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Abstract:

Parents play a very important role in their children's social, intellectual and physical development. Not much is known about parental involvement in early childhood education in Kenya. This study sought to establish the extent to which parents are involved in the acquisition of literacy skills by their children. The study was carried out in Akithi Division, Tigania West District, Kenya. Descriptive survey research design was used to carry out this study. Data collection was done using questionnaires and interview schedules. It was found that parents in Akithi Division were lowly involved in acquisition of literacy skills by their children. The study revealed that parents were not adequately aware of their expected role in the acquisition of literacy skills by their children. The study suggested that parents need to be sensitized on the importance of their involvement in literacy acquisition and that parents should be trained on how to assist their children acquire literacy skills.

Key words: “parental involvement”, “acquisition”, “literacy skills”

Introduction

The ability to read is the basis of most school learning, and one of the surest predictors of academic achievement (Maryland, 1979). With the rapid increase of human knowledge and expanding curricula, books have become the nucleus of much of the activity conducted in schools and success in many academic subjects is dependent upon the pupil's reading ability (Pappas, 1976). Studies by Adekola (2009) in Nigeria, Williams (1998) in Malawi and Zambia and Uwezo (2011) in Kenya on the role of literacy in pupils' performance in mathematics showed that pupils were more likely to answer correctly those test items involving figures and number operations but not number problems that are language and literacy dependent. According to the World Bank (2002) skills of literacy need to serve some purpose and practice that is important to their users. Haigh (1977) noted that school work is based upon reading and writing, and to be poor at language, in the school sense, is different in kind from being poor at history or even poor at mathematics. Literacy learning should therefore be given a lot of attention as one of the steps to improve performance of pupils in school.

The area of the brain that learns the rules of language remains open to stimulus until around age six (Hildebrand, 2000). The area for learning vocabulary, Hildebrand (2000) further explains, stays open a lifetime but is most receptive in early childhood between the ages of two to the age of six years. Strickland (2004) notes that learning to read and write is an ongoing process and contrary to popular belief, it does not suddenly begin in the kindergarten or first grade. What children learn from listening and talking contributes to the ability to read and write (Juel, 1988). Young children learn the uses of print in their lives as they observe adults read, make lists, and make use of literacy as they go about everyday lives (Strickland, 2004). Children who come from richer home literacy environments show high level of reading knowledge and skills at the start of kindergarten and throughout primary school (Hildebrand, 2000).

Parents and teachers therefore, share the responsibility for helping children become readers. Hildebrand (2000) noted that when parents set the stage for reading during the early years of life, children are better prepared to learn the reading skills taught at school. The home learning environment and the parenting children receive influence their language and literacy development and the skills they bring to school (Hart & Risley, 1995). Involvement with reading activities at home has significant positive influence not only on reading achievement, language comprehension and expressive language skills, but also on pupil's interest in reading, attitude towards reading and attentiveness in the classroom (Rowe, 1991). This stage of child development coincides with the time when parents are the main teaching agents. Very few studies have been carried out in Kenya on parental involvement in the acquisition of literacy skills by their children. This gave impetus to the current study.

Research Objectives

This study sought to achieve the following objectives:

- i. To establish the extent of parental involvement in acquisition of literacy skills among pupils in primary schools in Akithi division, Tigania west district.

- ii. To determine the factors that influence parental involvement in acquisition of literacy skills among pupils in primary schools in Akithi Division, Tigania West District.

Methodology of the study

Using the descriptive survey, this study intends to explore the extent of involvement of parents in acquisition of their children's literacy skills in Kenya. The study was conducted in eight public primary schools in Akithi Division, Tigania West District, Kenya. The accessible population was 1581 subjects made up of 1031 standard eight pupils, 144 lower primary school class teachers and 406 parents in the School Management Committees (SMC) in 29 public primary schools in Akithi Division. Eight schools were selected through simple random sampling to participate in the study. All the standard eight pupils, a class teacher and the parents' representative in the SMC from each lower primary level in the sampled schools were purposively selected to participate in the study. Standard eight pupils were selected since they possess language skills that would enable them to understand and respond to items on the questionnaire. The pupils also have knowledge about parental involvement from their own experiences. Lower primary school class teachers were considered because they handle pupils at a time when they acquire basic literacy skills while SMC's were interviewed because they form an important linkage between parents and schools. Questionnaires and an interview schedule were used for data collection. The researcher ensured content validity through the expert judgment of the supervisors as advanced by Mugenda and Mugenda (1999). Data was analyzed using percentages and frequencies and presented using tables and charts.

Results and Discussions

2.1 Demographic Information

Section one of the pupil's questionnaire required respondents to state their gender and the type of family they lived in. The teacher's questionnaire required respondents to state their gender, academic qualification as well as their teaching experience. The researcher sought to establish the gender of the pupils, teachers and parents who participated in the study and the results are reflected on Table 1.

Table 1

Respondents' Gender

Respondents	Gender	Frequency	Percentage %
Teachers	Males	6	25
	Females	18	75
Pupils	Males	154	53.7
	Females	133	46.3
Parents	Males	9	37.5
	Females	15	62.5

Among the teachers, female respondents made up 75% while males made up 25% of the respondents. The pupils surveyed comprised 53.7% males and 46.3% females. Among the parents, female respondents made up 62.5% while the males made up 37.5% of the respondents. This shows that the number of female parents who participated in the study was higher than that of the males. This finding is in line with that of Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1997) that mothers often experience stronger role expectation than fathers for day to day involvement in children's schooling. However among the pupils there were more male respondents than the females.

The researcher collected data concerning the kind of family in which the respondents were brought up in terms of who they lived with. The results are revealed in Table.

Table 2

Family Status

Pupil lives with	Frequency	Percentage
Father and Mother	196	68.3
Father only	12	4.2
Mother only	54	18.8
Guardian	25	8.7

The study found that respondents who lived with both their parents were the majority at lived with their guardians comprised 8.7 % of the respondents while those who lived with their fathers only were the least at 4.2 %. This shows that majority of the respondents lived with at least one parent and therefore had an opportunity to receive assistance in acquiring foundational literacy skills at home.

2.2 Extent of Parental Involvement

The study aimed at establishing the extent of parental involvement in literacy acquisition among pupils in Akithi Division Tigania West District, Kenya. It sought to investigate the extent to which parents were involved in literacy activities such as reading to children, listening to children read, provision of a literacy rich environment and in direct literacy instruction. It also considered the extent to which parents consulted teachers over literacy, rewarded their children for literacy, checked children's homework and bought books and other reading materials for children. An item was included in both the teachers' and pupils' questionnaires which required respondents to rate parents in terms of the extent of their involvement in literacy acquisition based on their involvement in eight (8) selected indicators of parental involvement in literacy acquisition. Information on Table 3 shows the responses of teachers and pupils as regards the extent of parents' involvement in activities that indicate parental involvement in literacy acquisition by their children.

Table 3

Respondent's Rating of Parents on Extent of their Involvement in Literacy Acquisition

Activity	Group	Very actively involved %	Moderately involved %	No opinion %	Lowly involved %	Not involved at all %
Reading to children at home	Teachers	0.0	12.5	8.3	66.7	12.5
	Pupils	8.7	31.4	2.1	47.4	10.5
Checking of homework	Teachers	8.3	8.3	0.0	62.5	20.8
	Pupils	4.2	4.2	0.0	45.8	45.8
Provision of reading materials and a literacy rich environment	Teachers	4.2	8.3	0.0	45.8	41.7
	Pupils	11.8	33.1	2.1	36.9	16.0
Direct literacy instruction	Teachers	4.2	12.5	8.3	41.7	33.3
	Pupils	11.1	28.6	1.7	37.3	21.3
Interest in children's performance in literacy.	Teachers	0.0	29.2	8.3	58.3	4.2
	Pupils	10.1	18.1	2.1	38.0	31.7
Consultation with teachers over children's literacy	Teachers	16.7	0.0	4.2	50.0	29.2
	Pupils	4.2	8.3	0.0	58.3	29.2
Listening to pupils reading	Teachers	8.3	12.5	25.0	20.8	33.3
	Pupils	9.8	28.9	5.6	39.0	31.7
Rewarding of children for reading well	Teachers	4.2	12.5	0.0	58.3	25.0
	Pupils	11.4	24.0	3.5	36.2	24.7

On reading to children at home, 66.7 % of the teachers indicated that parents were lowly involved, while 12.5 % indicated that parents were moderately involved. Another 12.5% of the respondents indicated that parents were not involved at all.

Majority of pupils (47.4%) rated parents as lowly involved while 31.% of the pupils rated their parents as moderately involved. This shows that majority of parents were lowly involved in reading to children.

On checking of children's homework, 62.5 % of the teachers rated parents as lowly involved while 20.8 % rated parents as not involved at all. Pupils indicated that their parents were lowly involved (45.8%) with an equal number, (45.8%) rating parents as not involved at all in checking of their children's homework. This is an indication that parents are lowly involved in checking of their children's homework while according to the teachers (20.8%) and pupils (45.8%), a good number of parents are not involved at all.

About provision of reading materials and a literacy rich environment, teachers indicated that the majority of parents (45.8 %) were lowly involved while 41.7 % are not involved at all. Majority of the pupils (36.9%) rated their parents as lowly involved in provision of reading materials and a literacy rich environment. This is an indication that most parents are not actively involved in providing reading materials and a literacy rich environment while a large number are not involved at all.

Over 40 % of the teachers indicated that parents were lowly involved in direct literacy instruction while 33.3% were not involved at all. Pupils also rated their own parents lowly with 37.3 % being rated as lowly involved while 21.3% were not involved at all. This shows that majority of parents are lowly involved in teaching their children how to read and write at home. A good number of parents were rated by teachers (33.3%) and pupils (21.3%) as not involved at all in direct literacy instruction.

On parents' interest in their children's performance in literacy, majority of teachers (58.3 %) and pupils (38.0%) opined that parents were lowly involved whereas 29.2% and 18.1% of the teachers and pupils respectively were of the opinion that parents were moderately involved. A good number of pupils (31.7%), however, rated their own parents as not involved at all in as far as interest in their children's performance in literacy is concerned.

On consultation with teachers over children's literacy skills, 50.2% of the teachers indicated that parents were lowly involved while 29.2% of the teachers rated parents as not involved at all. Similarly, parents were rated as lowly involved by 58.3% and not involved at all by 29.2 % of the pupils on the same indicator. The majority of teachers (33.3%) rated parents as not involved at all in listening to their children reading to them at home. Most pupils (39.0%) indicated that their parents were lowly involved in listening to them reading at home while 31.7 % rated them as not involved at all. This shows that most parents are not involved in listening to their children reading to them at home.

On rewarding of children for good performance in reading and writing, 58.3% of teachers indicated that parents were lowly involved followed by 25% of teachers who indicated that parents were not involved at all. Majority of pupils (36.2%) rated parents as lowly involved while 24.7 % indicated that their parents were not involved at all in rewarding them for good performance in reading and writing. This shows that majority of the teachers and pupils are of the opinion that parents are lowly involved in rewarding their children for good performance in literacy.

The above analysis shows that teachers and parents view parents as lowly involved in their children's acquisition of literacy skills. This is based on their rating of parents in terms of the extent to which they are involved in the eight indicators of parental involvement in literacy acquisition. Majority of teachers and pupils rated parents as lowly involved in reading to their children, checking of children's homework, provision of reading materials and in direct literacy instruction. Parents were also rated as lowly involved in terms of interest in children's performance in literacy, consultation with teachers over children's literacy skills and in rewarding of children for good performance in reading and writing. Many of the teachers (33.3%) indicated that teachers are not involved at all in listening to their children read while majority of the pupils rated them as lowly involved on the same indicator.

2.3 Parents' Perception of Involvement

Parents' representatives in SMC's were interviewed on the role parents play in the development of their children's literacy before children enter school, during pre-school and in primary school. During the interview with parents, it emerged that parents were not adequately informed about their role in their children's literacy acquisition. Parents who indicated that they participated in their children's literacy acquisition singled out sending children to school on a daily basis, purchase of

school uniforms and providing children with food as their most important contribution to this end. Parents also identified maintaining of children's discipline as another contribution they make towards literacy acquisition. "I make sure that I discipline my children any time the teachers complain about them", one respondent observed. Parents interviewed considered pupil's indiscipline as an important challenge that schools were facing in the process of teaching literacy skills. To them, indiscipline was mainly exhibited in the form of failure to do homework, absenteeism and truancy by children. To these parents, the best contribution they could make was to help the teachers with disciplining of the children.

Other respondents indicated that they were comfortable with helping children read and write before they enter school but often discontinued this practice once children started school. Once children start school, parents leave literacy development to the teachers and wait for the school to inform them on their children's progress through the end of term reports. This, they said is because many parents don't consider themselves capable of making much contribution to the child's literacy acquisition process.

From the interview with parents' representatives, it was clear that most parents were unaware of their role in the literacy acquisition process by their children. Many respondents admitted that they had never read to their children or listened to them reading. Others indicated that they had not deliberately set out to provide a literacy rich environment in their homes. A few respondents indicated that they had rewarded children for performing well in school, based on their ranking in class at the end of the school term. However, no respondent indicated that they had rewarded their children for reading or writing well. Some respondents observed that many parents do not have confidence with their own abilities in helping children learn how to read and write, and therefore leave the responsibility to nurture literacy almost entirely to the teacher.

2.4 Reasons for Low Parental Involvement in Literacy Acquisition

Teachers and pupils were asked to suggest reasons for low parental involvement in literacy acquisition. Their responses are presented on Table 4.

Table 4

Respondents' Opinion on the Reasons for Low Level of Involvement in Literacy acquisition

Reason	Frequency			Percentage		
	Pupils	Parents	Teachers	Pupils	Parents	Teachers
Poverty	102	13	6	35.5	54.2	25
Illiteracy	32	16	18	11.1	66.7	75
Alcohol and drugs abuse	13	12	14	4.5	50.0	58.3
Lack of interest	41			14.3		
Family conflicts			15			62.5
Parents too busy		15	17		62.5	70.8
Fear of making mistakes in front of their children		8			33.3	
Fear of contradicting teachers		6			25.0	

The most commonly suggested reason for low parental involvement from the three groups of respondents was illiteracy at 75 % among teachers, 11 % among pupils and 66 % among parents. This view is in line with the finding by Lessing and Mahabeer (2007) that parents' level of education influences the involvement of parents in the development of their children's literacy. In addition, low literacy levels of parents tend to provide learners with minimal chances of exposure to reading material thereby effectively reducing their literacy abilities (Lessing & Mahabeer, 2007).

Teachers, pupils and parents suggested poverty as another common reason for low parental involvement in literacy acquisition at 54 %, 35 % and 62 % as indicated on Table 4. This view was also held by Robb (2003) that provision of resources for learning at home, such as writing implements and books is affected by low socio-economic status of parents and this adversely affects literacy learning as parents are not in a position to provide the resources necessary to undertake this activity. This view is also reflected in a study by the Scottish Government (2008) which found that for many parents,

lack of time may emerge from the hardships imposed by low income and poverty which limits their ability to make financial and mutual contributions to literacy acquisition by their children.

Parents and teachers in addition cited lack of time by parents as a possible reason for parents' low involvement in literacy acquisition by their children at 70 % and 62 % as indicated on Table 4 respectively. This view agrees with the finding by the Scottish Government (2008) that the work schedule of some parents may limit their ability to attend meeting and to offer effective home-based activities towards literacy acquisition.

Alcoholism and drug abuse was another reason that was commonly put forward by all the groups of respondents as a possible reason for low parental involvement in literacy acquisition. Parents representatives interviewed observed that many parents often got home drunk and were therefore not in a position to discuss any academic matters with their children. It also emerged from the interview with parents that families where one or both parents engaged in alcohol abuse had frequent family conflicts that disrupted children's academic progress since such children did not attend school regularly.

Lack of interest by parents was suggested by 14.3% of students while family conflicts were cited by 62.5% of teachers as additional suggestions for low parental involvement in literacy acquisition by their children. In addition, 33.3 % of the parents suggested that they feared making mistakes in front of their children while another 25% of the parents fear contradicting teachers. About 62.5% of parents and 70.8% of teachers consider parents too busy to find time to get involved in their children's literacy acquisition.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study the following conclusions are drawn:

- i. This study established that there is low parental involvement in acquisition of literacy skills among pupils in primary schools in Akithi Division, Tigania West District, Kenya.
- ii. This study also revealed that parents are inadequately informed about parental activities that may influence acquisition of literacy skills
- iii. This study revealed the various reasons for low parental involvement as well as the challenges faced by parents in the effort to help their children acquire literacy skills. Among the reasons are poverty, parental illiteracy, family conflicts and parental abuse of alcohol and drugs. Other reasons include busy work schedules for parents that leave them with very little time for involvement. Some parents fear contradicting teachers while others fear making mistakes in front of their children.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are necessary in light of the responses from the respondents and in view of the research findings.

- i. The government should enhance community sensitization on the value of parental involvement in literacy acquisition. This could be done through the mainstream media, community radio services as well as through religious organizations.
- ii. School managers should put in place clear policies on the involvement of parents in their children's acquisition of literacy skills. This could be done through the introduction of open days for parents with children in public primary schools dedicated to parents/teachers individual consultation over children's progress in literacy as well as other academic areas.
- iii. Schools should conduct regular workshops for parents to guide them on how to assist their children acquire literacy skills. This is especially vital since this study found that parents consider themselves inadequately skilled to assist their children to acquire literacy. Hindrances to involvement like poverty and illiteracy can be overcome through training of parents since a lot of parental interventions to children's literacy do not require financial inputs. These include reading to children, listening to children read, consulting with teachers as well as checking of children's homework. Other interventions, such as parents listening to children read, showing interest in a child's academic work and provision of a literacy rich environment do not necessarily require parental literacy.
- iv. There is need to enhance community-school linkages to promote rapport between teachers and parents so as to achieve greater cooperation in the learning process. This is especially important since this study established that some parents find teachers arrogant.

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