



Parental Involvement in Early Schooling: Exploring Parent and Teacher Views in a Low-income African Context

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the nature and influence of parental involvement in children's early schooling exhibited by low income parents in an African City—Lusaka in Zambia. The sample consisted of seventy-two first graders, their parents and forty-five teachers. Using self report questionnaires, parents rated their own levels of involvement and extent to which schools involve them in children's schooling. Similarly, teachers reported on teacher-parent communication and parental involvement. In assessing the impact of parental involvement on early grade achievement, two early grade reading tests—orthographic awareness and decoding were used as outcome variables. Results showed majority parents scoring lower than the mean on the parental involvement measure. Despite lower scores, parents categorised as highly and moderately involved had children performing better in both outcome variables. Further, an antagonistic view of parental involvement between teachers and parents emerged. Implications of the study in light of the findings are discussed.

Keywords: Parental involvement; early reading skills; early schooling; parental views; teacher views; school; home; Zambia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Skills for early reading are the foundation of a learners' academic career. Research has shown that the achievement of these skills is dependent on the child and the environments (home and school) that provide affordances for acquisition [1-6]. Although formal education is largely the responsibility of the school, many studies have demonstrated the influence of informal and formal family opportunities in the process [7-12]. Before formal schooling, parents expose children to literacy artifacts within the home that actively or passively register reading skills as important, valued and meaningful activities in a child's intimate culture [13-19].

After school entry, parental involvement (PI) in children's learning continues to be an important ingredient in the children's learning process. Research on PI in literacy socialization demonstrates that parents are becoming increasingly aware of the significance of reading for academic achievement and use in technologically advancing societies [7,20-22]. Benefits of parental involvement in children's education are summarised as; 1) increases the frequency of children's academically relevant experiences; 2) conveys message to the child about the importance of school; 3) conveys message to the teacher that parents care about children's schooling [23]. As such, parental involvement in children's school report benefits in children's school performance [3,24-27,6] and may be among the most significant indicators of school success [28,29].

Theoretically, this study is embedded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological system [30]. Within the contexts identified for human development, Bronfenbrenner places family and school (microsystems) to autonomously and synergistically create opportunities for children to learn. Their synergic interaction (mesosystem) facilitates the learning process. However, a number of studies have reported that this linkage is neither automatic nor easy [31,32,11]. In this synergy, researchers have identified parental involvement as the missing link in academic achievement [33]. Others exploring the home—school interplay yield reports that parents fall behind in the education of young children and look to schools to provide education [34] despite making substantial contributions that amplify school programs [35,7]. A lapse in the connection between these contexts is as good as a failed context [30]. One aspect that signifies the

connections between these autonomous contexts is the children's daily transitions from one context to the other [36-38,32].

Factors contributing to inconsistent parental involvement can be traced to historical and cultural factors like low educational levels, poverty and its associated effects. These factors place families at a disadvantage with views that schools are the only way to escape the 'transgenerational plagues' (5). Overwhelmed by large class sizes, poorly resourced infrastructure, low teacher motivation and lack of appropriate teacher and learner materials, schools may benefit from stronger parental involvement in facilitating children's education. The current study examined the nature of school involvement exhibited by low income parents as reported by parents and early grade teachers in an African urban city, Lusaka. The study was guided by the following questions; 1). What is the nature of school involvement exhibited by low income parents? 2). To what extent do parents consider their children's schools involving them? 3). To what extent does parental involvement relate to children's early reading skills? 4). How do teachers perceive teacher-parent communication and parental involvement?

2. METHODS

2.1 Design

The descriptive design that utilized quantitative method to investigate parental involvement in children's schooling with specific emphasis on literacy skill acquisition was used.

2.2 Participants

2.2.1 Child participants

Nine public schools were purposefully sampled to capture families from different SES classes—low, medium and high. Schools were selected in accordance with the population density of the area. The highly density areas represented low income, medium populated represented middle income and the low populated represented the high income. This sampling strategy did not achieve the intended purpose of sampling from all SES classes. It was revealed that lower primary public schools serve low income families. The SES demographics assessed by parental education, occupation, family possessions and direct observations revealed that all families were low income. It

appears that most middle and high income families enroll their children in private schools. A total of 72 child participants were randomly sampled representing 32 boys (45%) and 40 girls (55%), mean = 7.15, SD = .62.

2.2.2 Parent participants

A parent in this study was operationalized as someone who provided primary care to the learner. These included; biological parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents. Each parent represented one of the learners recruited in the study. Parental age was between 25 and 61 years ($M = 35.67$, $SD = 6.65$) [39].

2.2.3 Teacher participants

A total of 45 teachers were samples from more than the nine schools that recruited the learners. The teacher age was between 26-55 years ($Mean = 37.05$; $SD = 7.34$).

2.2.4 Assessments

2.2.4.1 Parental involvement

Assessed using a locally developed structured Home Literacy Questionnaire [39], 14 likert type questions about parental involvement in children's school reading, homework and teaching related activities were asked. Higher scores on the scale represent higher levels of involvement and vice versa. The items on the scale report an acceptable alpha of $\alpha = .86$. In addition, using a five-point likert scale with four items parents rated how much teachers involved them. These items report an internal consistency of $\alpha = .61$.

2.2.4.2 Teacher perceptions

Questions relating to teacher-parent communication frequency, teacher ratings of parental involvement were also considered. A total of ten items were used and reported an internal consistency value of $\alpha = .62$.

2.2.5 Assessments for early literacy skills

Two early reading skill tests were locally developed [40] in one of the official local languages for early grade instruction—ciNyanja to assess learner's early reading skills.

Orthographic Awareness (OA) — this measure assessed letter knowledge. Items on the test

comprised letters, syllables and simple words which progressed with increased difficulty. This test had an objective scoring system ranging from -54 to 54. The learner received a score of 1 for every correct response and minus one for every incorrect response. This test achieved a moderate test-retest reliability, $r = .67$ ($N = 22$).

Decoding Competence—this test assessed early spelling skill. Items included letter-sounds, syllables, and simple words. Learners were asked to match what they heard to the corresponding letter, syllable, or word that was on the paper. The scoring ranged from 0-20 with a score of one for every correct response and zero for every incorrect response. This test showed a higher test-retest reliability accepted for social science research, $r = .86$ ($N = 22$).

2.2.6 Procedure

The research obtained ethical approval from the University of Zambia Research Ethics Committee (UNZAREC). Further, approval was sought from the ministry of Education to work with the identified schools from which children and the parents would recruited. In collaboration with teachers, appointments were scheduled with parents. The principal researcher and four trained research assistants participated in the data collection. The participants in the study gave a written consent or otherwise oral if they could not read and write. Administration of the home literacy questionnaire followed an interview format and lasted approximately 35 to 45 minutes. These interviews were conducted in the parents' preferred language as determined by the assessors during initial contact. The language of use was primarily ciNyanja, but characterized by code-switching between English and ciNyanja throughout the interview.

Learners' reading skills were assessed individually at their respective schools. Each child spent about 20 to 35 minutes with the assessor during testing. These assessments required the learner to underline the correct responses. A Self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data from the teachers and questionnaires were returned at an agreed date.

2.3 Data Analysis

To understand the tendency of parental involvement, descriptive statistics in form of percentages were computed on all parent and teacher responses. Further, Analysis of Variance

(ANOVA) was performed to assess the impact of parental involvement on learners' early literacy skills on the differently formulated categories of PI.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Descriptive Results

Descriptive statistics obtained from the parental involvement measure showed that most parents scored below the mean. With the highest possible score on the parental involvement measure at 56, parents' actual scores ranged from 3-40 ($M = 16.32$; $SD = 9.44$).

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the learner scores on the reading skills as function of parental involvement level. The low PI category represents the largest group of participants and lagged behind their peers in other categories (moderate and high) on the early reading skills.

Table 2 shows descriptives in form of frequencies and percentages of parental responses to the views about the schools. These results show that parents' view the schools as not optimally engaging them.

To ascertain the impact of parental involvement on early reading skills, ANOVA was performed.

Levels of parental involvement produced group differences for both early reading tests—orthographic awareness $F(2, 69) = 8.79$, $p < .001$ and decoding competence $F(2, 69) = 6.27$, $p < .01$. Post hoc comparisons showed that on both tests the low PI category significantly differed from both the moderate and high PI categories, $p < .05$ and $p < .01$ respectively. However, significant differences were not observed between moderate and high parental involvement levels.

Teacher reports on communicating with parents through letters, calendars and newsletters showed lower frequency levels. Eleven percent (11%) of the teachers did not send any information, 58% sent at least once in a year and 31% at least 2-3 times. On discussing learners' progress with parents, 13% reported discussing at least once a year while 87% reported at least 2-3 times a year. On teacher frequency of sending homework with learners, 13% sent fortnightly, 27% at least once a week, 38% 2-3 times a week and 22% daily. Teacher reports on general parental involvement in the child's schooling yielded 64% of the teachers rating as poor, 20% as good and 16% as very good. Specific rating on parental involvement in assisting with homework, 24% of the teachers reported that parents did not help, 34% helped very little, 33% helped quite well and 9% helped very well.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for categories of literacy skills as a function of parental involvement (PI), N= 72

		PI category		
		Low	Moderate	High
<i>n</i> per category		40	18	14
Orthographic awareness	<i>M</i>	13.85	20.28	20.86
	<i>SD</i>	7.55	6.02	4.64
Decoding competence	<i>M</i>	6.65	9.78	11.43
	<i>SD</i>	2.64	3.44	3.54

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for parental views on school involvement (N=72)

Statements		Agreed	Disagreed	Not sure
My child's school involves me in his/her education	<i>n</i>	30	42	-
	%	42	58	-
My child's school should make greater effort to involve me in his/her education	<i>n</i>	56	16	-
	%	78	22	-
My child's school cares about my child's progress in school	<i>n</i>	38	30	4
	%	53	42	5
My child's school does a good job in helping him/her become a better reader	<i>n</i>	25	44	3
	%	35	61	4

4. DISCUSSION

This paper examined the nature of involvement in children's learning of low income parents. The study also examined how this involvement may relate to learners' achievement of early reading skills. Despite the significance of parental involvement in the learning process, self-reports from parents in the current study revealed lower levels parental involvement as obtained from the measure. This finding is supported by parental self-reports and teacher observations on involvement. Parental self-reports showed that majority parents rated their participation in the home-based activities as low. This resonates with the teacher data that shows that 64% of the teachers viewed PI in children's schooling as poor with specific poor homework assistance offered to children by parents. This study clearly shows that low income parents require empowerment and guidance in exploring their involvement in children's learning. In line with [33] it shows that parents may be the critical but missing link in their children's education. However, involvement could be affected by parents' low education. It could be that parents may not have the capacity expose their children to various activities that enhance their involvement. It must be noted however that in Zambia, like other collectivistic societies, a child is brought up by a wider base of players in the family and community. As such, parents delegate elementary school responsibilities to older siblings or capable others within their families and neighbourhoods. Thus, teacher observations especially on homework assistance could be a reflection of other members of the family. In addition, poor parental involvement could be attributed to the fact that parents view the school as having the responsibility of teaching their children. This would lessen their level of involvement because they know that the school and teachers are trained for purposes of educating children.

From the self-reports, half the parents in the sample felt that the schools did not optimally involve them in children's schooling. As such, 78% of the parents were of the view that schools should to make greater effort in involving them. Teacher reports confirm parental observations using the teacher communication frequency and strategies that teachers do not seem to adequately involve parents. Teachers confirm the routine communication style that is characterised by dates for school opening, collection of school reports and closing. Although some teachers

reported that parents do not cooperate, some parents felt that teachers do not explicitly involve them. In line with this finding, [2] also found that schools in Pakistan and Bangladesh inhibited parental accessibility to school information. They reported that whilst it was clear from the parents that they were not very, and in some cases not at all, involved in their children's schools, they knew little about the education system or what their children were doing in school. It appears that lack of accessibility to schooling system may compel parents to give unsatisfactory report about the school. In perceiving the schools as not doing a good job, over 90% of the parents considered enrolling their children in private tuitions. This may show that parents perceive these schools as inadequate. However, 53% of the parents still viewed teachers as caring about their children's progression. An explanation for this finding could be that regardless of teacher input, parents believe that teachers are trained to teach and are responsible for education of children. Thus, parents are left without an option but maintain the status quo especially if they cannot afford private schools. Other researchers have observed a similar pattern that despite entrusting the education process to the teachers, parents complain that schools are failing [7]. These antagonistic parental views need to be registered with teachers and schools so that they (teachers and schools) could improve in parental engagement, delivery and management. While parental expectations may be high when children enrol in school, teachers could engage them (*parents*) and register their (*teachers*) challenges as well as communicate the need for parental involvement from the onset.

Despite the generally low parental involvement levels observed, differences in the performance on early reading skills were identified. It was found that parents who exhibited moderate and high parental involvement levels had children who outperformed those in the low PI category in both skills. These findings illustrate the home-based involvement in children's learning process is present in low income families albeit low levels. This study registers the concerns raised by both parents and teachers in children's education. It is undisputable that home-school relations and partnerships need addressing. One of the ways that children can benefit from a stronger partnership would be for teachers to strategically give expert knowledge to parents on how to help their children at home. Similarly, this partnership would help teachers to register with parents the many challenges faced in schools

such as poor school infrastructure, class sizes, inadequate learning and teaching materials.

Although research documents positive contributions of parents to both delivery and school management, the sample of parents in this study could have particular challenges. The very low parental education experiences may hinder critical feedback. Similarly, parents were employed in low skilled jobs or owned small businesses that needed their maximum presence. Thus, parents may not find time to be involved in school activities because they are working to make ends meet. The challenge of giving suggestions to schools is also noted by [7] who observed that knowledgeable parents (middle class) could be used as forerunners in advocating for the partnership and giving feedback to the school. However, serving children from low socioeconomic status, these public schools do not have parents from higher SES classes that could provide knowledge on how they would be involved. Thus, there is need to improve the current public schools in order to target middle and high class parents who would provide critical feedback. With the established Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA), none of the parents in this study not only reported being in the associations but also that they were unaware of such associations.

Teacher reports do not seem to produce constant flow of communication aside collection of school reports at the end of the school term. Over 85% of the teachers report to meet parents at least 2-3 times a year. Although this strategy has been in practice, parents are not always the ones to collect children's school report cards; rather, older siblings or other relations are delegated to collect report cards on behalf of parents. This hinders critical discussion about the child's progress and areas that the child needs concentration and improvement. Similarly, since the collection of report cards is done on one day, teachers with large class sizes may not adequately register concerns because they need to meet every child's representative. The observed weak link between these contexts can further be evidenced from the teacher reports of both communication and general parental involvement. These results confirm Bronfenbrenner's assertion of the significance of these contexts as autonomous and synergistic influences in the child's learning process. The home environment, the hub for parental involvement as captured in this study, is cardinal for establishing with the learner that education is

both an acceptable and important phenomenon in the child's life. However, the noted weak relations between parents and teachers may not be encouraging for learners' educational growth.

Since most parents possess only low education, teachers have an upper hand to provide guidance to the meetings and discussions about children's education. Researchers have noted that poorly educated parents may not know at first how to support their children's academic progress, but can acquire literacy skills if the school reaches out to them [41]. Therefore, there is need that teachers regularly inform, encourage and equip parents through a healthy communication system. To address this challenge in the context of the current study, there is need for interventions that promote high quality parental home based involvement, and relationships between parents and teachers. Other researchers have recorded the positive outcomes of the Home-School partnerships. For example, a study in Israel tested whether schools could integrate parents in the schooling system. With a sample of 510 parents and their first grade children recruited from 21 classrooms in seven Jewish schools examined the effectiveness of the school-family partnership in helping children to learn to read and write [31]. Parents and teachers participated in bi-weekly activities within the schools. In their findings, the impact of school-family partnership was significantly positive and higher for the participating parents, teachers and children [42]. Using self-reports, parents scored higher on their roles as encouraging reading and creating a family literacy environment. Teachers reported higher parental involvement and children performed better on the literacy tests compared to the control children. Parents reported to understand the processes that children go through in the classroom when learning to read and write. This programme produced a working relationship between parents and teachers.

5. CONCLUSION

The current study has shown that low income parents exhibit involvement in children's schooling that positively impact their academic skills. The study provides impetus for further research on parental involvement in Zambia. This may be a good target for interventions especially for the engagement of parents in the schooling system. Similarly, such interventions would be a good foundation for the creation of teacher and parent training programs. The

current study is however not without limitations. Firstly, the study sample size is small for both validation of the home literacy questionnaire as an instrument as well as external validity. This study was also limited to the low socio economic status. The study could have been informative to explore and document parental involvement at middle and high socioeconomic status.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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