Parental Involvement in Enhancing Emergent Literacy Skills Among Pre-Primary Children: A Case Study of Parents Who Are Academic Staff

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Abstract

This study examined parental involvement in enhancing emergent literacy skills in their pre-primary children at home. Specifically, the study intended to assess parents' availability of time for their children's home schooling, identify the types of emergent literacy skills that parents develop in their children at home, and explore the challenges that parents encounter in this regard. The study employed a qualitative, phenomenological design informed by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's Revised Parent Involvement Process model and the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978). 9 academic staff from the Open University of Tanzania (OUT), including four males and five females, participated in the study. Parents who participated in this study had their children in pre-primary education. Data were collected through interviews and analysed through thematic analysis. The study found that some parents had time to be involved in their children's education, while others were unable to do so due to work-related exhaustion. Parents enhance both code-focused and meaning-focused literacy skills using strategies such as speech development and tools like flashcards and alphabet blocks. The study found challenges to parental involvement in child literacy development. The challenges include work-related exhaustion, the disparity between home and school language, a lack of awareness about which tools work best for various literacy skills, and a lack of understanding of emergent literacy development. Parents demonstrated a strong desire to participate in their children's emergent literacy development, despite the challenges they face. Parents recommended an increased interaction between parents and teachers regarding strategies for promoting emergent literacy skills. The study recommends that there is a need to examine the role of parents' gender in supporting emergent literacy at home.

Keywords: Emergent Literacy Skills, Pre-Primary Children, Parental Involvement

Introduction

Parental involvement is acknowledged as a significant determinant of an effective education system for their children (Hornby Lafaele, 2011). Parental involvement refers to

behaviours, attitudes and values that reflect a parent's commitment to their child's education and schooling (Bakker & Denessen, 2007). Parents' involvement extends beyond behaviours to include beliefs about educational objectives and methods by which parents support their children's learning both at home and school (Wilson et al, 2019). The present study focuses on parents' involvement in enhancing emergent literacy skills in their children at home. According to Wohlers (2005), the home environment serves as the child's first teacher and plays a significant role in predicting academic outcomes. Involvement in home-based learning activities can include helping with homework, discussing school-related topics, or engaging in educational games (Kandasamy et al., 2016). This study specifically examined the role of parents in fostering emergent literacy skills, an important aspect of early language development before and after formal schooling (Kigobe, 2019). Martini and Sénéchal (2012) emphasise that parents are primary educators, as they determine the types of literacy activities that shape their child's academic success. Overall, parental involvement in children's education, particularly in the development of emergent literacy skills, is critical for their academic achievement.

　　　Emergent literacy skills are the basic building blocks for learning to read and write (Hee, 2014). Emergent literacy skills are categorised into two groups, depending on the activity. These include code-focused and meaning-focused activities. Code-focused activities promote skills related to the mechanics of print awareness of reading words, including phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, letter-sound correspondences, and phonics, spelling, and reading fluency (Castles et al., 2018). However, meaning-focused activities focus on the meaning of written and spoken language and include vocabulary, morphemic awareness, syntactic awareness, knowledge building, and comprehension strategies (Castles et al., 2018). The present study explores types of emergent literacy skills which parents at home enhance. According to the Home Literacy Model (HLM)　by Sénéchal and LeFevre (2002, 2014), meaning-related literacy activities are those where the print is present but is not the focus of the parent-child interaction, for example, when parents read storybooks to their children. In contrast, code-related literacy activities focus on print, for example, activities such as when parents teach their children the names and sounds of letters or to read words. According to Anderson (2009), when parents are actively involved in the development of emergent literacy skills, their children embrace the importance and value of reading and writing (Anderson, 2000).

　　　The given information demonstrates that the involvement of parents in their children's education and emergent literacy development is not a novel agenda or topic. Understanding how the home literacy environment affects the acquisition of children's later language and emergent literacy knowledge has become of increasing interest to Roberts et al. (2005). Emergent literacy skills in early childhood are becoming important in determining the future educational success of the child (Stutzel, 2019). Emergent literacy consists of at least two distinct domains: inside-out skills (phonological awareness, letter

knowledge) and outside-in skills (language, conceptual knowledge, and vocabulary). Several studies have been conducted on the extent of parental involvement in education, as per Bakker and Denessen (2007). Fatonah (2020) states that little has been done about parental involvement in enhancing emergent literacy skills, which are foundations for children's reading and writing habits. In this regard, little has been done on the involvement of parents who work with universities in enhancing emergent literacy skills in their children at home. The study focused on academic staff from the University who, according to Kerres (2005), play a key role in education innovation as they are the "gatekeepers" of the research and teaching activities within the University. Most of the academic staff at the universities have the highest-level degree in their field. Studies show that education levels relate to their children's learning in terms of the acquisition of reading skills (Chen et al., 2018; Vanderauwera, 2019). Moreover, children are considered at risk due to their family backgrounds, such as parents' education and occupation (Hee 2014). In this regard, much has been done on the impact of parental involvement in their children's education as well as on the development of literacy skills. The present study extended the previous studies on the involvement of parents in enhancing emergent literacy skills in their children. Specifically, the present study intended to;

    i.   Assess parents' availability to be involved in their children's education at home.

    ii.   Identify types of emergent literacy skills enhanced by parents

    iii.   Explore challenges parents encounter by involving themselves in enhancing emergent literacy in their children

Theoretical Perspectives

This paper was guided by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandle, a theoretical model of the parental involvement process and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Dempsey and Sandler's model of parental involvement offers a more holistic perspective that explains why parents become involved in their children's education and how their involvement makes a difference (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Parents' efforts to assist their children's learning, according to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model in Lavenda (2011), can be categorised into 4: participation through instruction, involvement through modelling, involvement through reinforcement, and involvement through encouragement. The categories were assessed in the present study.

The sociocultural theory revolves around social interaction, the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), and the Zone of Proximal Development (Karki & Karki, 2024). Vygotsky believed and scientifically demonstrated that social and cultural influences and interactions initiate mental growth and deepen mental processes (Vygotsky, 1978; 1986). Vygotsky believes that children are completely dependent on others and are

more aware of them in the early stages. Vygotsky's theory states that infants learn through social interactions, particularly collaborative conversations with experts in the things they are seeking to grasp. Final principle: the ZPD shapes learning experience design. The difference between actual and potential development as measured by individual problem solving and problem-solving under adult guidance or in conjunction with more capable peers, according to Vygotsky (1978). The present study, based on the theory, regards a parent as an individual who is an expert in the development of emergent literacy skills in a child. Parents are involved in their children's education by either fostering the emergent literacy skills or extending the lessons that their teachers have taught. Consequently, the current investigation of parental involvement in the development of emergent reading skills in children employs all three sociocultural theory principles.

Empirical Literature Review

Parental engagement in children's education is one of the most widely accepted aspects of successful education, due to research (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Research indicates that the manner in which children acquire the ability to read is influenced by the level of parental involvement in their education (Guo et al., 2021). Children develop a more comprehensive reading when their parents read with them more frequently and maintain a more optimistic perspective on their involvement (Li et al., 2020). Other research indicates that children's positive attitudes towards reading and their reading achievement are positively influenced by regular household reading, which includes both shared book reading and listening to children read. Tan et al. (2020) have also discovered that early home literacy activities are significant predictors of children's readiness for school, their later capacity to read, and their progress in reading. Tan et al. (2020) are supported by Fatonah (2020) and Kasakula (2022), who found parents performing literacy activities with their children. Fatonah (2020), who studied children in early education, found the following literacy activities for parents with children: memorising, parents using media, and providing literacy-rich surroundings. The latter author studied children at the primary education level.

Research has also examined the elements that impede effective parental involvement in children's education. Parents possess a limited understanding of their children's educational curriculum (Mapp, 2003). Additional issues include parents feeling unenthused or reluctant to assist their children with homework due to their elevated educational attainment, hence jeopardising their children's academic advancement (Silaji, 2018; Habimana et al., 2017; Mwebesa et al., 2017). According to Bunijevac (2017), parents sometimes feel a lack of empowerment and the confidence to believe they can educate their children. As far as the significance of emergent literacy skills is concerned, little has been done on parental involvement.

Method

The researchers involved parents who are working with the University under the academic section and who have children under five years studying at the pre-primary level. In Tanzania, children under five years and those who are five years old are expected to participate in compulsory one or two years of pre-primary education (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST, 2014;2023). The research was qualitative with a phenomenological design. The information necessary for the study was gathered through structured interviews. Data were analysed through thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis follows five steps: familiarisation with the data, code generation, searching for themes, review and refining of themes and reporting. The steps were followed for the present study. Nine parents participated in the study, five of whom were female and four of whom were male members of the academic staff affiliated with the Open University of Tanzania. The nine academic staff members were effectively acquired after the saturation point was reached. According to Charmaz (2006), contrasts sequentially add experiences until exhaustive saturation of the properties of categories and relations among them is achieved. This is the process by which the saturation point occurs during data collection. The study was interested in collaborating with academic staff because, as Hee (2014) posits, children are deemed at-risk as a result of their familial backgrounds, including the education and occupation of their parents.

Presentation of the Findings

The academic staff who participated in this study had the following characteristics presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of the participants

Participants	Age	Gender	Children under five in pre-primary education	Level of Education	School options for their children
Participant A	49	Male	Three children	PhD	Private English Medium
Participant B	30	Female	One child	BA	Private English Medium
Participant C	32	Female	Two children	MA	Public Non-English Medium
Participant D	35	Male	One child	MA	Private English Medium
Participant E	44	Male	One child	PhD	Public Non-English Medium
Participant F	39	Female	Two children	MA	Private English Medium
Participant G	45	Female	One child	PhD	Private English Medium
Participant H	40	female	Two children	PhD	Private English Medium
Participant I	31	Male	One child	BA	Private English Medium

Source: Field (2024)

Table 1 reveals the characteristics of participants who were involved in the study. The male 4 ages were between 31-42, while the ages for females ranged between 30-45. The table shows that the majority (5) of the participants had one child, while three participants had two, and the remaining participant had three children. Additionally, most of the parents interviewed have their children enrolled in private English-medium schools (7), while two parents have their children enrolled in public non-English-medium schools. The medium of instruction is determined by the type of school, with English and Kiswahili being the most common. Moreover, Table 1 also revealed that the academic staff involved in the study are those with a PhD (Doctor of Philosophy), MA (Master's degree) and BA (Bachelor's degree).

The primary findings were presented in accordance with the themes examined. The study examined three themes: the availability of parents' involvement in their children's education, the types of emergent literacy that parents enhance, and the challenges that parents encounter when they involve themselves in enhancing emergent literacy in their children.

Parents' Availability for Home Learning

In this theme, the researcher sought data regarding parents' availability at home to support their children's educational needs. An academic female staff member reported on parental involvement in their children's education:

I have two children who are in kindergarten; one is five years of age, and the other is three years old. I get time to sit with my children every day during weekdays. I understand that being available to my children on issues of education has an impact on tomorrow's learning. I usually spend one hour before supper. I either read them a story or sing a song on alphabet letters (Personal interview B).

Another academic staff member with a similar experience reported:

Every day after working hours, I go home mainly to assist my children with their homework. In my experience, children alone do nothing, and they can't work alone. They need someone to guide them and talk to them about the homework given to them. My involvement builds confidence in my children. (Personal interview G)

The two quotations illustrate that parents have the opportunity to be active in the academic affairs of their children and that this opportunity is available to them. Parents believe that it is their job to be involved in their children's educational experiences. Parents see the importance of involving themselves in their children's academic issues. Unlike the above, other academic staff substantiated the availability of their children's education at home. One academic staff member reported:

Upon returning home from a lengthy day at work, I am consumed by the desire to relax. I yearn for more time to assist my children with their academic responsibilities, but it appears that my occupation is consuming all of the hours I require for this. (Personal interview A)

Additional to that, academic staff E reported:

…I am unable to inquire about my children's day or assist them with their assignments because of the extensive hours I commit to my job. It appears that I am fulfilling their material needs, yet I am failing to engage in their educational development. (Personal interview E)

Another academic staff member said:

.. Honestly, I never give much thought to the possibility of participating in my children's education. I am so preoccupied with ensuring that the bills are paid and that food is provided that the idea of sitting down with them to do homework never even enters my consciousness. This is due to my current workload, which is very busy (Personal Interview H).

It was further reported that parents do not have the time to get involved in the educational matters of their children while they are attending school at home. The task that parents do is allegedly overly demanding and very busy, according to the parents. When they go home from work, they realise that they are exhausted. The findings imply that academic staff have a lot of work to do during the day. They prepare for lectures and lecturing, marking off the scripts, and student consultation, which makes academic staff, who are also parents, have no time to assist their children with academic issues. What parent do is to make sure that their children have their basic needs, they pay school fees, and they go to school.

Types of Emergent Literacy Skills   Enhanced by Parents at Home

Emergent literacy skills each play a significant part in the overall process of children's learning. Children are better prepared to build the required tools for successful reading and writing if they are given the opportunity to develop these core skills at an early child development stage. In this regard, academic staff were asked through interviews about the types of emergent literacy skills they enhance at home as part of involving themselves in their children's academics. The following quotes substantiate this view: one of the academic staff said:

…Surrounded by alphabet blocks, I sit down with my son, and we start the process of naming each alphabet letter. Initially, he encountered difficulties; however, his enthusiasm as he began to identify letters in texts gradually increased. ..It is remarkable to observe how something so basic could assist him in acquiring a comprehensive understanding of letters. This teaching is done every time I am free at home. But it is incredible to see how something so simple helps a child build letter knowledge and gives

him the tools to start reading and writing. (Personal interview B).

As demonstrated in the quote, it is revealed that a parent first sees the importance of enhancing emergent literacy skills in children. A parent recognises that being able to name the letters of the alphabet can help children develop their reading skills. Additionally, a parent in the statement disclosed and sees the importance of alphabet blocks in improving children's ability to recognise the names of letters in the alphabet. However, from the findings, parents reported that it is an extremely challenging effort to improve children's ability to recognise the names of alphabet letters, and that it takes a child a long time to become proficient in this skill.

Another academic staff member added by reporting:

…As we sit at the dinner table, I start asking my daughter about her day, describing things around us in detail learnt. I observe that she began employing new words in her utterances, which I had never heard her say before. I come to the realisation that I am assisting her in the development of her vocabulary…. By doing that, I enhance my child's capacity to read, write, and express herself with each new word she acquires… (Personal Review D).

In addition, it was found that a child's vocabulary improves unconsciously through the process of speech. Parents enhance their children's literacy skills by utilising mealtimes, as they are frequently preoccupied with their academic responsibilities. The findings imply that emergent literacy is not exclusively achieved through formal education; rather, it can be nurtured through commonplace interactions, thereby offering a comprehensive learning approach.

…Each evening, we convene, and I request that my child identify the letters on the flashcards while simultaneously articulating their sounds." I observe her accurately writing each alphabet letter in Kiswahili, both uppercase and lowercase, with a pencil in her hand. I have observed her confidently producing alphabet letters, articulating their sounds, and even writing them independently… (Personal Interview C).

Furthermore, the evening time has been revealed to have the potential for parents to enhance their children's literacy skills. The parent specifically indicated enhancing alphabet letter names, sounds, and alphabet letter writing for both uppercase and lowercase letters. The findings indicated that parental efforts to enhance alphabet letter names enabled the child to produce the names of alphabet letters. From the findings, it can be said that emergent literacy skills are enhanced by parents' instruction, involvement through reinforcement and involvement through encouragement.

Challenges Parents Face in Enhancing Emergent Literacy at Home

Parents were also interviewed on the challenges they face in their involvement in enhancing emergent literacy skills in their children. One of the academic staff reported:

...I put in a lot of hours at work as an academician, and by the time I get home, I am completely worn out. It is challenging for me to muster the energy to sit down with my child and focus on mastering his letter and sound recognition. Because of the nature of my profession, I do not have the time or the attention to be as involved in my child's literacy development as I would like to be. (Personal Interview E).

According to the findings, a parent faces the issue of combining the time they spend working with the time they spend helping their child. Taking into consideration the findings, the parent has the desire to assist the child in academics, but more specifically in the development of emergent reading abilities. One of the problems is that, as a result of having more work to accomplish, one is unable to assist a youngster. The findings imply that parents are aware of the need for involvement; nevertheless, their jobs leave them with limited time and capacity. Other academic staff with different challenges reported:

...It can be challenging for me to assist my children with reading if they are struggling. When it comes to explaining things in a manner that mirrors what they learn in school, I am not always sure how to do it. In spite of the fact that I want to be present for them, the language barrier makes me feel as though I am not completely connected to their education. (Personal Interview H).

A similar case was reported:

…..I have seen that when my children ask me for assistance, I frequently find it difficult to explain things understandably. In order to teach them in the manner that I would like to, my language abilities are not strong enough… These days, children know more English than we parents do. They have a strong vocabulary; they want me to use the vocabulary they have acquired from school, or their teachers have taught them. …...I want them to be successful, but there are moments when I feel like I'm not able to steer them in the right direction. This is a frustrating situation for me. (Personal Interview A).

In addition, it was found that the language barrier presents difficulties for parents when they endeavour to become involved in the academic issues of their children. The results of the study demonstrated that a parent does not feel secure with the degree of English that they possess in comparison to the level of English that their children possess. In this regard, the findings imply that language difficulties induce feelings of insecurity in

parents over their capacity to provide support for their child's education, particularly in subject areas that require a solid command of the English language.

Another academic staff member reported a different challenge;

....In fact, I have no idea what kinds of tools to employ. There are a few things that I have heard about, such as tracing sheets and special pencils, but I am not sure which ones are the most effective in assisting her in learning. I have the impression that I am merely speculating, and I wish I had a more distinct understanding of what may genuinely be effective in enhancing letter writing to my children. .... I know if I use a certain tool, I will be able to assist my child. Since I don't have enough knowledge of the emergent literacy skills to be enhanced for my child (personal interview E).

It was further found that parents had difficulty determining which resources to utilise in order to improve particular emergent literacy skills within their children, despite the fact that parents are aware of the significance of encouraging their children's literacy development. It is possible that they do not possess the knowledge or resources necessary to choose suitable instruments for effective learning.

Discussion of the Findings

According to this study, there are parents who have the time to participate in their children's education; however, other parents do not have this time available owing to a variety of influencing variables. The findings of the research correspond to those of Osabinyi (2023) on the amount of time that parents have available. Parents assisted their children in the lower primary school grades with reading literacy, as evidenced by Osabinyi in 2023. The sitting room is the location where parents regularly participate in reading activities with their children. According to the results of this survey, a significant number of parents continue to be ineffectually involved in their child's education at home. This is consistent with the findings of Pek and Mee (2020) and Syomwene (2022). The study conducted by Ineg-bedion (2017), titled "Academic Workload Planning for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Universities: The Experience of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)," indicates that members of the academic staff have expressed worries about the excessive workload they are carrying. This suggests that despite the fact that the study is an ODL, parents feel exhausted from their efforts. Zengin and Akdemir (2020) found that parents of refugee students were not very involved in their children's education, a finding that contradicts the results of the current study on the other side.

Furthermore, Li et al. (2020) found that families with high Socio-Economic Status (SES) tend to improve parental homework support, parent-child communication, and parental time with children, while those with low SES tend to improve strict discipline. The

results presented by Li et al. (2020) stand in contrast to those of the current study, indicating that not all parents were able to dedicate time to their children's academic pursuits. According to Rodríguez-Hernández et al. (2020), SES is measured through education, occupation, income, home resources, and neighbourhood resources. In this context, it was anticipated that academic staff would report having more time to engage in their children's education compared to those of low socio-economic status. Parents in this context have higher educational attainment and understanding of the importance of education. In contrast to the aforementioned, parents in indigenous societies possess distinct views on children's education and often disregard formal schooling; they exhibit resistance to formal education (Bukhori, 2021). In indigenous societies, parents may not recognise the significance of formal education, perceiving it primarily as a means of preserving their cultural heritage.

Parents also in this study help their children develop literacy skills at home. These skills included the ability to name letters, the ability to write alphabet letters, the ability to recognise the sounds that alphabet letters make, and vocabulary development. In this regard, parents can enhance more code-focused skills than meaning-focused skills (vocabulary), depending on the literacy activities parents and children do at home. According to Sanabria et al. (2024), it is more difficult to enhance meaning-focused skills than code-focused skills. Time constraints, inadequate instruction, and the challenge of evaluating and constructing knowledge are among the obstacles to the development of skills that are focused on meaning. Sanabria et al. (2024) support the findings of the present study. In their study, they found that in grades 1 through 3, there was more meaning-focused instruction than in earlier grades. The parents who took part in this research have children who are now enrolled in pre-primary education, which is an early grade level, and code-focused instruction is the most popular type of instruction in pre-primary education. The code-focused skills which allow accuracy at the initiation of learning to read and the gradual acquisition of fluency through reading practice (Castejón et al., 2015). Enhancing emergent literacy skills in this context indicates that children utilise Kiswahili in schools where English is not the medium of instruction. In contrast, children attending institutions that offer instruction in English use the English language.

Furthermore, the present study found the following challenges that hinder parents from being involved in enhancing emergent literacy skills in their children at home: the nature of the work which parents makes them exhausted, disconnection of the language used at school and home, parents' lack of knowledge of which tools to use for which type of emergent literacy skills to be enhanced and lack of enough knowledge of emergent literacy skills to be enhanced to pre-primary children. In contrast, Edward et al. (2022), in their study on parental involvement in children's acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills, were hindered by limited parental support and a home learning environment. The differences may be because Edward and others focused on rural parents, while the present study

focused on urban parents. On the other hand, Edward et al. (2022) concurred with the present study on the lack of parents' knowledge about pre-primary education as a challenge. One of the findings of the present study is that parents lack enough knowledge of emergent literacy skills to enhance to pre-primary children. Similarly, Axelsson et al. (2020) also reported that parents lack basic literacy skills and are unable to help their children prosper in school.

Theoretically, the present study supports the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler parental involvement model and sociocultural theory. Parents in this study see the importance of involving themselves in their children's education, particularly in enhancing emergent literacy skills. The present study contradicts Silinskas et al (2020), who found that home engagement was strongest for families with low household incomes.

Conclusion

Based on their professionalism demand, academic staff are willing to be involved in their children's education. As a result, parents' education influences parents' involvement in their children's education. Parents at home promote emergent literacy skills that are code-focused, encompassing alphabet letter names, sounds, writing (both uppercase and lowercase), and vocabulary, which is meaning-focused. Parents acknowledge the challenges associated with enhancing emergent literacy skills in their children, yet they recognise the importance of their involvement in enhancing these skills and integrating learning activities into daily routines.

Recommendations

The study recommends the need for parent-teacher interaction and collaboration in helping children develop emergent literacy skills. Furthermore, there is a need to examine the role of parents' gender in enhancing emergent literacy at home.

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