorosho, 2011; UWEZO, 2013). Ndijuye and Beatus (2022) found that parents in primary schools had limited engagement in school matters. Similar findings for Tanzania were revealed by Edward et al. (2022) that parental involvement was hindered by the lack of parents' knowledge about literacy skills, limited parental support and the effects of the home learning environment. Further, a study by Uwezo (2013) found that there was a slight difference in literacy performance among children between rural and urban contexts in Tanzania. Equally, Ndijuye and Beatus (2022) found that urban children outshined rural children in every literacy aspect tested, except reading comprehension. Furthermore, Ndijuye et al. (2020) pointed out that children are lacking fundamental literacy skills across various levels of education.

The existing trend of literacy skills in school-aged children indicates that literacy practices and the overall education performance of most children have not always been meaningful. This evidence of poor literacy skills among school-aged children happens amidst the significant attempts of the government to offer fee-free basic education for every child, employ teachers and build classes to facilitate pupils' learning (Shukia, 2020). Similarly, the education stakeholders in Tanzania have ensured that children get access to quality learning materials, teachers are trained, and quality and sufficient school infrastructure is built (Barrett et al., 2019; Shukia, 2020). Despite addressing important aspects that would promote children's learning in general and the development of literacy skills in particular, it is less clear as to which approaches parents should engage in to develop children's literacy skills in the context of primary schools in Tanzania.

Central to the discourse on children's development of literacy skills are their early experiences and parents' readiness to support literacy learning (Bartoli et al., 2022; Jeynes, 2017; Niklas et al., 2016). Parental engagement is considered imperative in developing primary school children's literacy skills. Literacy skills are one of the most vital life competencies that all people should possess. Bierman and Sheridan (2022), for example, establish that effective parental engagement builds children's literacy skills. Those literacy skills serve as a solid foundation for children's current learning and a strong pillar in their subsequent education levels. This means parental disinterest in their children's proper reading and writing, makes them struggle to learn other subjects in the future. For that reason, Crosby (2021) maintains that parents have an exceptionally significant role in children's literacy

development compared to other family background variables. Parents' delight and genuine interest in their children's literacy learning have also had lifelong impacts. For instance, according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] (2012), when parents read to their young children regularly, those children are more likely to develop proficiency in literacy skills than those who do not. One meaning is that teachers and parents have significant roles to play in children's learning both at home and in school settings. The practices that parents can subscribe to for the literacy skills development of their children at home may include playing opportunities, singing and dancing (Ali et al., 2023).

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 (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training [MoEVT], 2014). Similar emphasis is given by the Education Sector Development Plan from 2016–17 to 2020–21 that parents in Tanzania are responsible for supporting children's literacy skills development. Specifically, its fourth objective advocates the development and implementation of a parenting, communication and education campaign. The focus is to support and engage parents in primary education by reinforcing and committing them to support early investment in children's learning (Joseph, 2014).

However, pervasive low literacy abilities among primary school children, both globally and locally, are reported (Anney et al., 2016; Murray et al., 2015; World Bank, 2018). Moshia (2012) argues that, low literacy performance is still a challenging issue in Africa despite numerous efforts made by different African governments to eradicate illiteracy. Similarly, a study by Axelsson et al. (2020) reports that, parents who lack basic literacy skills are unable in terms of helping their children to prosper in school. MoEVT (2014) reports that 5,200 of the total primary school-leaving graduates all over Tanzania's mainland were unable to read, write, or count. Such a situation leaves numerous questions unanswered as to what and how parental engagement in developing literacy skills among children is enacted or implemented. Considering the above background, therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine the approaches to parental engagement in children's literacy skills development.

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

This study was guided by Family Literacy Theory. This theory perceives that children's literacy skills development is entrenched in daily interactions with parents and other family members around them (Taylor, 1983). Given this, parents are central in teaching children literacy before and after school enrolment. The theory suggests that parents create a friendly learning environment that incorporates children's

learning of literacy skills. This is possible because parents are the immediate and first individuals to teach children before and after enrolment into school (Anderson et al., 2008; Nkhata et al., 2019). Therefore, family literacy theory suggests that children's literacy exposure is never separated from their parents' disclosure and the ways that they are comfortable exposing those skills. In that regard, parents can share the best ways of engaging in children's learning (Nkhata et al., 2019) and stimulating children's literacy development through daily related literacy activities (Yao, 2015). The Family Literacy Theory was used to appreciate the ways that describe parental engagement in promoting primary school children's literacy skills in Tanzania. Here, it informed the study on ways parents engage to promote literacy skills among primary school children.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Design and sample**

A qualitative research approach was employed and it was guided by the interpretivism paradigm. Interpretivism research paradigm holds that reality is subjective as constructed and interpreted by people in their contexts and thus there are multiple realities (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The paradigm calls for the use of a qualitative approach that aims to understand social phenomena from the perspective and experience of parents' and teachers' views and understandings. The approach assisted the researchers in understanding participants' knowledge and experiences about the approaches used by teachers to engage parents at home and school for the literacy development of their primary school children. A multiple-embedded case study design was employed. This particular design allowed flexibility and triangulation during data collection and it enabled the inclusion of various subunits at once. In that regard, parents, primary school teachers, standard three children, and head teachers were embedded, as subunits of analysis within the case.

Schools were selected by reflecting on their performance in the regional literacy skills examination. The researcher visited the Municipal Council office and was directed to an Educational Officer who provided the details about such performances in primary schools in Tabora region. Children were purposively selected from the selected primary schools. After establishing the sample needed, written informed parental consent was sought from the parents of children who participated in the study. The children whose parents gave their consent were then purposively selected based on the criteria that they are the ones whose children were in Standard Three and were also consulted to participate in the study.

Heterogeneous purposive sampling was employed in the selection of districts, wards, sex, teacher and a number of years of teaching Standard Two in primary

school teaching experience. A total of 44 participants were involved: four head teachers, eight primary school teachers, sixteen parents of Standard Three pupils, and sixteen Standard Three pupils (aged 6–10 years). All participants came from four primary schools in two districts in Tabora region. Standard Three pupils were included in the study because they could provide valuable information on how their parents assisted them in developing literacy skills at home when they were in Standard Two.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data. A semi-structured interview was chosen to explore the feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and experiences of participants (teachers and Standard Three pupils) on the parental engagement approach in developing children's literacy skills. The participants were individually interviewed about their approaches to helping primary school children develop literacy skills. Focus group discussions with parents of the interviewed children took place in school compounds after making appointments and getting their consent. There were two groups of focus group discussions whereby each group comprised eight parents. The discussions were conducted in Kiswahili language which is the language that all parents were conversant to use fluently.

Thematic data analysis was employed with the support of NVivo software version 12. The transcripts 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 and sentences. Similar codes generated themes about approaches that support parental engagement in developing children's literacy skills. The 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

### **Results and Discussion**

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

#### **Communication between teachers and parents**

The current study found that communication between teachers and parents contributed to the literacy skills development of primary school children in higher-performing

schools. During the interviews, teachers confirmed that children performed better in literacy skills following regular visits to schools and communication with their parents. Accordingly, those were parents who responded to teachers' invitations positively and discussed various issues about their respective children's literacy willingly. Consistent with this finding, one of the participating teachers said: *"I've been at this school for the past fifteen years. We communicate with parents regarding their children's behaviour and learning and their responses are encouraging"*.

This was affirmed by some parents from a focus group discussion.

Most of us respond to teachers' invites as quickly as possible. We are aware that once we get engaged positively in school matters, it helps teachers to guide our children more meaningfully. Teachers communicate with us through official channels on matters that need our immediate attention. This is good for parents who comply with teachers' invites and advice.

It is interesting to note that during interviews, students in high-performing schools confirmed the findings of their teachers and parents. Most of them revealed that their parents visited their schools and communicated with respective teachers about various learning issues including their literacy development. There are several possible explanations for this finding. One of them is that communication between parents and teachers in high-performing schools mattered most.

From the above finding it emerged that through parent-school visitation and communication with teachers, pupils' literacy skills development could be improved. This is consistent with Palts and Harro-Loit's (2015) findings which revealed that active parents discussed the feedback and evaluation system among themselves and with teachers to improve their children's academic success, including literacy development. Furthermore, the findings are consistent with previous findings by Durack (2022), that open communication about reading difficulties encountered by children, reflects teachers' and families' strong partnerships and it increases the likelihood of positive reading achievement. In Turkey, Yıldız and Yılmaz (2021) found that family-teacher communication is the backbone of joint home-school efforts for children's development and literacy learning. Collectively, it can be reasoned that consistent communication between parents and teachers has a positive impact on the development of pupils' literacy skills.

On the contrary, it appeared that communication between teachers and parents in low-performing schools was not promising. In these schools, teachers were reluctant to advise parents on how to monitor their children's

learning. Categorically, one teacher revealed that: *“In our school, parents are hesitant to attend their children’s academic activities. Parents are never prepared or flexible enough to see what is going on at school. As a result, we are left with their children to help.*

Another teacher complained that:

In this school, the majority of parents do not recognize any misconduct committed by their children, nor do they recognize their children’s learning progress in terms of literacy skills. I would like to see parents conduct follow-ups on their children’s school issues. Parents should not wait for teachers to summon them.

In another development, it emerged that parents used to assign too many household chores to their children. For that reason, children spent less time learning literacy skills at home. One of the teachers commented:

Most of the children here are doing too many chores 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 work more on household chores than review what was taught at school. This kind of habit affects children’s ability to get academic support, particularly in relation to literacy skills.

As a response to teachers’ expression of dissatisfaction with parents’ engagement in their children’s literacy development, parents had different perspectives. For instance, it was recorded from one FGD parents remarking:

We prefer to be called via formal ways rather than oral communication, which is given to us through our children. If teachers need to give us proper information, it is better to put it in writing. We are aware that some of our fellow parents are not engaging positively in school matters, which may be because of this kind of practice. We propose that teachers use official channels regarding any information that will need parents’ attention. Also, measures should be taken against parents who do not comply.

A possible explanation for these findings may be that the need for communication between teachers and parents is appreciated by both teachers and parents. Yet, parents were not comfortable with the ways teachers used to send oral invites through children. It is difficult to explain this experience, but it might be related to parents’ concerns that their children were still too young to deliver the correct information as received from teachers. Plausibly, most of the parents expected to be provided with specific and direct information related to their children’s

learning from schools. This was considered to be a prerequisite for effective parental engagement and not otherwise. Similarly, Durack (2022), insists that open communication between teachers and parents counts most in supporting children's literacy skills development. Elsewhere, Palts and Harro-Loit (2015) found that parents who had little communication with teachers were primarily concerned with their children's grades and health. Communication between teachers and parents should be done with a focus to impact children's academic progress, including the acquisition and development of literacy skills across populations and class levels. To address erratic communication, the findings suggest that phone calls, report cards, and social media groups such as WhatsApp groups, should be employed. This could be the best approach to facilitate parent-teacher meetings for efficient monitoring and promotion of children's literacy skills.

### **Supporting children**

Parents in high-performing schools appeared to assist their children at home through different learning-related activities. Some of them used to assign children writing and reading assignments and read through their exercise books. In this way, learning took place at home in natural settings. Similarly, those parents purchased school learning materials, including books, manila cards and exercise books, for their children. During the interview, one parent reported that: *“As for me, 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.”*

On the question of teachers' support, this study found that most of them supported primary school children in developing literacy skills at school. In this respect, children were reinforced to master literacy skills through remedial classes. Given this atmosphere, each teacher from standards one to three was required to ensure every child in their respective classes could read, write and count correctly. One of the teachers shared the following experience:

I provide classroom assistance; for example, sometimes, I prepare five to ten sentences for the children to read aloud individually. In addition, I assist them in revising the material by assigning numerous literacy exercises. I check their exercise books and see how they progress. When I see they did not perform well in any of the subjects' exercises, I try to assist them.

Even teachers in high performing schools not only take their time in teaching but also they were using their extra time. Despite having some other assignments, they dared to set some academic initiatives in helping the children in their school to make sure they master some literacy skills.



It is interesting to note that even school head teachers supported the approach. For instance, one head teacher commented:

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

One of the issues that emerge from these findings is that children's learning requires meaningful support from various stakeholders with teachers and parents at the front line. Once primary school children are supported effectively at home and in school settings, they are likely to develop and master literacy skills. This could happen because children's time both at school and home environments would be used to enjoy and flourish educationally. Similarly, Javier and Jubay Jr. (2019) found that the support of parents and teachers is vital to increasing students' level of performance in vocabulary skills. Similarly, Zemichael et al. (2017) exposed that a child who received parental support performed better academically and learned more diligently. One possible implication of this finding is that parent-teacher support is critical in improving children's literacy skills, irrespective of class level.

### **Cooperation between teachers and parents**

This is an important approach in parental engagement for educating a child. The study found that parents of most children in high-performing primary schools used to work together in the form of strong cooperation. Through cooperation, an excellent learning environment has been created, both at home and school. It evolved that, children's inabilities to read, write and perform simple arithmetic operations like addition and subtraction were earlier identified. Through cooperation, teachers with parents set strategies by providing children with writing and reading activities at home to develop literacy skills. This happens instantly when children's literacy challenges are realised. One of the parents admitted:

I am always working cooperatively with teachers; and my daughter's academic performance is flourishing. Surely, 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 support teachers' efforts in educating my child.

From the findings, parents of children in high-performing schools boldly admired their cooperation with teachers. In this way, the number of illiterate children was reduced. During a focus group discussion with parents, it was recorded that:

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. When I am summoned, I do not hesitate. Therefore, I am always willing to come to school and discuss issues concerning our children when we are requested to do so.

This finding may be explained by the fact that parents are the children's first teachers. Once engaged through useful strategies they can help their children develop literacy skills in a promising manner. These findings call for the school to work harder in improving children's performance for the parents to be more willing and comfortable to engage in school matters.

Nevertheless, the situation was different in low-performing schools. Cooperation between teachers and parents was inadequate. That happened despite its importance in developing primary school children's literacy skills. Specifically, one teacher revealed:

Cooperating with parents is a very vital and enriching experience. It allows me to understand the children's 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, but they have never come here or communicated with us since their children were in grade one until now.

The finding observed in this study mirrors those of the previous studies that have. In this regard, Cosmas (2017) maintained that parents must take a reciprocal responsibility to work with schools to support and promote their children's literacy skills. Similarly, the findings of this study are consistent with the longitudinal study by Cook et al. (2018) on parent-teacher relationships and their association with children's academic skills in Norwegian schools. It was found that grade one children who had outstanding parent-teacher cooperation experienced better social and academic skills, including literacy skills (Cook et al., 2018). In addition, Cook et al. (2018) found that children in Grade One also had fewer negative behaviours than children whose parents and teachers did not cooperate. It is difficult to explain this result due to context differences, but it might be related to the benefits of cooperation as an approach to parental engagement.

On the contrary, some parents in low-performing schools did not take cooperation with teachers on their children's education as an important matter. Such parents excused themselves that they could not cooperate with teachers due to their hectic

social schedules on multiple socio-economic activities. Certainly, that life mentality has risked the development of their children's literacy skills. Responses from one FGD revealed:

You know how time-consuming the jobs of some of us are. Sometimes, we have to be in the office every day, which makes responding to school matters difficult. When parents and teachers work together, we know that our children can be more active and responsible. Children will have no place to hide because parents will follow up at home just as teachers do at school.

It is implied from this finding that some parents do not engage in literacy activities with their children at home unintentionally. There are similarities between the attitudes expressed by parents of children in low-performing schools in this study and those described by Cosmas (2017). Central to the findings of Cosmas is that parents' poverty was used to justify poor parental and community-engaged practices for children's literacy skills development. Surprisingly, as in Cosmas' work, it emerged from the field that some parents had a misconception that children's learning is only the teacher's role at school.

Perhaps this could be the reason for low-performing schools having children with a high rate of illiteracy. In the language of Hemmerechts et al. (2017), parental engagement in literacy activities could lead to worse or better reading skills in primary school children. That means when parents are well engaged in their children's literacy skills development, it is possible for them to learn any skill that will help them excel in their academic endeavours. Accordingly, the parental engagement approach increases students' level of performance in vocabulary, which is significant in writing skill proficiency. Early parents' interventions in literacy activities matter most. Thus, the centrality of cooperation should not be underrated.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that parental engagement and intervention are important in children's learning. This study revealed different approaches to engaging parents in their children's literacy skills development from low and high performing primary schools. The findings further revealed that parents from these schools have different motivations in their engagement such as good performance of their children, friendly treatment from teachers and trust between teachers and parents. Parents from high-performing schools perceived the approaches more positively than the others. Generally, these findings highlight a critical lens for understanding the elusive and complex nature of parental engagement and its impact on children's literacy skills development in primary

schools. Furthermore, the impact of parental engagement or non-engagement was evident in the respective literacy skills development, this pointed to a need to strengthen parents' awareness and capacities for helping children's academic performance at school and home. It would be mistaken to assume, however, that the success of children in literacy learning is exclusively dependent on parent-school partnerships as described in this paper.

In struggling to reduce and later eradicate problems associated with the acquisition and development of literacy skills among children in primary schools in Tanzania, the government through its Ministry of Education, Science and Technology should emphasize more on revising the primary education curriculum to focus on children's literacy development activities. Educational officers at wards and district levels should strategize on involving parents and the entire community to work closely with teachers on understanding the importance of literacy skills development among children. Also, head teachers should prepare short-time seminars in schools for parents to gain awareness on how to support their children's literacy activities in home environments.

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