

# Helping Children Experiencing Difficulties in Learning to Read Kiswahili: Perspectives of pre-primary teachers in Tanzania

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## Abstract

The study sought to ascertain the beliefs held by pre-primary teachers about why some children experience difficulties in learning to read Kiswahili and how they can be helped. Knowing about teachers' beliefs is a gateway to improving pre-primary reading instruction, the curriculum and learning to read early. The study was informed by the qualitative hermeneutic-phenomenology methodology, comprising 21 semi-structured interviews and 12 classroom observations. The findings reveal that although teachers were uncertain about what caused children's learning difficulties they cited factors both internal and external to the child which were outside the teachers' realm. Moreover, teachers believed in supplemental practices, parents' involvement, retention, forming mixed-ability groups in class, focusing on the 3Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic) and in-service teacher training as a 'toolkit' to help children who are finding learning to read difficult. The study recommends that teachers' professional development programmes should be on-going and that a systematic diagnostic mechanism is established to identify children with learning difficulties.

**Keywords:** Teachers' beliefs, finding learning to read difficult, pre-primary teachers

## Introduction

Since the adoption of the Dakar Framework for Action at the World Education Forum in August 2000 that reaffirmed the call for Education for All (EFA), there have been unprecedented efforts to put children through school. Millions of children, both girls and boys, are going to school now. Indeed, a few, if any, would doubt that Tanzania has made impressive gains in the EFA goals with respect to access and gender equity (UNESCO, EFA/GMR 2015). Moreover, a huge amount of human, financial and material resources has been invested in the education sector in Tanzania over the last decade (see Education Sector Development Programme – ESDP 2008-2017).

Despite the investment in education, research has demonstrated that children's competence in literacy and numeracy is well below expectations (Ngorosho, 2011; Uwezo, 2014; USAID, 2013, 2014). In 2011, it was reported that some primary school pupils moved to secondary school without having learnt how to read or write at the expected level. This is clearly reflected in the government's Education Statement No. 14, 2011, which required the heads of ordinary-level

secondary schools not to admit students who could not read or write. The statement reads:

In recent years, it has been noted that some students in some secondary schools cannot read or write. To correct this defect, MoEVT urges secondary school principals not to accept students who cannot read or write... students who are selected to join secondary education should be assessed on reading, writing and numeracy skills before they start their formal studies (MoEVT, 2011).

In 2013, USAID conducted a National Baseline Assessment for the 3Rs in Tanzania involving 2,266 standard 2 pupils. The study concluded that, although the early grade education programme in Tanzania was doing a good job of laying the foundation for learning, learning of the 3Rs is not at the expected level. Thus, there is much work to be done (USAID, 2013). Uwezo (2015) reported that the literacy rate in Kiswahili in all grades remains low. For example, in 2013, only 45% of grade III children were able to read a Standard 2-level story in Kiswahili. This was an increase of about 19% of children who passed (26%) the Kiswahili test in 2012. Only one in five grade III children were able to read a Standard 2-level story in English, and just three out of ten (31%) children were able to do Standard 2-level multiplication. About 60 percent of students were able to read 18 words in Kiswahili correctly (USAID, 2014).

Failure to learn to read or not read well early on endangers children's educational careers and they may not be able to meet the demands of globalization and a competitive economy (Snow *et al.*, 1998). Moreover, children who fail to learn to read are likely to drop out of the education system (Dubeck, Juke & Okello, 2012; Research Triangle Institute International, 2011). Research has also revealed that children who experience reading difficulties in early grades seldom catch up later (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2003).

Unless they learn to read at an early age, children cannot absorb more advanced skills and content that relies on reading. Children who do not learn to read in the early grades risk falling further and further behind in later ones, as they cannot absorb printed information, follow written instructions, or communicate well in writing. These challenges, rooted in poor reading skills, lead to disappointing results and they often drop out of the education system (Research Triangle Institute International, 2011, p. 1).

Indeed, this statement denotes the challenges of failing to learn to read early. Impliedly, the statement communicates the need to devote concerted efforts aimed at promoting reading skills at an early age.

Several factors could be attributed to reading failure or difficulties. These include inappropriate teaching and learning approaches, lack of early literacy experiences, large class sizes and poor facilities (Alcock *et al.*, 2000). Despite this information, little is known about pre-primary teachers' beliefs about why children are finding learning to read difficult and what could be done to help them in the context of pre-primary classes in Tanzania. The current study sought to narrow the gap of knowledge on this topic so as to find out what beliefs are held by teachers and the strategies they believe are effective for helping children experiencing difficulties in learning to read Kiswahili. Kiswahili is a phonetically consistent language, is the official language of Tanzania alongside English, is used nationally for communications and is the

medium of instruction in nearly all public pre-primary and primary schools (URT, 1995). Teachers' beliefs are an important part of their thinking and tend to have an effect on the plans and decisions they make about instructional methods and materials, their interaction with children, their behaviour in the classroom and students' learning outcomes (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Westwood *et al.*, 1997). Teachers' beliefs can influence their definition of teaching tasks (Nespor, 1987), and can lead them to emphasise, ignore or leave out aspects of the curriculum and the methods and advice of others (Orafi & Borg, 2009).

### **Pre-primary education in Tanzania**

Tanzania launched a new Education and Training Policy (ETP) in 2014. The policy states that the formal education system will comprise one year of pre-primary education, ten years of primary education, and two years and three and over years of secondary and higher education (1-10-2-3+), respectively. However, the policy has not been implemented in full. Instead, education and training practices to a large extent are currently being informed by the ETP of 1995 with a 2-7-4-2-3+ structure. Each primary school in Tanzania is expected to have a pre-primary class as an addendum. The 2014 ETP stresses that pupils (aged 5-6) should have pre-primary education before they are admitted to Standard I. Despite this emphasis, participation at this level of education seems to be below expectations and tends to fluctuate. This can be attributed to the community's lack of awareness of the importance of this level of education and the limited enrolment capacity of pre-primary schools/streams (MoEVT, 2012). The vision of pre-primary education is to have children with a strong foundation in the basic early skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing and counting.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Learning-to-read Difficulties**

In the course of learning to read, difficulties or failure should be expected. Learning-to-read difficulties may be grouped into two major categories, namely intrinsic and extrinsic (Catts, Kamhi & Adlof, 2012). Intrinsic factors are internal or child-related factors that may make learning to read difficult. These may include inherited reading difficulties as well as perceptual deficit in that reading is a complex neurological process requiring the sophisticated integration of many components in the brain, visual and auditory functioning and information processing (Catts *et al.*, 2012). Extrinsic/experiential factors are factors external to the learner, such as an adult not reading a book to a child, and inadequate and/or inappropriate reading materials. Children learn to read when exposed to print (Neuman, 2004), when parents spend time reading to their children, talking about a book or picture, providing adequate and appropriate instruction and the opportunity to practise their reading skills (Adams, 1990). If they lack such experiences in the early stages of learning to read they are likely to experience difficulty learning to read. However, the effect of lack of early literacy experiences seems to decrease with age, especially when children are given a good amount of quality reading instruction, including supplemental reading instruction (Catts *et al.*, 2012).

A study by Nierstheimer, Hopkins and Schmitt (1996) examined the beliefs held by prospective teachers pursuing a bachelor's degree at Midwestern University about why some children find learning to read difficult and what could be done to help them. The study found that participants attributed difficulties to two main factors: child-related and parents or home-

related factors. Child-related factors included beliefs such as something is wrong with the child in terms of vision, hearing loss, brain damage, lack of attention and concentration, or dyslexia. The parents or home-related factors reported by the study included lack of early or adequate literacy experiences, such as exposure to books at home and lack of parents' interest in their child's education. When participants were asked about what could be done to help children with such problems, they assigned responsibility to a person outside the classroom, such as reading specialists and parents.

Dubeck *et al.* (2012), for example, examined early primary literacy instruction in English and Kiswahili in Kenya. Forty grade 1 and 2 teachers participated in the study. The study involved 24 classroom observations and 22 interviews. The findings indicated that nearly all teachers cited pupils' irregular school attendance, lack of parental support, and the presence of many languages spoken in the context of the study. Furthermore, the study reported that teachers believed that grouping students [according to their abilities, i.e. mixed-ability grouping], manipulating the daily schedule, supplementing classroom resources and professional development were important strategies for helping children finding learning to read difficult. Although these studies are informative, research in the context of pre-primary teachers in Tanzania is scant. Thus, this paper focuses on this area.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to explore the beliefs held by pre-primary teachers about why some children experience difficulties in learning to read and what could be done to help such children. Knowing about pre-primary teachers' beliefs has the potential to inform curriculum reform, teacher educators and instructional practices. The study was guided by the following questions:

- What are pre-primary teachers' beliefs about why some children find learning to read Kiswahili difficult?
- What are pre-primary teachers' beliefs about what can be done to help children who experience difficulties in learning to read or are at risk of failing to learn to read Kiswahili?

### **Methods**

This paper is part of a PhD study, the fieldwork for which was conducted in 2012. The study used the qualitative research approach, hermeneutic phenomenology, in particular. The choice of this approach was based on the assumption that pre-primary teachers would have multiple beliefs about the topic under investigation. The study was conducted in Tanzania in two districts of Kilimanjaro region, namely Rombo and Mwanga. The districts were purposively selected because of variations in the reading performance test reported by Uwezo (2010). Uwezo's study involved 38 districts of Tanzania. Of the districts, Rombo performed well, ranked first, whereas Mwanga ranked 36. The concern for variation was to generate rich information for a comprehensive understanding of the research questions (Patton, 2002).

## Participants

Twenty-one government-owned primary schools with pre-primary classes were involved in this study. Three steps informed the selection of the participating schools. Firstly, two divisions from each participating district were selected. The District Education Officers of the selected districts were consulted and asked to nominate two divisions, one considered effective and the other the least effective in promoting pupils' acquisition of reading competence. As a result, four divisions were nominated. Secondly, four wards - two from each division - were selected on the basis of the criteria used for selecting the divisions. At this stage, the division education directors were involved in nominating the wards of interest. Thirdly, 21 schools from the selected wards were conveniently selected to participate in the study. Twenty-one pre-primary teachers from the selected schools were purposively selected to participate in the study. The selection was based on the fact that each selected school had one pre-primary class, which was taught by one teacher. Table 1 presents the teachers' background information.

Table 1: *Participants' Background Information*

<i>Teacher Background Information</i>						
Gender	Male	01	01	00	01	03
	Female	05	04	05	04	18
Education	Primary	03	04	00	03	10
	Secondary (O-Level)	03	01	05	02	11
Teaching Qualification	Not attained	05	05	00	05	15
	Grade A	01	00	05	00	06
Pre-primary training	1 day seminar	-	-	01	-	01
	2 weeks	01	-	-	-	01
	3 months	-	-	-	01	01
	1 year	01(Preschool)	-	-	(preschool training)	01
	1 year	-	-	-	-	01
	None	04	05	04	01	16
					(preschool training)	03
Years of Pre-primary teaching	Less than a year	01 (6 months)	-	-	-	01
	1 - 5	02	03	04	01	10
	6 -10	02	01	-	04	07
	10+	01	01	01	-	03
Years of primary teaching	1 - 5	-	-	-	-	-
	6 -10	-	-	-	-	-
	10+	01	-	05	-	06

As the table indicates, only three participants were males. Of the participants, ten had received primary education whereas 11 had received ordinary level secondary education. Only six participants had been trained as primary school teachers with Teacher Grade III 'A' certification. The majority of the participants had never received any formal teacher education training. The table further indicates that the majority of participants had more than a year's pre-

primary teaching experience, and six of them had taught in primary schools for more than 10 years. Only one participant reported to have taught for less than a year.

### **Techniques used to generate information**

The study employed a combination of methods to generate data, namely, semi-structured interviews, direct classroom observation, and post-observation interviews. This was to echo Pajares (1992), who contends that, "...reasonable inferences about beliefs require assessments of what individuals say, intend, and do...not to do so calls into question the validity of the findings and the value of the study". Twenty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with pre-primary teachers. The interviews were conducted in Kiswahili, the medium of instruction in the majority of public pre-primary schools in Tanzania. All interviews were conducted in the classroom for 45 to 60 minutes after pre-primary pupils had left. All the interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's consent to preserve the participant's actual words.

Twelve out of 21 pre-primary teachers—three from each participating ward—were observed in at least two actual reading lessons. The focus of observation was on the physical setting, teachers' behaviour, instructional activities and possible influencing factors, and the materials employed during the reading lessons. The decision to observe this number of teachers was based on convenience. Nevertheless, purposeful stratified sampling guided the selection to ensure that four main parameters were represented: ward, sex, teachers' educational background and number of years' pre-primary teaching experience. The prime reason for this sampling frame was to gather as rich information as possible from teachers with varying backgrounds to generate a comprehensive picture of reading instructional practices.

Observations lasted for 25 to 50 minutes. The lessons were video-recorded. The researcher was aware that his presence in the classroom and recording might problematize the 'normalcy', 'naturalness' and 'authenticity' of the data to be generated (Health *et al.*, 2011), which might lead to invalid results and conclusions. To minimize this effect, observation was done on more than one occasion, which might have led to habituation.

Classroom observation was supplemented by post-observation video-stimulated interview (PVI), which was done shortly after classroom observations. Teachers were shown the video clips of their lessons retrieved from the digital video camera and asked to describe and comment on their actions and decisions. PVI served two purposes: to clarify some observed instructional practices that the researcher felt left a gap in understanding based on classroom observations alone, and to explore the beliefs and reasons underlying teachers' actions and their associated meaning from their perspective.

### **Data analysis**

The analysis of data in this study was inspired by the abductive analytical approach, which combines deductive and inductive reasoning to analyse the empirical material. Themes were firstly deductively derived from the research questions and insights from the theoretical

framework of the study and previous literature on the subject being investigated. Thereafter, data were approached inductively, which allowed unanticipated themes to emerge but also helped to determine whether the deductively derived themes were supported by the data from the field. A list of themes from each participant's verbatim transcript was made. Then, a cross-case analysis was done. Similar themes were clustered together. This process involved going back and forth between the theoretical framework and data to refine the created nodes. The transcripts were reread for coding, which was done by identifying words, sentence(s) and/or paragraph(s) from each transcript and dragging and dropping them into the respective nodes. All the coded data extracts were reviewed to determine whether they formed a coherent pattern.

### **Findings**

The study sought to find out pre-primary teachers' beliefs about why some children find learning to read Kiswahili difficult and what can be done to help such children. The teachers maintained that children entered a pre-primary class with varying reading skills, as some were predisposed to learn the basic skills with guidance from their teachers while a few were not no matter how hard the teacher tried. One of the teachers for example said:

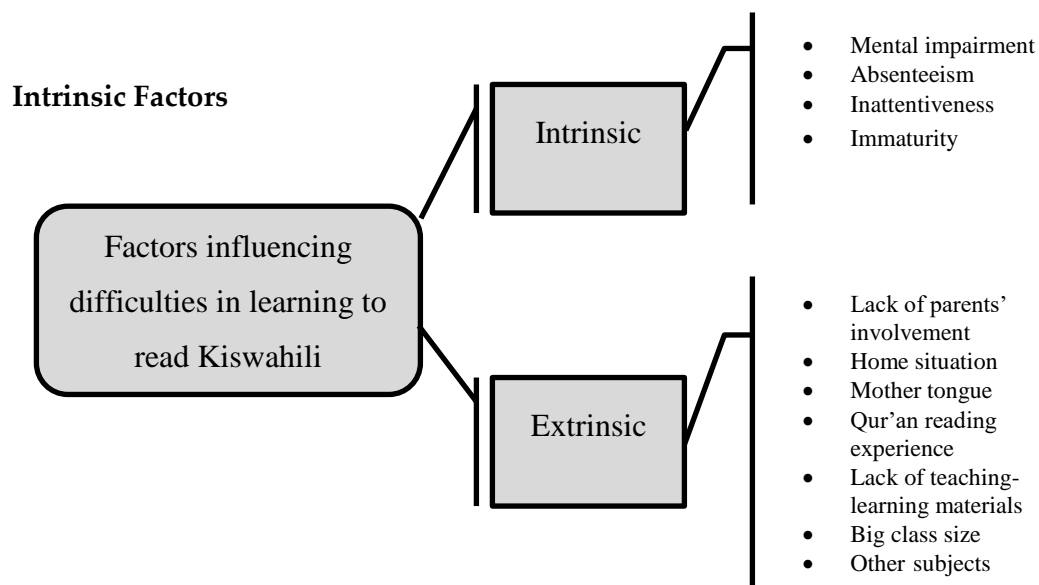
Most of the children can learn to read. Only a few, maybe one or two out of ten, cannot read no matter how hard you work, they cannot.

Nearly all teachers, regardless of their background, were unsure of what exactly influenced difficulties in learning to read. This could be discerned from their responses as they said, "I do not know. Maybe..." and "I do not know what exactly causes difficulty in learning to read". When probed further, however, the teachers cited a variety of factors that they believed influenced children's learning-to-read-difficulties (See Figure 1).

Participants attributed difficulties in learning to read to factors such as a child's mental impairment, absenteeism, inattentiveness and immaturity. The vast majority of the participants believed that children with mental impairment were 'unteachable' and likely to complete pre-primary and primary education unable to read. They claimed that it was impossible for such children to learn to read no matter who taught them, the instructional strategies employed or how hard the teacher worked, as one of the teachers commented:

I have observed that it is impossible for a normal child to fail to learn to read unless the child has a mental problem. Such a child is unteachable no matter who teaches him or her, or what instructional approaches are used as the child will still be unable to learn to read...they are unteachable, I can tell you.

Figure 1: Factors



Moreover, some teachers believed that difficulty in learning to read was caused by a child's irregular classroom attendance. They felt that irregular attendance could result in reading problems mainly because the child did not learn what others had learnt in his or her absence, as one of the teachers explained:

...absenteeism...a child attends a class irregularly. Today at school the next day at home, while other children continue learning in his or her absence. Can this child understand what others have learnt in his or her absence? It is impossible for a child who has no mental problems and who attends a class regularly to fail to learn to read.



Teachers attributed children's absenteeism to parental problems and to children's reading difficulties. One of the teachers, for example, said, "Some parents are careless; they do not care about whether or not their children attend school. They do not even ask or push their children to come to school." Another teacher reported that a child with reading problems would not want to go to school mainly because he or she was afraid of being labelled a failure by others as she said, "...you know a child who has reading problems, who cannot read well does not like school...maybe he or she is afraid that others [pupils] will call him or her names, I do not know".

The findings further reveal that teachers believed that difficulties in learning to read resulted from pupils' lack of attention during lessons due to obsession with too much play and emotional disturbances. Emotional disturbances were attributed to hunger and parental problems at home, as illustrated by the following quote:

Some children come to school hungry. You find a child in a classroom is unhappy most of the time. She cannot focus on what is going on in the classroom. This [lack of attention] hinders effective learning...When you ask the child the reason, he or she tells you: 'I did not eat at home before coming to school'.

The teachers also stated that under-five children have problems learning to read because of their immaturity. They claimed that younger children, less than six years old, were not mature enough to focus on learning what they were taught compared to older (6+ years of age) children. In discussing the difficulties of learning to read, one of the teachers commented:

Previously, children were enrolled at age six and above. Children of this age were mature; they concentrated more on what you teach...they [6+ years of age children] understand more easily than younger children...younger children, aged four to five are not yet ready to learn...they experience difficulties in learning to read.

## **Extrinsic Factors**

### *Home-based factors*

The majority of teachers expressed the belief that the lack of parents' involvement in their children's learning led to difficulties in learning to read. They claimed that children whose parents read with them tended to do much better at reading than those whose parents did not. Nevertheless, the teachers reported that the majority of the parents did not engage in reading practices with their children because they felt that that was the responsibility of the teacher and they lacked the time, as reflected in the following quotes: "There are some parents who help their children but the majority do not...they think that that is the teacher's responsibility"

Some parents do not have time to ask their child about what he or she was taught at school. They engage in other family activities. Some parents teach their child, which makes a difference...you realise that this child is being taught by parents at home. Other parents do not bother.

The teachers further revealed that some children experienced difficulties in learning to read

because of a difficult home situation. Some children were reported to come from families where they did not get enough food and experienced parental conflicts. According to the teachers, the lack of adequate food made pupils inattentive in the classroom. The teachers believed that parental conflicts interfered with children's learning. Children could not focus on their studies, as one of the teachers remarked:

Another problem is the difficult home situation, children do not have enough food...A child comes to school hungry, he cannot learn. Some children come from families with parental conflicts...a child becomes emotionally disturbed and unhappy, thinking about what happened at home...the child cannot concentrate, leading to poor performance.

Reading in the mother tongue and reading the Qur'an were also believed by some teachers to be factors contributing to learning and reading difficulties. These teachers said that some children came to school unable to speak Kiswahili due to the influence of the mother tongue. This made it difficult for them to learn to read Kiswahili. In this regard, one teacher commented, "Some children cannot speak Kiswahili when they enter school, as they speak their mother tongue...they know only a few Kiswahili words. They do not speak Kiswahili at home. This inevitably contributes to learning and reading difficulties". Teachers also believed that children from Muslim households reading the Qur'an interfered with learning to read, as the Arabic script runs from right to left, which is different from Kiswahili based on Roman orthography, where reading and writing proceeds from left to right, as one of the teachers explained:

The majority of my pupils are Muslims; they attend madrassa classes where they are taught to read the Qur'an. Reading the Qur'an involves reading from right to left as opposed to Kiswahili. This makes them [pupils who attend madrassa classes] experience difficulties in learning to read [Kiswahili]. We have such a problem. But with much repetition...repeated practice the majority of them make it. But it needs time and patience.

### ***Classroom-Related Factors***

Teachers cited a number of classroom-related factors they believed had a bearing on children's difficulty in learning to read. These factors included lack of or scarcity of teaching-learning materials, big class sizes and other subjects that must be taught. The teachers claimed that the scarcity of teaching-learning materials (e.g., textbooks, letter and word cards, picture books and posters) contributed to the difficulties the children experienced in learning to read Kiswahili. They believed that the availability of such teaching and learning materials would enable pupils to interact with books and see what they have been taught, which in turn would support learning to read. The teachers further claimed that it was difficult for them to assist pupils with reading problems individually due to the big classes, as there are more than 45 pupils in a class, as one teacher said:

...children are capable of learning. However, they are affected by the classroom situation. The class is big...too many children, more than fifty children in a class, they cannot sit comfortably...four to a desk! Besides, teaching materials are scarce, no books, pictures, cards [letter, syllable and word cards]...no picture books, children have to look at pictures in my copy, the only copy. I have to pass it around for them to see. It is very difficult.

Some teachers mentioned that there were many subjects that must be taught at the pre-primary level. They claimed that children were still too young to learn all those subjects. They were of the opinion that the subjects confused pupils and did not give them enough time to concentrate on reading. They believed that it was easy for pupils to forget what they had learnt because of a lot of other things they were taught.

...you know when, for instance, you teach the letter 'a' you have to repeat it several times, but with these subjects you cannot do as you want...you have little time to teach it for reinforcement because you have to teach other subjects too....You teach a word and after a short time you teach science and other things. The next day you ask them what words we learnt yesterday...only a few can remember.

### **Helping children finding learning to read difficult**

The teachers were further asked what they believed could be done to help pupils experiencing difficulties in learning to read. In response to this question, the teachers cited possible strategies including remedial practices, parents' involvement, retention, mixing and grouping in the class, focusing on the three 'Rs' (reading, writing and arithmetic), readjustment of reading instructional time, and in-service teacher training.

### **Remedial practices**

Nearly all the teachers believed that extra or supplemental reading practices at school were important for helping children who were finding learning to read difficult. The teachers claimed that some children forget so easily that they needed remedial practices to remind them about what they had learnt. Other teachers maintained that children differed in their ability to learn. Some learn faster than others. In this regard, supplemental practices were important. The teachers explained that supplemental practices could involve individuals or a small group of pupils during after-class hours or during short breaks, as one of the teachers said:

There are children having problems learning to read. They need help. When other children have been released to go home they [children with reading problems] should remain for let's say thirty minutes to practise what they have learnt. They may even repeat what they did together with others...extra time is important, you know human beings differ in their mental abilities, and so do children. Some children are fast learners while others are slow. I do not know the reason. But I think slow learners need more time to practise.

### **Parents' Involvement**

More than half of the teachers believed that if parents were involved daily in their children's school work this would help struggling children to catch up and learn to read. Parental daily involvement in their children's school work would help to remind their children about what they had been taught at school. This would help to minimise reading problems their offspring were facing. One of the teachers said:

...but also parents should be concerned about their pupils' school work each day. When a child gets home, the parents should ask the child, 'Tell me what have learnt at school today?'... 'Can you read here for me?' I believe that this would help the child, who is experiencing difficulty

learning to read...it is important that parents remind their children at home.

One teacher went further to explain how parents could be involved by saying that teachers could assign parents some reading tasks they could do with their children at home. This task, for example, could include giving parents some syllable cards to read with their children who were at risk of failing to read. Nonetheless, the teacher acknowledged that this was almost impossible for many parents, mainly because of the misconception that a child's interaction with the teacher at school was more than enough, as one teacher elaborated:

Parents' involvement is very important. A few of them can be involved, but the majority cannot. I used to send them some reading tasks for them to do with their children but they did not care...they do not have time. Most of them think that sending a child to school is enough.

### **Retention**

Some teachers cited retention - holding pupils who failed to read after one or more years in a pre-primary class - as one of the strategies to help pupils who experienced difficulties in learning to read. According to the teachers, retention would provide the children with opportunities to practise more, thereby minimising the risk of total reading failure. Nevertheless, the teachers acknowledged that there were some exceptional cases of children who would not be able to read no matter how long they are retained in the pre-primary class. One of the teachers clarified this point:

Retaining pupils for a year or more at this [pre-primary] class may help reduce the number of pupils who are at risk of failing to read. You know when they spend some time here they get time to practise. In Grade One, they may practise but there are too many subjects and so they have fewer opportunities to practise reading. However, some children cannot learn to read even if you retain them for three years...I really cannot understand why this is the case.

### **Within-class ability mixing and grouping**

A few teachers believed that placing pupils experiencing difficulties in learning to read with more capable learners in the classroom helped to minimise these difficulties. The teachers claimed this strategy benefited children with difficulties as in the absence of the teacher they got assistance from their capable peers, who challenge them. One of the teachers, for example, said:

I do not have time for extra reading practices. I mix those who experience difficulties in learning to read with the more capable learners...when you mix children with learning-to-read difficulties with others who are more capable, they are helped. Capable pupils may read for them even in the teacher's absence. This challenges the pupils with difficulties...who ask themselves why can't they read when their colleagues can; 'If my colleague can, then why can't I?

Nevertheless, one teacher acknowledged that this technique would not always work because of the nature of pupils and limited resources, but it was better than grouping the pupils in a class on the basis of their abilities, as she further elaborated, "...it is not guaranteed that children who are experiencing difficulties in learning to read will learn to read as expected when mixed with others [more capable peers], but I believe in this rather than grouping them according to their

abilities". Some teachers, however, believed in ability grouping. They articulated that grouping pupils according to their abilities helped teachers to closely follow up those pupils experiencing difficulties in learning to read. They claimed that by placing pupils with difficulties she has to remain in this class. It helps to minimise the number of pupils who experience difficulties in learning to read.

On top of the above, the teachers recommended that the number of pre-primary subjects be reduced to the three 'Rs' – reading, writing, and arithmetic - as it was previously. Focusing on the 3Rs would provide more instructional time and attention.

The problem is with the other subjects that must be taught. There are too many and confusing to a child. In my opinion, these subjects could be trimmed to three important skills, reading, writing and arithmetic. These are the basic skills a child needs to acquire. In previous years, emphasis was placed on these skills [reading, writing and arithmetic]. Pupils had enough time to practise. It was easy for the children to learn to read, not like today when you have too many subjects...children end up confused.

It was further found that teachers believed that they could help children experiencing difficulties in learning to read, but almost all of them revealed that they were less certain about what they were doing because of the lack of substantive and specialised training that would boost their confidence in what they were doing to help the pupils. They thus felt the need for training to boost their pedagogical knowledge and hence confidence.

## **Discussion**

The teachers believed that the majority of the pupils could learn to read and that only a few found learning to read difficult or failed. The teachers reported that some pupils were 'unteachable' and were likely to complete a pre-primary class cycle unable to read for various reasons, as discussed later. Although the teachers were uncertain they attributed pupils' difficulties in learning to read to mental impairment, immaturity, absenteeism and inattentiveness. Other factors cited by the teachers were the lack of parents' involvement with their children's reading activities at home. The teachers also frequently cited classroom conditions, such as big class size, limited time and lack of teaching-learning materials as potential causes of difficulties in learning to read. These findings support previous research and the assertion that difficulties in learning to read or failure is a result of the interaction of a set of intrinsic and extrinsic/experiential factors (Catts *et al.*, 2012).

It can be discerned that all the factors cited by the teachers as causing- pupils' difficulties in learning to read were outside the teachers' realm. For example, the teachers did not view ineffective instructional practices as one of the possible causes of difficulties in learning to read despite being uncertain of them. This is consistent with Nirstheimer *et al.* (1996) who reported that teachers did not mention any instructional-related factors as a reason for children finding learning to read difficult. In fact, classroom instruction in which the teacher is directly responsible may cause difficulties in learning to read (Kamhi & Catts, 2012; Snow *et al.*, 1998). As Snow *et al.* (1998) contend, a good number of students who should be capable of reading experience difficulties because of the ineffective or insufficient instruction they receive.

The teachers in this study, for example, labelled some pupils 'unteachable', which is indicative of teachers' low expectations, which might lead to Stanovich's (1986) notion: "Matthew Effects and the less skilled reader...the poor-get-poorer effects" (p. 382). Teachers with low expectations might pay less attention to less motivated pupils, offer few opportunities for practice, and place such pupils in the low-ability category, hence adversely influencing their learning. These characteristics were evident in this study. In response to a pupil's incorrect response, one teacher, for example, remarked: "you know nothing, sit down". Another one said "-What are you reading! Sit down, you are wasting our time" and then stopped the pupil from reading. Such comments were neither followed by corrective feedback nor was an opportunity given to the pupil to practise. This suggests that pupils with reading difficulties were included in the classroom but excluded from the teaching-learning process.

Pupils seemingly capable were encouraged and provided with an opportunity to try again when they responded undesirably. This is reflected in the teacher's following remark: "what is happening to you today, I know you can read. ...you are a good girl and you can read... can you try again?" Such feedback is encouraging and motivates the pupil to keep on trying, which in turn might facilitate learning to read.

There are several factors that may cause ineffective instruction. These include 'poorly' or 'untrained' teachers, the unavailability of teaching-learning materials and large classes. All these characteristics were evident in this study. The majority of the teachers were untrained while other teachers' training background could be described as inadequate. Indeed, their responses indicated a lack of confidence in the instructional practices they employed because of limited specialised training. Moreover, as mentioned elsewhere, teaching-learning materials such as books were largely lacking, classes were large, and the teacher-pupil ratio was high. The teachers frequently cited these factors as impediments to the teaching and the learning of their pupils. Mbise (1996) asserts that, "the lack of proper teaching facilities and materials, and large classes... adversely affect the performance of teachers" (pp. 45-46), which in turn might affect learning.

Citing factors outside the teachers' realm is indicative of teachers' belief that children's difficulties in learning to read were not their responsibility. This might lead teachers to operate along the lines of 'it can't be done' or 'there is little I can do', and or 'it's not my job'. Unless the teachers do some 'soul-searching', they will simply continue seeing the problem as the responsibility of others. Indeed, if teachers do not reflect on factors relating to them as potential causes of the difficulties pupils have in learning to read, they might remain static or recycle, for example, their instructional strategies regardless of whether or not they were effective. They might also just 'sit and wait' because of the notion that 'I am not responsible', which might result in children experiencing more difficulties in learning to read or failing. Although the reasons given by teachers in this study are their own, it is important to accept them cautiously because it was noted that in pre-primary classes there was no system for diagnosing learning-to-read difficulties or disabilities. In addition, other factors might make it difficult for a child to learn to read, such as a child's visual and auditory deficits, as well as dyslexia, which teachers

seemed to be unaware of. Perhaps, it is high time that we reflected on these factors and devise systematic diagnostic mechanisms and early intervention.

**The** teachers cited a number of strategies, such as grouping pupils by age or ability in the class, and readjusting reading instructional time. The teachers also cited that in-service teacher training is crucial for supporting children experiencing difficulties in learning to read. Dubeck *et al.* (2012), for example, noted that teachers adjusted the learning outcomes and instructional activities according to the pupils' age. A study by Chorzempa and Graham (2006) found that most of the responding teachers reported that, although there were some concerns, they employed the within-class ability grouping strategy because it helped them meet their students' instructional needs.

Although ability grouping is beneficial, arguments have been made to discredit it, principally because it might lead to social stigmatisation, lowered academic expectations and decreased motivation of students in low-ability groups. It may also widen the achievement gap because the instruction provided to students in the lower-ability groups might be inferior to that of children in the higher-ability group (Chorzempa & Graham, 2006). Alternatively, within-class mixing might be more beneficial for pupils experiencing difficulties in learning to read. This may enable teachers to overcome the challenges of big classes and limited instructional time. Abadzi (2013) argues that, if well-planned and carried out accordingly, "this activity [ability-mixing] should leave no child behind" (p. 26). Similarly, Vygotsky (1978) advocates for "scaffolding instruction", which has its roots in his concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In this kind of instruction, when mixed together, a more competent or slightly older pupil provides a scaffold for the less competent learner or less mature classmate to ensure that the tasks that he or she could not otherwise achieve were accomplished. Through collaboration in classroom activities, older children in a mixed setting can challenge younger children's ZPD, which, in turn, helps them to master new skills.

Research also suggests that more capable and older pupils benefit from the ability and age mixing approach (Berk & Winsler, 1995). As they work together with less capable and younger peers, more capable and older children practise more and reflect on the task at hand. In this study, an understanding of the majority of teachers of the benefits of within-class mixing could be described as narrow mainly because of the lack of and/or inadequate teacher training and lack of professional development programmes.

Although ability and age mixing is beneficial and might be relevant in the context of this study, significant concerns need to be taken into account. The benefits of mixed interaction may depend on the organisation and support the teacher provides to children's classroom activities (Berk & Winsler, 1995). For the approach to be effective it needs to be well structured by the teacher and be goal-directed. In the context of this study this was far from being achieved. There was no systematic assessment of pupils' reading progress each day and no proper records were kept (as discussed further in the subsequent sub-section), which could inform the teachers about what each pupil could or could not read, which would inform ability-mixing practices.

On top of the strategies that teachers believed to be important for helping children finding learning to read difficult, a classroom environment rich in print and quality systematic phonics-syllabic instruction, especially in shallow orthographies such as Kiswahili, speeds up reading acquisition (Trudell & Schroeder, 2007). Abadzi (2013) asserts that decoding may be achieved in 3-4 months when spelt languages are taught consistently. In addition, quality reading instruction requires trained and motivated teachers. Ongoing school-based in-service teacher professional development and collaboration among teachers in a supportive environment, if well thought out, might foster teachers' self-examination and reflection on their beliefs and instructional practices (Shulman & Shulman, 2004). Consequently, these practices might lead to a change in teachers' beliefs and behaviour, thereby improving reading instruction and reading outcomes.

### **Conclusion and recommendation**

Teachers were uncertain about what exactly caused children difficulties in learning to read and what could be done to help such children. This could be attributed to limited teacher training and the lack of systematic diagnostic mechanisms and teacher professional development programmes. The teachers attributed children's difficulties in learning to read to experiential factors, which were outside their realm. Impliedly, teachers did not feel responsible for children's difficulties in learning to read. This study recommends continuing school-based professional development programmes, which encourage collaboration, peer-to-peer interaction and reflection on practices. The study also recommends the establishment of a systematic diagnostic mechanism to identify children with learning-to-read difficulties and possible causes, such as auditory and visual deficit and dyslexia. This might lead to early identification of children with reading difficulties, resulting in developmentally appropriate intervention.

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