



Parental Involvement in Children’s Initial Literacy Learning in Primary Schools in Mungwi District, Zambia

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Abstract

This study sought to establish what primary schools were doing to ensure that there was parental involvement in children’s literacy learning. A qualitative design methodology was utilized, and data was collected through interviews, document analysis, and focus group discussions. The study found that parental involvement in children’s initial literacy learning in many schools was only achieved through the strategies put in place by some cooperating partners working with the schools such as Read to Succeed, a nongovernmental organization supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The strategies put in place by these partners enabled teachers and parents to work together so that parents were able to actively get involved in their children’s initial literacy learning. The study recommends that teacher education seriously consider including components on parental involvement in the college literacy syllabus to enhance teachers’ involvement of parents in children’s initial literacy learning in primary schools. The study further recommends that parental involvement in children’s literacy learning should be embedded in the school curriculum to enhance the commitment of teachers and school administrators.

Keywords: parental involvement, initial literacy, learning, primary schools, children

Introduction

Research has shown that educational success has its foundation in the literacy abilities of learners (Gove & Cvelich, 2011). Literacy provides access to personal enrichment through literature, culture, and social interaction (MESVTEE, 2013). Well-cultivated literacy abilities are critical in the development of other intellectual and social domains in children (Dearing et al., 2006). Research on education and economics has also revealed that the degree of learner achievement has a direct link to a country’s economic growth. For example, Hanusheck and Woessman (2009), in their study titled “The Role of Cognitive Skills in Economic Development,” found that a percent increase in learners’

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attainment of basic literacy skills translated into a 0.3 percentage point increase in annual growth rate of a country's economy. De Beer (2004) also suggested that for the sake of one's future, development and cultivation of a comprehensive literacy that enables people to perform necessary skills and live full and meaningful lives is what is desperately needed. This is the case for Zambia, whose literacy attainment levels have in the past gone down, as recent study reports show that many children exit primary education without acquiring basic literacy skills to enhance their productivity on the labor market (MESVTEE, 2013; SRNDP, 2014).

In the Grade 5 National Assessment Survey of 2006 and 2008, reading achievements were below 40% in both English and Zambian languages (35.3% and 39.4% respectively). Another Grade 5 National Assessment Survey and the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) Survey for 2010 also showed poor reading and writing abilities among learners. Equally, the South African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ III) of 2010 noted that among Grade 6 learners that were tested in reading, only 27.4% were able to read at a basic competency level (MESVTEE, 2013). Although these studies did not focus on lower primary grades, the results could be a reflection of poor foundation in the early grades. In support of this, a 2012 pilot study on the EGRA also found that about 90% of second graders tested were not able to read or recognise a single word, even in their mother tongue (SRNDP, 2014). This is not without a number of interventions, such as the primary reading program through which the New Breakthrough to Literacy (NBTL) was introduced in a bid to help children learn to read fluently and write easily and accurately in a local language. The NBTL course was followed by a course that was termed Step into English (SITE) and was aimed at helping learners to read and write in English in the second grade. This was followed by a course called Read on Course (ROC) which was meant to consolidate the reading and writing skills acquired in the first grade in Zambian languages and second grade in English. However, despite these and other interventions, such as Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programs that teachers undertake at school level and other higher institutions of learning, there has been no significant improvement in reading, as attested to in the recent studies (Banda, 2012; Folotiya-Jere et al., 2014; Matafwali, 2010; Mubanga, 2012; Mwanza, 2012).

In 2013, the Ministry of Education noted with concern that one of the reasons learners were failing to learn content materials is that many were not able to read and write (MESVTEE, 2013). The Ministry acknowledges that literacy is a tool that society uses in "social, economic and political development" (MESVTEE, 2013, p.18). This is why literacy is one of the key competencies and core learning areas of the curriculum aimed at building a foundation for further learning (MESVTEE, 2013). However, teachers alone cannot achieve this task. Parents may need to support their children. To do this, they may need some encouragement and guidance from primary schools.

Some related studies include a study by Kangombe (2013) which focused on home-school partnerships that facilitated literacy development—in particular, strategies or techniques teachers used to partner with parents to help develop the literacy skills of pupils in the fifth and seventh grades in Lusaka's high-density area. While Kangombe's study looked at home-school partnerships that facilitated literacy development in the upper primary grades in an urban district, this study focused on what primary schools were doing to ensure that there was parental involvement (PI) in children's initial literacy learning in the preparatory grades (grades 1–4) in a rural district. A study by Kabali (2014) focused on the role of the home environment in the acquisition of reading skills in Zambia. This study, however, focused on what primary schools were doing to ensure that there was PI in children's initial literacy learning. Other studies that linked literacy to home environment had a bias on emergent literacy (Kaunda, 2013; Musonda, 2011; Zimba, 2012). While the previous studies reviewed the potential of home environment in enhancing literacy skills and thus provided a basis for PI in

children's initial literacy learning, this research sought to extend past research by focusing on what primary schools were doing to ensure that parents were involved in children's initial literacy learning in primary schools.

Related Literature

Parental Involvement and Literacy Success

PI is one of the support strategies that can enhance literacy achievement in school-going children. According to the Harvard Family Research Project (2007), parents and families are responsible for supporting literacy because they influence children's performance by modeling, providing emotional attachment to learning, and enhancing learning achievement. For example, when parents read to their children, they help them appreciate the value of reading and encourage them to learn how to read so that they can become independent readers. Bonci et al. (2010) observed that the family and the home environment have a powerful impact on children's educational achievement, especially in language and literacy development. A study by Enemuo & Obidike (2013) in Nigeria also reviewed those activities in which parents engage their children on a daily basis help them build their understanding of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Harris and Goodall (2007) also observed that there is a strong relationship between PI in learning activities at home and children's cognitive achievement, particularly in the early years. However, a study by Murungi et al. (2014) in Kenya found that schools were not making enough efforts to involve parents in children's literacy learning.

Teachers as Initiators of Parental Involvement in Children's Literacy Learning

Successful PI in children's initial literacy learning is largely dependent on teachers who form the link between parents and schools (Goodall et al., 2011; Sanders & Sheldon, 2009). However, Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) argued that "Schools and their teachers are not the only sources with potential to nurture or inhibit fruitful connections between parents and teachers. Children could well play a dynamic role in this process as they are known to do in other aspects of their experience and development" (p. 46). While it is true that children have the potential to nurture or inhibit fruitful connections between parents and teachers, school-related actions of children are largely dependent on what teachers do to prepare children to work with parents. Glasgow and Whitney (2009) also stated that how much parents get involved in children's learning is dependent on how often schools reach out to parents. This may suggest that schools have a mandate to devise ways that enhance PI in children's learning; for instance, Lumpkin (2010) suggested that it may be effective for schools to conduct regular orientation sessions with parents during which teachers can explain to the parents how they can provide meaningful support to their children. Consistent with this, Adelman and Taylor (2007) argued that meaningful involvement of parents requires specialized expertise without which there can be no meaningful involvement. However, schools must play a role to enhance it. Therefore, this study sought to establish what roles schools play in enhancing such involvements by parents.

Parental Involvement and Teacher Training

Although successful PI in children's initial literacy learning is largely dependent on teachers, the ability of the teachers to support effective involvement of parents is dependent on their understanding of the context and the processes of involvement (Hoover-Dempsey, 2010). This may suggest that teachers on their own without undergoing any training may not know how to effectively involve parents in children's literacy teaching (Agronick et al., 2009). They may require training and coaching, especially when working with parents whose background is different from theirs (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2010). A study by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) revealed that the reason family involvement

programs were often not fully implemented was a lack of staff training in skills related to working with families. Therefore, this study sought to establish if teachers had access to training on PI in literacy learning.

Theoretical Framework

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) proposed a model of parental involvement process which tries to answer three essential questions: (1) why parents become involved in their children's learning, (2) what parents do when they are involved, and (3) how parents' involvement makes a positive contribution to learners' success (The Parent Institute, 2012).

The model is divided into five levels. Level 1 of the PI process addresses factors that motivate parents to be involved in their children's education. This level is subdivided into another level (1.5), which brings out the forms of involvement that parents may choose to be involved in. Level 2 looks at learning mechanisms that parents engage in during their involvement in their children's learning. Level 3 focuses on how learners perceive their parents' involvement in their education/learning activities while Level 4 addresses important learning outcomes that are influenced by parents' involvement in their learning. Level 5 looks at learner achievement, the result of PI in learning. According to this model, these factors complement each other to determine the form and frequency of PI in children's education (The Parent Institute, 2012). Although this is the case, the focus of this study is on how each of these may work as a single entity to influence parents' involvement in their children's initial literacy learning, without disputing the idea that each of these is affected by the other. Of particular interest to this study was Level 1, which comprises three major constructs that motivate parents to be involved. These are (1) parents' construction of their parental role in their children's learning, (2) parents' sense of self-efficacy for helping the child to succeed in school, and (3) general invitations, opportunities, and demands for PI presented by the child, the teachers and the child's school.

Parents' Construction of Their Parental Role

According to the model, the parents' decision to be involved in their children's learning is dependent on what they believe to be their role in their child's education and progress (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Thus, the more the school makes parents understand their role in their children's learning, the more successful PI in children's learning becomes. This means that perceptions that parents have about their children's learning would seem to be the most important aspects that influence parents to be involved in children's education. This has implications on what schools should do to ensure there is PI in children's initial literacy learning.

Parents' Sense of Self-Efficacy

Parents' self-efficacy for helping their child to succeed in education is concerned with whether parents believe that their involvement can bring positive outcomes in their child's learning. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) described self-efficacy as the extent to which an individual is able to make a difference. However, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) explain that "Self-efficacy beliefs are concerned not with skills" (p. 18) "but with beliefs about what one can do with the sub skills that one possesses" (Bandura, 1986a, p. 368). This means that, although parents might have skills and potential to influence children's learning, as has already been established in earlier studies (Kabali, 2014; Kaunda, 2013; Zimba, 2012), beliefs held by parents on their ability to help improve children's literacy outcomes is what would determine their decision to be involved and has implications on what schools should do.

Invitations, Demands and Opportunities Presented by the Child and the Child's School

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) model of PI posits that opportunities, invitations, and demands made by the child and the child's school are the factors that influence parents to be involved in their child's learning. In their revised 2005 model, level 1 addresses the need for schools to welcome and respect parents, with the aim of helping to motivate them to get involved in their children's learning, helping them feel invited to participate, and respecting the factors that affect PI in children's learning (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005). The child's school, as well as the child himself or herself, ought to invite their parents to be involved in their literacy learning. Equally, the school environment must be inviting, and teachers' behavior should be welcoming and facilitative for PI (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). This is significant in establishing how primary schools ensure that there is PI in children's initial literacy learning. While the study is on literacy learning, the theoretical framework is on learning in general and, therefore, makes it more informative than the case could have been if it was limited to literacy learning alone.

Methods

The purpose of the study was to establish what primary schools were doing to ensure that parents were involved in their children's initial literacy learning in primary schools. To achieve this, multiple sources of data were used (Tracy, 2010), as is typical in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). This included interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, all of which enhanced triangulation, which in turn helped the researcher to compare and cross check results for consistency (Patton, 1990) and fair interpretation of the results (Pacho, 2015). The main questions addressed in this study were:

1. How do primary schools ensure that parents have opportunities for involvement in their children's initial literacy learning?
2. What aspects of the primary teacher training literacy syllabus are aimed at addressing how teachers can involve parents in their children's literacy learning?

Study Sample/Sampling

The sample for the study was conveniently drawn, as the researcher wanted two urban and two rural schools that were within and beyond the radius of 12 kilometers from the District Education Board Secretary's (DEBS) office respectively. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants. At the school level, four teachers teaching Grades 1–4 were chosen, and ten grades 3–4 children were included in the sample, together with head teachers of each of the selected schools. This translated into 16 teachers, 40 pupils and 4 head teachers in the study. The study also included two standard officers from the District Education and the Provincial Education offices respectively. One District Resource Center Coordinator (DRCC), one Provincial Resource Center Coordinator (PRCC), and a Head of Department (HOD) in teaching language and literacy in one primary College of Education were also part of the study. This brought the number of participants from teacher education to three. Two parents from the Parent–Teachers' Association (PTA) top leadership positions and eight parents of pupils in Grades 1–4 were included in the sample. The choice of parents was based on the number of children recruited in the study. This translated into ten parents per school and the total number of parents in the study came to 40. Parents' educational level ranged from four to twelve years in school with the majority having reached the ninth grade. The expected number of participants in the study was 105. However, one teacher was out of the station at the time of the research. All the participants

were familiar with Bemba, a local language used for initial literacy and the mother tongue of most parents and children in the area. Bemba is also widely spoken in the country.

Data Collection Strategies

Interviews

Semistructured interviews were conducted face to face with heads of primary schools, teachers of Grades 1–4, the District Education Standards Officer (DESO), Senior Education Standards Officer (SESO) of languages, DRCC, PRCC, and a college lecturer. Collecting data through interviews was advantageous, for interviews are known to be reasonably objective (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010) and flexible (Patton, 2002). Besides, semistructured interviews leave room for probing (Hancock, et al., 2007) thereby allowing for clarity and detail. For all participants, the interviews took place at their places of work (offices), except for one who opted to be interviewed at home for the sake of convenience. The following process was followed to conduct the interviews:

The researcher started by welcoming the participants and introducing herself as a way of putting the participants at ease. Thereafter, the researcher introduced the research to the participants, explaining the topic and the reason for the research, adhering to ethical guidelines (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). After participants had given their consent, the researcher began the interview, starting with the more general questions to allow participants to open up and provide answers in full (Richie & Lewis, 2003) and then moving to more specific ones.

During the interview, the researcher made handwritten notes, coupled with recording in the case of participants who permitted the researcher to tape record. The researcher made an effort to enhance an in-depth elicitation of information by trying to frame the questions clearly and by probing. Towards the end of the interview, the researcher notified the participants that the interview was coming to an end to ease the atmosphere and return to normal interactions (Richie & Lewis, 2003). The interview ended with thanking the participants for their participation, reassuring them that data collected would be put into safe custody and that it was purely for academic purposes.

Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions were conducted for parents and children (Creswell, 2007). Each of the focus groups was comprised of 10 people, a number that the researcher felt was small enough to allow for participants' adequate sharing of views and big enough to allow for divergent views (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). As for the interviews above, the researcher began by introducing herself and the topic of the research, as well as its purpose. The participants were also taken through the ethical guidelines, after which they gave their consent to take part in the study. All focus group discussions were conducted in Bemba, since it was the language in which all participants were fluent. Later, the responses were translated to English by the researcher. During the process, the researcher was mindful of group dynamics, knowing that some people can dominate the discussion (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). This helped the researcher to involve everyone. Individual participants were given a chance to "express their views without any interruption" in the way their responses were coming out (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 145). All the responses were recorded verbatim.

Document Analysis

The literacy syllabus used in primary teacher training was checked and analyzed to establish whether it included any topics related to PI in children's initial literacy learning in primary schools. The records of continuous professional development activities that had been conducted at the school level were

also obtained. The researcher was given access to the School Inset Record Book (SIR book), which was checked and analyzed for content on PI in children's literacy learning. The idea was to establish whether teachers had access to training on PI as a way of facilitating the involvement of parents in children's initial literacy learning in primary schools.

Data Analysis

Data was thematically analyzed by coding significant themes in the participants' thoughts and reflections (Clark, 2006; Kombo & Tromp, 2006). The cut and paste in Microsoft Word coding procedure was used to help discover recurring patterns (Suter, 2012) in the data and from these, to develop themes, following a back-and-forth process.

Findings

Research question 1: How Primary Schools Ensure that Parents Have Opportunities for Involvement in Their Children's Initial Learning

a) School–Community Partnership Program

The study established that each primary school visited had a School–Community Partnership Program (SCPP), an initiative of Read to Succeed (RTS), through which primary schools were linked to the community. Most participants revealed that invitations to parents to participate in various literacy-related activities both at school and at home were through the SCPP. A school administrator explained, "Through the SCPP, we invite parents to see how the children are learning. Under the same program, we have plans to construct a reading shelter within the school where parents can come and read stories to their children."

The study also revealed that under the SCPP, each school visited had a School–Community Partnership Committee (SCPC) which spearheaded PI in children's learning. According to the terms of reference provided to the researcher, one of the responsibilities of the SCPC was to ensure that the educational interests and welfare of children are given priority at all times in the areas of reading and writing. The committee met every month to plan and review PI activities in children's learning, noting that "A SCPC is in place and is in the forefront to spearhead PI activities" [School Administrator].

Invitation to Parents to Participate in Literacy Events at School

Invitations to parents to participate in literacy events at school included those requesting parents to attend Parents' Open Day and International World Literacy Day (IWLD) celebrations and Reading Circles (reading competitions) on closing day or any other selected day. For example, one teacher stated, "We invite parents to celebrate world literacy day with the children. During the celebrations, parents have an opportunity to observe their children perform literacy activities such as reading and writing." One school administrator also said, "On World Literacy Day, we call parents to come and celebrate with the learners and during the process, they see how their children are reading."

Parents and children noted the same thing. Parents stated that teachers invited them to attend children's reading competitions and International World Literacy Day (IWLD) celebrations, during which they had a chance to witness their children perform reading activities. Children explained that on closing day, teachers asked them to bring their parents to school so that they could attend their children's reading competitions. The same was the case for the IWLD celebrations.

The study also established that inviting parents to attend literacy events gave them an opportunity to read to the children as role models and to perform drama for the children: "We hold

literacy day celebrations and ask parents to see pupils reading. During Open Days, we ask parents to come and read in front of pupils as models. We also engage parents in poetry and drama performance during open days” [School Administrator].

One parent in a focus group discussion also said,

“Tulasangwako uko abana balecimfyanya mukubelenga pampela ya term. Ici cilatupelako akashita kakumona ifyo abana balebelenga. Ngakuli open day, balatupelako inshita yakubelengela abana nokwangalako ifyangalo ifyalola kukufunda abana ubukankala bwaba mukwishiba ukubelenga nokulemba”. (“We attend reading competitions at the end of the term. This gives us a chance to observe how children are reading. During school open days, we are given a chance to read to our children and perform some drama to teach children the importance of reading.”)

However, participants did not state how primary schools prepared parents to participate in such events apart from giving them formal invitations to attend the events.

The study also revealed that asking parents to attend literacy events at school also gave them an opportunity to see how their children were progressing in their literacy learning.

b) Engaging Parents in the Preparation of Children’s Reading Materials

The study established that parents were contributing learning and teaching materials in support of literacy lessons at the request of teachers and school administrators. Teachers were asking parents to come up with words and to compose traditional stories for use in the learning and teaching of literacy in primary schools. As expressed by one school administrator, “We ask parents to write storybooks in local languages and bring them to school. Sometimes, we request parents to prepare words for reading, which children read during reading competitions, and children who read well are rewarded.”

The parents and children also described the same thing, as expressed in one focus group discussion:

Bakafundisha balatupela umulimo wakupenya amashivi ayakubeleenga abana mufyakucimfyanya uko naifve tusangwa nokumonako uko abana balebeleenga aya yene mashivi. Limo balatwipusha ukulemba ututabo twamalyashi nokuleeta kusukulu pakuti abana balebelenga.” [Parent]

(Teachers assign us work to come up with reading words for children to use during reading competitions, which we also attend and see how they are reading. Sometimes, they ask us to write storybooks and bring them to school so that children can be reading.)

However, such stories and word lists were not offered to the researcher. Some parents also stated that they did not know how to write, and as such, they could not participate in the preparation of children’s reading materials, as expressed in a focus group discussion:

Nangu bakafundisha batweba ukulemba utumalyashi nangu amashivi yakubelenga abana, tulafilwa pamulandu wakukana ishiba ukulemba na ukubeleenga. Ecimo cine namufyakubelenga ifyo bakafundisha bapeela abana ifyakubelengela. Cilefwaikwa bakafundisha ukumona ngakuti batwismilako isukulu hya mwasibukeni pakutwafwako ukusambilila ukubelenga nokulemba. [parent]

(“Even though teachers ask us to write stories for the children to read, we fail to write because of illiteracy. This also applies to reading materials that teachers give children for us to read for them. There is need for teachers to consider opening adult classes to help us learn how to read and write.”)

The study also revealed that some parents were not responsive to the request. For example, one school administrator said, “We invite parents to come up with stories, but the response is not very good.”

c) Encouraging Parents to Attend Their Children's Literacy Learning Sessions at School

The study also found that primary schools encouraged parents to attend their children literacy learning through the SCPP. However, some participants said that this was done through Family Pac, a program that had been established by United Nations International Children's Education Fund (UNICEF), explaining, "Teachers are asked to follow what was in Family Pac, where they invited parents to be in class and discern if there are any difficulties" (PRCC).

Parents and children were also in agreement with this idea. They stated that primary schools gave them freedom to visit the school and observe their children learning any time they felt like it. One parent said:

Kusukulu bakafundisha nga baleefunda tulekala tulemfwa ifyo baleefunda. Twalikwata insambu shakuya kusukulu insbita ili yonse nokuyamona ifyo abana balesambilila ukulemba na ukubeleenga. [parent]

("At school when teachers are teaching, we sit and listen to what they are teaching. We are free to visit classes any time we like and observe how children are learning how to read and write.")

Likewise, one child also said, "*Baleeta abafyashi mukumona ifyo leemba nefyo ubelenga mu class.*" ("They [teachers] invite our parents to see how we read and write in class.")

The study further established that teachers expected parents to make some comments in the form of praise and suggestions regarding their children's literacy learning and not just sit in class and observe. The study also found that invitations to parents to attend their children's initial literacy learning helped parents to learn and appreciate how traditional games and stories could be used to teach children how to read and write. Others said that observing children learning in a local language helped them to develop confidence that they could also teach their children at home:

Ukusangwa uko abana balesambilia cilatwafwilishako ukusambilila ifyo ifyangalo na utushimi fngabomba mukufunda abana ukubelenga na ukulemba. [parent]

("Attending children's learning sessions helps us to learn how traditional games and stories can be of help in teaching children how to read and write.")

However, some participants stated that some parents did not bother to see their children learning, saying "Even when they (parents) have been asked to be visiting classes to check on how their children are learning, they do not come". One parent; a member of the SCPC also put it this way: "*Lyonse tulasosa ukuti abafyashi baleisa pakuti basangwako nomba kubafyashi kwaliba umulele.*" ("We often talk about the need for parents to come and attend but there is inertia on the part of parents.")

Some primary schools had put up some measures to ensure that parents attended their children's literacy learning sessions. These included asking parents to log in the parents' visitation book and write their observations, putting a penalty on parents who did not want to see their children learning and asking teachers to record their interaction with parents.

d) Communication with Parents

Communication involved inviting parents to discuss with them their children's literacy performance, showing parents their children's literacy progress and discussing their children's literacy-related problems. On inviting parents to discuss their children's literacy performance, one teacher said, "We invite parents to school to come and share with them their children's performance in literacy. We invite parents when a child performs poorly in literacy."

Parents in a focus group discussion were also in support, as seen from what one parent said: “*Bakafundisba limolimo balatwita mukulanshanya pafyo abana besu baleebomba mu literacy. Balatulanga ifyo abana baleeya pantanshi.*” (“Sometimes teachers invite us to discuss with them how our children are performing in literacy. They show us how our children are progressing.”)

As for discussion of children’s literacy-related problems, one teacher said:

We call the parent if a child has a problem, and we try to identify areas where they can help by discussing together. When a child is absent, you call parents to find out because absenteeism is a serious cause for poor literacy and so we call parents so that they help us ensure that their children attend school regularly.

It was also found that primary schools mainly used general invitations to invite parents to school and not necessarily an invitation for literacy activities per se. Schools used development of the school as the reason for inviting parents to school. The language used in the invitation letters was, however, collaborative in that parents were addressed as partners, as seen in the sample sentence: “We invite you to come to school so that we can discuss some developmental issues concerning our school.”

e) Giving Children Homework

The study found that all schools gave children literacy homework to be done with the help of parents at home. This included word-building from sounds learned in class, story composition, and sentence construction. For example, one teacher said, “When teaching new sounds, I give learners homework and tell them to ask their parents to help them identify and formulate words with that particular sound.” Another teacher with a similar view put it this way, “When learning a particular sound, learners are told to ask parents to help them make words that are related to that particular sound. For those in Grade 4, they even make stories.”

It was also found that teachers were asking parents to sign their children’s literacy homework as acknowledgment of their involvement. However, the type of homework exemplified assumed that parents knew how to read, and schools did not state how they involved those who could not read.

Parents agreed that teachers gave pupils homework, which included books for parents to read to children at home and requests for parents to check their children’s exercise books. They also stated that their children were asking for help from them in their literacy activities, such as teaching them how to read and telling them stories. However, some parents felt that children did not regularly ask for help with literacy-related activities. They stated that primary grade children were the ones who asked more often.

In addition, some parents expressed a lack of knowledge of how to help children with homework, explaining that they sometimes asked their children to ask other people to help. Children agreed that teachers gave them different homework activities as a way of involving parents in their initial literacy learning:

Ba teacher nga batupela homework limbi ukupaanga imiseela batweba ati abakung’anda baye mvafivako. Nga ba teacher batupela home-work, batweba ati takuli knyaisangila uye eba abakalamba boobe bakwafiveko.

(“When teachers give us homework such as making sentences, they tell us that people at home should help you. When teachers give us homework, they tell us not to go and answer by ourselves but to go and ask your older brothers/sisters to help you.”)

However, the children expressed that sometimes their parents told them that they did not know how to help, as expressed in the following:

Nshishibe ifyakucita, mipushe bamunonko nangu abanobe. Nshaishiba ukubelenga. Finshi mvacisambilila. Nafikosa, bushe tabacimipelako example?

(“I do not know what to do, ask your brothers and sisters. I do not know how to read. What did you learn? It is difficult. Were you not given an example?”)

Asked how teachers prepared them (children) to interact with their parents with homework, the children had different views, some of which were:

Batwebafye ati muyeeba abakunganda bamwafweko. (“They merely ask us to tell people at home to help us.”)

Balanda ati nganawishiba uisangile wemwine. (“They say, “If you know, find answers on your own.”)

Balanda ati takuli kuleka abafyashi bakulembela. Kubepushafye bakulangako ifyakulemba. (“They say, ‘do not let parents write for you but just ask them to show you how to write.’”)

Balanda ati mwikale nomunobe musange. (“They say, “Sit with your friend and work out the answers.”)

Some teachers felt that not much was being done to ensure that parents had opportunities for involvement in their children’s initial literacy learning. Asked why this was the case, some attributed this to parents’ negative attitudes while others to their limited knowledge of PI.

f) Monitoring of Pupils’ Literacy Exercise Books and Teachers’ Preparations

It was found that school administrators monitored teacher preparations to ensure that teachers included teaching aids to stick in classes for the inspiration of parents while teachers monitored children’s exercise books to check for parents’ signatures, which served as a guarantee of parents’ participation in their children’s literacy homework. One school administrator had this to say:

We monitor pupils’ books and the preparations of teachers to check for homework on literacy. We encourage teachers to design good teaching aids to stick in class for the inspiration of parents when they visit classes. We also check for parents’ signatures under the given work in pupils’ books.

However, not all the parents were able to sign the pupils’ exercise books to guarantee their participation in their children’s homework.

For the PEO official from Standards office, PI in children’s initial literacy learning was achieved by embracing the efforts of cooperating partners:

We are open to the initiatives of cooperating partners such as Read to Succeed. Teachers are also asked to follow what was in New Break Through to Literacy (NBTL) Family Pac where they invite parents to be in class and discern if there are any difficulties.

It was also found that some officials at Provincial Education and District Education offices were working in collaboration with RTS to monitor what was going on in primary schools. For example, responding to a question on what mechanisms had been put in place to ensure that there was PI in children’s initial literacy learning in primary schools, both officials from Teacher Education Department (TED), at PEO and DEBS, agreed that monitoring to see what was going on in schools was being done through the RTS Program.

However, there was a mismatch on the views of officials from Standards Office at PEO and DEBS office and those from TED in the same offices. Some officials from the Standards office at

DEBS believed that PI in children's initial literacy learning was the responsibility of TED and the Planning office at DEBS:

The office is not doing anything. Issues to do with PI in children's learning are not under this office. The work is done by planning and Teacher Education. They are the ones working with RTS. For us, ...we have very little.

After further probing on what was being done in regard to monitoring by Standards Office, the same DEBS official said, "We do not have contacts with schools. We have never done any monitoring." It was also found that the Standards Office felt left out in what was being done to ensure that there was PI in children's initial literacy learning; a situation they believed to be a hindrance to the sustenance and success of PI in children's literacy learning in primary schools:

The program spearheading PI, for example, RTS leave out the department that is supposed to implement academic and curriculum delivery. Sustainability is at stake because the District Education Standards Office is left out. Because we are not involved, there is a gap. There should be a system flowing from the DEBS office. [District Standards Officer]

Research Question 2: Aspects of PI in the Primary Teacher Training Literacy Syllabus that Address How Teachers Can Involve Parents in Their Children's Literacy Learning

It was established that the college literacy syllabus did not include any methodological components to empower student teachers with knowledge and skills for involving parents in their children's initial literacy learning, raising doubts as to whether or not teachers had essential knowledge and skills to involve parents in their children's initial literacy learning. One lecturer, who said that as lecturers, they had scant knowledge on PI, further confirmed this doubt:

Limited information is passively obtained from workshops and is not enough to make us understand the various dimensions of parental involvement. We only train teachers on how to teach literacy from grade one and simply make mention that teachers should avail information to parents.

On whether or not teachers had the knowledge and skills needed to involve parents in their children's initial literacy learning in primary schools, one official from the DEBS office said:

We invite teachers in the transition phase and try to sensitize them on the importance of involving parents in their children's literacy learning. We also conduct ongoing sensitization through grade meetings, which are conducted at school or district level. Teachers have been trained and given a guideline on how to involve parents in homework.

The study further established that teachers had not received any training on PI in children's literacy learning from teacher training, workshops or Continuous Professional Development activities. Out of the 15 recruited in the study, only 4 reported having received some training through the RTS program. One teacher stated, "I did not learn anything during teacher training, but through RTS I have learned something." After further probing on what topics of parental involvement were covered by RTS, one teacher said, "Read to Succeed emphasizes giving homework, inviting parents to see how their children are learning and giving children storybooks to read to their parents."

The study also established that noninclusion of PI as a component in teacher training was a challenge to Provincial and District Education officials, teachers, and lecturers. For example, one officer from the Provincial Education Office stated that teacher preparation was inadequate and that teachers had limited knowledge on PI in children's initial literacy learning. A teacher with a similar view also said:

As teachers, we do not have adequate knowledge on parental involvement. Most of the things we do are on a trial basis. We know that it is good. However, we were not trained on what is involved. But Read to Succeed has enlightened us a bit.

A PEO official from Standards Office also expressed that lecturers did not have adequate knowledge, an idea that was also expressed by a lecturer teaching literacy in a college of education, who stated, “Our knowledge as lecturers is equally limited. As a teacher trainer, I simply follow the literacy syllabus that has no component on parental involvement.”

The document checklist was another instrument used to establish if teacher training included components on PI in children’s initial literacy learning. According to the analysis, the content did not include any component on PI in children’s literacy learning.

Equally, the School Inset Record Book in which Continuous Professional Development (CPD) activities are recorded showed that CPD activities conducted in primary schools for the previous two years from this study did not capture any topic related to PI in children’s literacy learning. Out of the four schools, only one school’s record of CPD meeting passively mentioned the need to set open days to facilitate interaction between parents and teachers and this was not pursued to define modalities of how this was to be done. Officials from DEBS and PEO Offices felt that inclusion of PI topics in CPD activities was the responsibility of teachers themselves.

Discussion of Findings

Cooperating partners, such as RTS, were reported to be the ones who were meeting some of the critical aspects of PI in children’s initial literacy learning. While this can be seen as positive, as they played a big role in this aspect, it can be also be argued that this mode of involvement is short-lived, as sustainability of these efforts remained questionable. However, the formation of the SCPP by RTS was a good initiative, as it set in motion PI in children’s initial literacy learning. Through this program, primary schools were able to meet one of the objectives for community participation, which is “strengthening community linkages” (MoE, 1996, p. 131) that is primary insofar as PI in children’s initial literacy learning is concerned. In this regard, the SCPP enabled primary schools to reach out to the community and initiate PI activities in support of children’s initial literacy learning (Holloway et al., 2008).

In addition to this, the existence of the SCPC under the SCPP was indicative of primary schools’ commitment to PI in children’s initial literacy learning at the grassroots level. This entails that primary schools had an established structure under which PI in children’s initial literacy learning was spearheaded. This is critical, as it can enhance commitment to PI in children’s initial literacy learning. By holding regular meetings, the committee was able to come up with various strategies through which primary schools reached out to the parents and involved them in various activities that supported their children’s initial literacy learning. These findings are consistent with Glasgow and Whitney (2009), who stated that how much parents get involved in children’s learning was dependent on how often schools reached out to parents. For primary schools in Mungwi District, this was made possible through the SCPC, which devised various strategies for PI in children’s literacy learning.

Encouraging parents to attend their children’s literacy learning sessions can be one way through which primary schools created an open, inviting, and welcoming environment for PI in children’s initial literacy learning (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). This was important, as it not only created parents’ opportunity for involvement in children’s literacy learning but also enabled parents to have access to capacity-building, as capacity-building opportunities are known to be

embedded in teaching and learning (Mapp & Kuttiner, 2013). By attending their children's initial literacy learning sessions, parents were able to have an experience of how literacy-supporting behaviors, such as singing and storytelling, can be used to enhance children's initial literacy learning at home. In this way, PI in children's initial literacy learning was enhanced.

As for the engagement of parents in the preparation of children's reading materials, primary schools enabled parents to use their expertise to contribute to their children's initial literacy learning. In this way, primary schools managed to do what Harris and Goodall (2007) referred to as harnessing what parents could do to help the school achieve its goal, which in this case is enhancing children's initial literacy learning. This is critical, as it can enhance the parents' role in their children's learning (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005). By asking parents to write stories and words for use in children's literacy learning activities, primary schools created an opportunity for parents to see themselves as partners in the learning of their children, contrary to the view that schools should do everything. This is even more true when parents see their own work being used by the school in the teaching of children, as was the case in this study. Therefore, engaging parents in the preparation of reading materials was one way through which primary schools helped develop and strengthen parents' beliefs on roles that they can perform to support their children's literacy learning in primary schools.

The absence of methodological components on PI involvement in children's initial literacy learning in teacher training meant that teachers came out of the college with little to no knowledge to enhance their involvement of parents in their children's literacy learning (Hoover-Dempsey, 2010). This may explain why teachers could not effectively guide students and parents on what they needed to do (Agronick et al., 2009). For example, the instructions teachers gave children on homework did not provide much information on what parents were required to do, contrary to good practice (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2010; Mapp & Kuttiner, 2013). Therefore, noninclusion of methodological components on PI in teacher training was a hindrance to PI in primary schools, as it deprived lecturers of the knowledge of how to motivate parents to be involved in their children's learning (Sandra & Hoover-Dempsey, 1997).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study demonstrates that efforts towards ensuring that parents were involved in their children's initial literacy learning in primary schools were largely limited to the initiatives of cooperating partners such as RTS. In this regard, PI may not be expected to make a meaningful contribution towards redressing the poor literacy achievement levels of Zambia's school-going children. Although working with cooperating partners appeared to have met some of the critical aspects of PI in children's initial literacy learning, sustainability of these efforts cannot be guaranteed as partners work within limited periods beyond which they have no control of what follows. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's models (1997, 2005) of parental involvement provide information on what teachers may need to know and understand in order to effectively involve parents in their children's literacy learning. Thus, this study affirms the idea that primary schools' staff on their own, without undergoing any training, may not effectively involve parents in their children's literacy learning. Therefore, teacher training is critical to PI in children's initial literacy learning in primary schools. In view of this, the study recommends the following:

- Teacher Education should consider inclusion of methodological components on PI in children's literacy learning in the college literacy syllabus to ensure teacher preparation on PI in initial literacy learning in primary schools.

- There is need to embed PI in the school curriculum to enhance the commitment of teachers and school administrators.
- The Ministry of General Education should come up with a comprehensive inservice program to empower lecturers with knowledge and skills on PI in children's literacy learning for effective involvement of parents.

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