

# Perceived Socio-cultural Barriers to Children's Acquisition of Kiswahili Pre-Reading Skills in Rural Pre-primary Schools in Tanzania

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## Abstract

*This paper explores socio-cultural barriers to children's acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills in rural public –pre-primary schools in Tanzania. Purposive sampling was used to obtain 48 pre-primary school teachers, head teachers and parents. Data were collected through semi-structured interview and focus group discussion methods. Thematic analysis was utilised in data analysis using NVivo-12 software for qualitative and non-structured data. The findings revealed that mother-tongue interference, limited parent-teacher collaboration and community beliefs about children's education were the perceived socio-cultural barriers to children's acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills. The paper concludes that children's acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills was hampered by the presence of various socio-cultural barriers. The paper recommends that pre-primary school learning environments in rural areas should be improved for children's successful acquisition of pre-reading skills.*

**Keywords:** *early childhood education, Kiswahili language, marginalised schools, reading acquisition, socio-cultural barriers*

## Introduction

Children's acquisition of reading skills remains one of the strong foundations of their socio-emotional and cognitive development (Çakıroğlu, 2019; Shukia, 2014). Alshehri (2014) supports that children's acquisition of reading skills improves the development of other communication skills such as writing as children learn how to pronounce letters and words, their spelling comes easier. Before reading with fluency and comprehending a text, children should develop pre-reading skills. The pre-reading skills highlighted in the Tanzanian pre-primary school syllabus include phonemic awareness (recognition of vowel and consonant sounds), phonics (letter-sound knowledge and knowledge of letter shapes) and vocabulary (observation and analysis of pictures and identification of names of different pictures or objects

found in their environment) (MoEST, 2016). Literature indicates that successful acquisition of the identified fundamental reading skills enhances children's social, emotional and academic skills (Çakıroğlu, 2019).

Low acquisition of reading skills is a global concern (Asumang & Susuana, 2020; Relyea et al., 2023). For example, Kuhfeld et al. (2022) in their study found that black students in the United States had low reading abilities as compared to their white counterparts. Also, a large gap between English and non-English in terms of reading comprehension score was evident in Kenya rural primary schools (Piper et al., 2016). Many children could read English words more easily than words in Kiswahili or their mother tongues. Therefore, lack of a strong foundation of pre-reading skills compromises children's reading comprehension.

Studies conducted within Tanzania indicate that only 12 percent of Grade Two pupils meet oral reading fluency locally-set standards of reading 50 correct words per minute in Kiswahili (Research Triangle Institute [RTI] International, 2017). Furthermore, Marwa (2014) found that eight percent of Grade Two pupils could not read with comprehension in Kiswahili. There was a great concern that primary school pupils were unable to read letters, words, sentences and do comprehension tasks (Anney & Mmasa, 2016). Uwezo (2015) identified rural and urban divide in terms of literacy skills, especially in Kiswahili reading skills in which urban districts outnumbered the rural colleagues in Kiswahili reading. Different reading experiences contributed to this disparity. Despite this, there are some rural pre-primary classes that demonstrated high performance in their National Examinations (Uwezo, 2015; 2017). Therefore, understanding the perceived socio-cultural barriers to children's acquisition of pre-reading skills was an inevitable endeavor. Available studies indicate that rural schools face challenges related to inadequate reading materials, teachers' inadequate knowledge, low levels of parents' engagement and support which subsequently compromise children's reading acquisition (Mohammed & Amponsah, 2018; Shukia, 2014). Chikwiri and Musiyiwa (2017) argue that these challenges negatively affect successful children's transitions from early childhood development to pre-primary education. Similar findings indicate that low children's literacy development is linked to poor parental support, unsupportive parental beliefs and use of the medium of instruction not recognized by children (Lehrl et al., 2020; Trudell & Piper, 2014).

There is ample evidence which suggests that socio-cultural factors undermine children's overall academic achievement (Mligo, 2014; Shukia, 2014; Yang, 2016). However, little has been learned about how these factors impact on children's acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills in Tanzanian rural public pre-primary schools. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore the perceived socio-

cultural barriers to children's acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills in Tanzanian rural public pre-primary schools.

### **Theoretical framework**

This paper employs Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Mligo, 2015). The theory demonstrates how child development is supported and embedded within a set of nested structures, from immediate microsystems, such as the home and school, to more remote systems such as policies, neighborhoods and culture. The levels include: the microsystem, children's immediate experiences; mesosystem, the linkages existing between microsystems like families and schools; ecosystem, the indirect forces affecting the developing child; and macrosystem, the surrounding social, cultural and political contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; Smith, 2013). This complex pattern of interaction in children's learning and development stemming from the surrounding environment was also taken into account in shaping this work.

According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems such as home-school socio-economic conditions, culture and education levels among others, affect children's learning in various ways, and acquisition of reading skills in particular (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; Ndijuye, 2020; Vanderauwera et al., 2019). Similarly, child's acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills cannot be viewed only as the study of a child but the external socio-cultural world in which the child's learning occurs. A pre-primary school child can better acquire various academic abilities including Kiswahili pre-reading skills when he or she is supported by community members, teachers and parents. More specifically, children's acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills occurs in a collaborative, reading-rich and a social-cultural barrier-free context.

### **Methodology**

#### **Research approach and design**

This paper employs a qualitative research approach in order to gain insights into the socio-cultural barriers to children's acquisition of pre-reading skills (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). Phenomenology research design was adopted so as to share the participants' lived experiences and perspectives about the phenomenon at hand (Barrow, 2017). Teachers, head teachers and parents were purposively sampled from four rural pre-primary schools in Misungwi and Musoma districts. Literature suggests that purposeful sampling is helpful in identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al.,

2015). A total of 48 participants comprising four teachers, four head teachers and 40 parents were involved. The participants' age, gender, education levels, occupations and years of service were taken into consideration when sampling them. Teachers and head teachers were sampled because of their roles of implementing and supervising Kiswahili pre-reading skills instructional practices. Parents are the primary caretakers and educators in children's early learning years. Therefore, parents whose children could read well and those whose children were not able to read well were involved.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Multiple sources were used to gather data. Specifically, semi-structured interviews with pre-primary teachers and head teachers were conducted to gather their views about socio-cultural barriers to children's acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills. Literature indicates that semi-structured interviews provide an opportunity for previously unknown information such as local practices and participants' insights into the topic under study to emerge (O'Keeffe et al., 2016). The interviews for all participants took an average of one hour duration. Tape recording was undertaken subject to participants' consent. Confidentiality was observed by assigning pseudonyms to participants and unauthorised persons had no access to the collected data. Focus group discussion with the parents was also conducted. Parents were invited via the head teachers of the respective school. Each group was comprised of 10 parents per session and lasted for about one hour. Prior to discussion, consent was sought from each parent, and confidentiality was assured. Transcripts from the interviews and focus group discussions were imported in the project folder created in NVivo-12 software for qualitative and non-structured data. Coding was carried out and a list of nodes from each transcript was created. Framework matrices were run and thus source materials were summarized along the established nodes. The findings were presented and interpreted in a simple and straightforward way with rich descriptions supported by representative verbatim quotations from the interviews and focus group discussions.

### **Results and Discussion**

After the analysis, two major themes: mother tongue interference and limited parent-teacher collaboration emerged forming the social barriers to children's acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills. Another theme was effects of community beliefs on children's education as a cultural barrier to children's acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills. Each of the merged themes is reported and discussed.

## **Social barriers to children's acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills**

Mother tongue interference and limited parent-teacher collaboration were the social barriers revealed from the findings to children's acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills. Each emerged theme is reported and discussed further.

### ***Mother-tongue interference***

The participants expressed their concerns that children were unable to use Kiswahili language. Instead, they named the pictures and various objects in their mother-tongues. Likewise, most of the children knew only their mother-tongues. In consequence, they failed to understand what their teachers talked about and also failed to interact with some books as learning materials. Thus, their acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills suffered. They mentioned further that children were not conversant with the medium of instruction, Kiswahili language, because it was not the language they frequently used in their daily communication even when they were at school. Thus, infrequent use of Kiswahili made children unable to speak or use Kiswahili words correctly. During focus group discussion with parents, most of them agreed that children faced the challenge due to limited use of Kiswahili words. Commenting on this, one of the parents explained:

Let me tell you this: In most schools in rural areas including ours, children are using their mother-tongue to communicate throughout the day even in school. In this situation, it is difficult for children to learn Kiswahili in school. Also, when they come home, no one encourages or teaches them in Kiswahili. Parents and relatives also do not know Kiswahili. (Focus group discussion, Parent 2, School B).

This finding suggests that children's acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills will continue to be low in contexts where the medium of instruction is not frequently used in children's daily communication. A similar observation was made by Smith (2013) maintaining that an individual's learning is a product of not only psychological forces but also cultural, social, political and economic forces. Children being unable to pronounce some sounds and name pictures in Kiswahili except in their mother tongues were social barriers to their learning. Their inability to use Kiswahili was attributed to the infrequent use of Kiswahili language in their daily communications. Therefore, children could not acquire Kiswahili language pre-reading skills simply because the language was less used in their communities. This finding is consistent with several findings from previous studies supporting that a medium of instruction not understood by the learner significantly impedes their learning (Motala, 2013; Trudell & Piper, 2014). Therefore, children's acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills needs their communities to expose them early to the language of instruction.

### ***Limited parent-teacher collaboration***

Participants shared that parents were less involved, leaving their children to be assisted by their teachers, as they thought that teachers were more knowledgeable and competent in teaching children to learn Kiswahili pre-reading skills than anybody else. One of the teachers complained:

There is no collaboration between parents and teachers. Parents have left everything to the teachers. The reason behind poor collaboration is that parents have the belief that the teacher is everything, given that teachers are trained, they must teach. But the reality is that parents have also a role to play for their children's educational development.

From the findings, besides their roles, parents thought that their children could effectively learn Kiswahili pre-reading skills solely through their teachers. These findings are in particular supporting the arguments of Bronfenbrenner (1979), Mligo (2015) and Smith (2013) that the home environment should work with the school environment to promote effective learning in children rather than depending on one context to influence learning.

Similarly, the findings revealed that there was a lack of linkages between home and school in terms of communicating and giving feedback about the children's learning progress. There were no special meetings held between the teachers and parents addressing issues of helping children to learn to read or discuss only pre-primary school children's learning. Limited collaboration was attributed to parents' lack of knowledge on children's learning issues and the nature of parents' economic activities which made them unavailable for most of the time. Commenting on the consensus reached by the majority of the parents, one of the parents said:

Most of us do not communicate with the teacher on children's learning and there is no feedback provided to the teachers. This is caused by the nature of our activities, which make us lack time to meet the teacher as you can see; we are occupied with a lot of activities. In this situation, I suggest that teachers should plan to hold meetings with parents and scheduled meetings should be known to all of us. (Focus group discussion, Parent 4, School C).

In schools where there are poor parent-teacher partnerships in children's learning, there is a great possibility of children's poor reading development, particularly poor phonemic awareness, spelling problems and vocabulary problems (Anney & Mmasa, 2016). The results also add evidence to Kim and Riley (2014)'s

findings that children's learning is affected not only by interactions in the home and interactions in the child pre-school setting but also by the linkages between these two settings. It means that the existence of inadequate linkages between parents and teachers is one of the barriers to children's acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills in schools.

Furthermore, lack of commitment by both parents and teachers was associated with the limited collaboration between the two parties, which inevitably affected children's acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills. Parents were reported to be less committed to their children's education and spent most of their time on their own activities. Teachers were less inclined to communicate with parents on children's learning issues. Teachers also did not hold special meetings with parents to inform and educate them on teaching children to learn to read Kiswahili pre-reading skills while at home and ensure that parents provided all the necessary learning materials to support children's learning. In fact, most of the teachers did not educate parents on helping their children to learn to read. Although teachers knew that parents had a role to play, they did not inform them accordingly. Instead, they ended up accusing the parents of not attending school meetings, which were aimed at handling pre-primary education matters. Narrating about what most of the parents mentioned, one of the parents explained:

I have not talked to the teacher because I lack that time. As you can see, I am preoccupied with a lot of activities. ... For the case of giving feedback, I also admit that I have never given feedback to the teacher about my child's school progress. I am sure even my fellow parents have never done so. We are just busy with other activities... (Focus group discussion, Parent 4, School D).

The findings imply that limited parent-teacher collaboration was attributable to teachers' and parents' lack of commitment and poverty which in turn, hindered the children's acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills. Shukia (2014) supports that lack of parents' involvement in their children's early reading is attributed to both parents' irresponsibility and family financial problems. It means that unless parents and teachers remain committed to support children's learning, children's pre-reading skills will be negatively impacted by the existing low commitment of both teachers and parents.

### **Cultural barriers to children's acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills**

With regard to cultural barriers, presence of community beliefs that negatively impacted children's education, acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills was the only key reported cultural barrier.

### ***Community beliefs on children's education***

Participants mentioned that most of the parents failed to take care of their children's psychological, social and physical wellbeing due to their negative beliefs about educating children. Specifically, the parents attributed their children's illnesses to witchcraft beliefs. They accused some members of the community of bewitching their children making them reluctant to take their children to hospitals for medical check-ups. Lack of children's timely medical check-ups made them fail to attend school and learn regularly. Missing some lessons made the children fail to learn essential skills. Some parents held a view that their children who passed their primary school leaving examination and progressed to ordinary level education were bewitched by some members of the community, a phenomenon which explained why most of them got sick when they joined Form One. As a result, the parents believed that educating children to end up being bewitched had no benefits, hence exerting little efforts in encouraging their children to learn. This condition was viewed as one of the barriers to children's learning progress in general and the acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills in particular. One teacher reflected:

Parents do not know that they are supposed to take their children to hospitals for medical check-up when they get sick. The parents end up attributing their children's sicknesses to witchcraft beliefs. In this situation, you cannot find a parent taking children to the hospital when they get sick. At the end of the day, they make children remain sick for a long time so they also miss studies.

Presence of witchcraft beliefs in communities has impacted education in general (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Mligo, 2014). Confirming this evidence, Mligo (2014) found that parents were reluctant to let their children attend pre-primary school education, eat and learn comfortably believing that they could be bewitched through food by their teachers. The beliefs lowered parents' support to their children's learning. Such a living experience suggests that learning in rural pre-primary schools is limited by the existing unsupportive traditions and customs that embed children's learning progress in various levels of education.

Likewise, the participants mentioned that some community members, parents included, used their children as home keepers and sources of family income by demanding children to work for them by fetching water and looking after their cattle. Due to such treatments, some parents discouraged their children in pre-primary schools from studying hard. Children in pre-primary schools were made to believe that education is less important than working at home. One teacher disclosed:

Here in our village, some parents persuade their children to fail



in their exams so that they can get married because they do not see the value of formal education. What they are interested in is getting dowry in the form of cattle. For boys, they see that it is better to have them involved in home activities like taking care of cattle or farming instead of wasting time in school where they end up going nowhere. In fact, these beliefs hinder their support to children's learning.

In line with Bronfenbrenner (1979), presence of interpersonal relationships and practices are embedded in the large social structures of community, society, politics and economics. The existing community relationships and practices in turn impede children's development including their acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This paper has unveiled that children were unable to acquire Kiswahili pre-reading skills due to the presence of socio-contextual barriers. Specifically, the barriers were mother-tongue interference, limited parent-teacher collaboration and effects of community beliefs. This study remains one of the ways to inform education stakeholders to find out ways to address such barriers for improved children's acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills in rural schools. Despite the availability of teachers and parents to support children's learning, their efforts had little success. Therefore, the paper recommends that schools in collaboration with other education stakeholders should design effective capacity building programmes focusing on strengthening parent-teacher partnership and educating parents on the benefits of investing in their children's education. The programmes could raise the awareness of the parents of their crucial role in their children's education and thus change their mindset so that they overcome negative beliefs and attitudes that cause them to fail to invest effectively in their children's education. The paper also encourages pre-primary school teachers to assume their crucial roles of teaching and educating the community around them about young children's learning issues. Finally, the paper highlights that children's learning of Kiswahili pre-reading skills in rural areas should be considered as a team work supported by all community members surrounding them.

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