

# Parental involvement in children's home learning activities in Early Childhood Education in Njoro Sub-county, Kenya

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate parental involvement in children's home learning activities in Early Childhood Education in Njoro sub-county, Nakuru County in Kenya. The objectives of this study were: to establish ways in which parents facilitated their children's learning at home; to establish the kind of knowledge and skills that parents exhibited in helping their children with homework; and to examine ways of improving parental involvement in their children's home learning. Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence provided the theoretical framework. A mixed methods approach and descriptive survey design guided the study. The sample was drawn from twenty three pre-schools and included forty six pre-school teachers, twenty three head teachers and forty six parents. Interview schedules and questionnaires were used to collect data. The study found that most parents assisted their children with homework especially in reading and writing activities. Most of the parents had the knowledge and skills of helping their children with homework. Teachers reported that talking to individual parents was the most effective method in improving their involvement in children's home learning. The study is expected to make improvements on parental involvement in Early Childhood Education which will go a long way to benefit learners through quality teaching and learning.

**Key words:** Early Childhood Education, parental involvement, home learning

## INTRODUCTION

The Government of Kenya recognizes that Early Childhood Development and Education interventions are significant to the social and economic development of the country as they provide a fairer and better start in life (Okwach, 2008). The Government of Kenya has therefore emphasized the importance of partnerships in safeguarding rights and the provision of the particularly important given services to meet the holistic needs of young children (MOEST, 2005). The ECDE Policy Framework (2006) emphasizes, recognizes and appreciates parents and families as the primary care givers and health providers of their children. The Ministry of Education is in the process of developing another policy. The Cabinet secretary was on record saying that the National government was in the process

of reviewing Early Childhood Development Policy that will provide standards, curricular and guidelines for the effective management and coordination of ECD institutions throughout the country (Odhiambo, 2016). There is a notable consensus across education policy statements and practice guidelines in many countries that parents are children's first and most enduring educators (OECD, 2012).

Mukuna and Indoshi (2012) identified the roles of parents as either academic related or utility related. The academic related includes helping children with reading and homework activities and providing learning materials. Utility related includes paying school fees, providing physical facilities and providing feeding programs for the children and participating in their preparation. According to Moon and Ivins, (2004) parents should help their children's learning at home. Home learning is therefore an important aspect of children's education that parents should involve themselves in. Given the demands on students to learn more and to increase their test scores, much study and learning needs to take place at home, after all children are in school for five or six hours in a twenty four hour day (Pollack & Miller, 2003). Whereas parental involvement in schools has been widely accepted, less is understood on how to meaningfully involve them at home. According to Kimu, (2012), while schools recognize several roles for the parents, their crucial role in their children's education has not been fully realized in Kenya. There has been a general lack of school policy on the parents' role in getting homework done and teachers' assumption that parents understand their roles in their children's homework. Menke, (1997) says that direct services to children and families will always be compromised unless proper support exist to shore up the service system. The fact that quality Early Childhood and Development Education depends on parental involvement is therefore an issue of concern that required an empirical study to establish the facts on the ground.

Okwach (2008) undertook a situational analysis on the development of an implementation strategy for ECD element of the national ECD Policy Framework and ECD Service Standard Guidelines. It was carried out in 18 districts in Kenya including Nakuru where the Njoro sub-county is situated in both private and public ECDE centres. One of the research objectives included investigating on parental attitudes towards ECDE, however the study did not address the relationship between the attitudes observed and the contributions that parents make in their children's home learning. There also exists scant empirical literature on parents' involvement in children's home learning activities. Thus these form a fundamental research base that needed investigation with the aim of making recommendations for an effective parental involvement program.

The purpose of this study was to examine parental involvement in the child's home learning activities in Early Childhood Education in public ECDE centres in Njoro sub-county, Kenya.

The objectives that guided the study were to:

- i) find out ways in which parents facilitated their children's home learning.
- ii) establish the skills that parents had in helping their children with home learning.
- iii) examine ways of improving parental involvement in their children's home learning.

With the belief that early learning begets later learning and success, just like early failure breeds later failure has been validated in both economic and educational research (Heckman, 1999). The quality of Early Childhood and Development Education is lacking against the background of poor parental involvement. This is an issue of concern given its contribution in the attainment of Education for All, Sustainable Development Goals and Vision 2030 in addition to being a waste of the scarce national resources. According to Swadener, Kabiru & Njenga, (2000), parents and other family members in Kenya as

elsewhere in the world have traditionally been the primary caregivers and educators of their children-particularly children from birth through age 4-5 years . Parents and other caregivers therefore have the greatest potential for influencing the future of their children and are critical stakeholders in both local services and larger policies and initiatives designed to benefit young children and their families Parents are an invaluable resource for schools-not just for fund raising and support activities, but in an educational capacity. This means acting as complementary educators at home and in the classroom (Dockings, 1990). It was therefore important to understand the ways in which they involve themselves in their children's home learning activities and the skills that they have when helping them.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study was guided by Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence. In her theory, Epstein (1987) contends that the family, the community and the school share children. Her model recognizes that students learn more and succeed at higher levels when home, school and community work together and play collaborative, complementary and supportive roles to support learning and development. In this theory, there are some practices that schools, families, and communities conduct separately and some they conduct jointly in order to influence children's learning and development. This study specifically looked at the sphere of the family and the roles of the parent in the child's home learning activities. The justification for using this theory is because it does not view the sphere of influence as separate or sequenced, because families and schools share the children. Additionally, the theory posits that the children's success is the primary focus for the home and school partnership.

### **Parental Involvement in Home Learning for ECDE Children**

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) define parental involvement broadly to include home-based activities (e.g., helping with homework, discussing school events or courses).

Learning at home is among Epstein's typology of parental involvement which includes how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning (Epstein, 1996). According to Lopez and Margaret (2014) parents often become involved in their children's education through homework. Whether children do homework at home, complete it in after school programs or work on it during the school day, homework can be a powerful tool for letting parents and other adults know what the child is learning, giving children and parents a reason to talk about what's going on at school, and giving teachers an opportunity to hear from parents about children's learning. Epstein (1987) defines home learning to include parental involvement in helping the children at home with homework, projects and other curriculum related activities, decisions and planning. A research done for David Douglas School District (2015) affirms that parental involvement with their children's education, both at home and at school, is positively correlated with student achievement.

According to Bridgemohan (2002) successful home learning requires that parents become involved in their children's learning, share thoughts, ideas, insights and experiences with their child, comment on their children's work and progress and request information from teachers in a communication session. A background report on ECDE by UNESCO (2011) shows that parents can create a home environment suitable for learning by among other things; designating an area to do homework; providing access to reading materials; and assisting with the organization of homework and studies.

Parental involvement at home seems to have a more significant impact on children than parental involvement in school activities. Helping with homework is a common strategy schools employ to engage parents. Schools must however be cognizant of parents' need for guidance and assistance in order to be effectively involved in this regard. Parents can involve themselves in several ways with regards to children's home learning. According to Mwirichia (2013), parental involvement in education at home include; homework

checking, reading together with children, playing math and computer games and provision of play materials.

Learners whose parents are involved both at home and in school become more successful at all grade levels regardless of the educational background or social class of their parents (Dauber & Epstein, 1993). They show significant gains in reading scores; but even when this has not happened, there is a noticeable improvement in attitude both to reading and school work in general, and the relationships between child, parents and teachers.

Benefits may be linked to the practice of supporting learning at home. For example, Callahan, Rademacher and Hildreth (1998), found that parents' involvement with at-risk sixth and seventh grade students improved students' homework performance. Epstein, in (Bridgemohan, 2002) had this to say:

*With this type of involvement learners gain skills, abilities and test scores linked to homework and class work. They complete homework and have a more positive attitude toward schoolwork which in turn develops high self-concept in the learner. In addition they view the parent as similar to the educator and home as similar the school. Parents have an understanding of the instructional programme and can therefore support, encourage and help learning at home. There is an awareness of the child and an appreciation of the teaching skill (pg37).*

Central to this success, however, is the school's development of training programs for parents which aim to provide parents with strategies for assisting and supporting their children at home. There is some indication in the research that diverse educational backgrounds influence the nature and frequency of parents helping their children with homework assignments. Straus and Burgers (2000) point out that parents who have had limited schooling themselves would generally have difficulty in helping their children with their homework. This is however contradicted by a report on Early Childhood Development, OECD (2012) which indicates that parents do not need to invest a

significant amount of time or acquire specialized knowledge in order to assist their children in learning. Instead, improved educational outcomes result from a genuine interest and active engagement from parents.

When parents are aware, knowledgeable and skillful, they serve as strong advocates for their children in the education system and their children are more likely to succeed (Bridgemohan, 2002). Parents in the traditional societies, however, cared and provided for their children even though they did not attend formal schools.

Deslandes (2001) examined the congruence between teachers' and parent's role construction and their expectations regarding their involvement in homework. This study revealed that the attitudes parents have towards school are very important, since the ones with more positive attitudes perceived their role in doing homework as more important. On the other side, it appears that the teachers expect more from parents than parents are aware, which especially goes for the secondary level of education – they expect them to be by far more involved than they actually are. While the home learning environment remains critical to a child's education, dialogue between parents and school needs to occur to keep parents informed about curricula, courses, school rules, and assessments.

## **RESEARCH APPROACH**

A mixed methods approach and descriptive survey design guided this study. The population of the study included all the seventy-nine public pre-schools, head teachers, pre-school teachers and parents from Njoro sub-county. Simple random sampling was used to select twenty-three pre-schools, forty six ECDE teachers and forty six parents. Interview schedules and questionnaires were used to collect data. Parents and head teachers of the participating schools were interviewed while questionnaires were

administered to pre-school teachers. This study combined both descriptive statistics and thematic analysis to analyze the data obtained.

## RESULTS

This section presents the results of the study.

### 1. Ways in which parents facilitated their children's home learning

The first research objective was to find out ways in which parents facilitated their children's home learning. The findings obtained under this objective are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Parents facilitation Approach**

Activity	Parents' Responses		Teachers' Responses	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Home Work Assistance	26	33.3	27	46.6
Read and write with the child	20	25.6	5	8.6
Allow time for play and study	9	11.5	10	17.3
Give extra work	9	11.5	—	—
Observe progress	7	9.0	2	3.4
Buy materials for use at home	5	6.5	8	13.8
Behavior guidance	2	2.6	—	—
Teach Life Skills	—	—	6	10.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>100</b>

The pre-school parents and teachers were asked to give specific activities that parents should do to facilitate their children's learning at home. Of the activities that parents did to help their child with their learning at home, the one most widely participated in was homework assistance at 33.3%, followed by reading and writing with the child at 25.6% and both allowing time for play and study at 11.5%.

The most frequently mentioned activity that the pre-school teachers expected parents to do was homework assistance at 46.6% followed by allowing time for studies and play at 17.3%, and provision of materials for use at home, 13.8%.

## 2. Skills Demonstrated by Parents

The second research objective was to establish the skills that parents had in helping their children with home learning. The skills included teaching the child to read out sounds, identify pictures, writing letters and numbers and pronouncing simple words. Prompted with the question of whether they thought they had the skills of helping their children with their home learning, no parent said that he/she completely lacked the required skills of teaching the child to read out sounds, identify pictures, write letters and numbers and pronounce simple words. This shows that given some training on how to assist their children with homework, parents could offer better support. When asked whether the school had offered them support on how to help their children to learn at home, 71.4% answered yes while 28.6% said no.

**Table 2: Children Commitment to Doing Homework**

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Always	4	9.5
Most of the time	11	26.2
Occasionally	14	33.3
Rarely	12	28.6
Never	1	2.4
Total	42	100.0

When asked whether they have encountered problems of children's homework not done, a majority of ECDE teachers, 33.3% said they experienced the problem occasionally, followed closely by those who experienced the problem rarely at 28.6% and most of the time at 26.2%. A few teachers said they always experience the problem at 9.5% while only 2.4% said they have never experienced the problem of children's homework not done. This shows 97.6% of teachers encounter the problem of children not doing the homework given to them.

### 3. Ways of improving parental involvement in their children's home learning

The third research objective was to examine ways of improving parental involvement in their children's home learning. The findings are presented in Table 4.

**Table 3: Improving Parental Involvement In Children's Home Learning**

Teachers Response	Frequency	Percent
Talk to individual parents	20	47.6
Hold parents meeting	13	31.0
Send letters to parents	3	7.1
Improve teacher parent relationship	5	11.9
Teacher to be strict	1	2.4
Total	42	100.0

According to teachers as in Table 3, talking to particular parents who did not adequately support their children's home learning was the most effective way of improving parental involvement at 47.6% followed by holding parents meetings at 31.0% and improving teacher-parent relationships at 11.9%. Others include sending letters to parents, 7.1%, and teachers being strict on those who do not do homework at 2.4%.

Probed with the question of ways of improving parental involvement in their children's home learning, a majority of head teachers said that parents should be sensitized through parents' meetings and seminars.

### 4. Availability of School Policy on Parental Involvement

The head teachers were asked whether they had a school policy on parental involvement which clearly states specific roles of parents as concerns their children's education, both at home and in school. Most of them admitted that they did not have a written policy but that they always communicated to parents about their specific roles during parents' meetings. Most of the roles were however the parents' roles in relation to school activities including payment of fees and provision of teaching and learning materials. Very few head teachers cited home learning activity as a role of parents. When probed further on

the home learning activities, they said they expected the pre-school teachers to communicate directly to the parents on how to help their children with their home learning activities.

## DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that the main activity that most parents did to facilitate their children's home learning was homework assistance which was also an expectation from the pre-school teachers. Others included reading and writing with the children, allowing time for study and play, buying materials to be used at home and observing progress. This is echoed by Epstein (1996) that learning at home includes how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning. Though reading and writing is also mentioned by teachers, their rating of the same was not as high as the one given by the parents. The teaching of life skills was also mentioned by pre-school teachers but not by parents.

The findings also revealed that while most of the parents had the knowledge and skills of helping their children with homework, they said that this was also dependent on what it is they were to help with. The reasons they gave was that the content they were taught during their school years is different from what is currently taught to their children.

This shows that for a majority of parents to effectively help their children's learning at home they need to be frequently updated on the content and methods currently in use. Though a majority, 71.4% said the school has offered them support on how to help with home learning, 28.6 said no support had been given to them at all. This implied that even those that received the support may have had challenges with helping their children with their learning at home. This could be that the 'support' was inadequate or done long time ago. It is therefore important that schools must be cognizant of parents' need for guidance and assistance in order to be effectively involved in this regard (UNESCO, 2005)

Most pre-school teachers said that they have encountered the problem of children's homework not done either occasionally or most of the times. It is therefore clear that although most parents said they helped with homework, there are still issues of consistency and frequency. As reported by Moon and Ivins (2004), most parents already understand that their role is significant but they need to be convinced there is more they can and should do. Schools also have an important role in convincing parents and care givers that their help and support will make a difference and is welcomed.

On how to improve parental involvement in their home learning, teachers said that talking to individual parents was the most effective method followed by holding parents' meetings to educate them and then improving teacher parent relationship. Both talking to particular parents and holding parents meetings agree with Mukuna and Indoshi (2012) findings that face-to-face meetings are highly satisfying for parents because their questions about their children are answered immediately. This is also supported by Wanjohi, (2010) that sensitization of parents on importance of ECDE is a major determinant of access to ECDE services.

An effective parental involvement programme and a written policy tend to be lacking in most schools and that schools use different ways to reach parents in an attempt to get them involved.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is clear that a substantial number of parents do support their children's home learning in a variety of ways and they only need to be equipped with the appropriate skills and knowledge to become more effective. With some training and encouragement parents could do a more effective job with their children's home learning activities.

- a) The Ministry of Education should therefore develop a policy that clearly defines parental roles in their children's education. ECDE teachers should also give parents specific

activities to do in supporting their children's learning at home and emphasize on their crucial importance in their children's education. This should be done by the end of the year 2018.

- b) The Education Officers should also partner with ECDE teachers to organize education programmes and conferences for parents to equip them with skills and knowledge in helping their children with home learning. This should be done regularly to ensure they are continually updated on any changes or emerging issues.
- c) The sub-county Directors of Education should also encourage regular communication between the parents and ECDE teachers so that parents are informed about their children's welfare and on any issues where their support is required.

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