Teachers' Perceptions on the Relationship between Social Competence and Reading Skills Acquisition in Primary School Pupils

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ABSTRACT

This paper set out to examine teachers' perceptions of the link between social competence skills and reading skills acquisition in the Kiswahili language for standard four pupils in public primary schools. This was a qualitative study, made on the population of the Kiswahili language subject teachers. The study was conducted in Babati Township Council, Manyara Region, Tanzania. It involved 17 selected public primary schools where one subject and school head teachers from each school were involved. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide. *The results show that the most important social competence skills for the acquisition of reading skills are communication skills, as other skills depend on the pupil's ability to communicate his/her ideas well. The study posits that social competence skills have a positive impact on pupils' acquisition of reading skills. The study recommends an additional curriculum that imparts pupils with social competence skills for reading and academic achievements at large.*

Keywords: *Perception, teachers, reading skills, social competence skills, public school*

INTRODUCTION
Reading can be defined as a receptive skill, which involves the ability to interpret or decode printed symbols. It is a skill, which is the ground of almost all processes of learning, and is necessary for pupils to learn other subjects (Geske & Ozola, 2008). More than 70 years ago, the international community declared literacy a basic human right (Smith-Greenaway, 2015). Unfortunately, this expectation has not become a realization for many children, and the high rate of illiteracy continues to

have an adverse effect in many nations (UNESCO, 2015). If a pupil's reading level is low, it implies difficulties in the acquisition of several other subjects and consequently obtaining education in general.

There has been a slight shift in the focus of schooling in recent decades. This is because traditionally, schools had focused on academic instruction; maths, language, arts, science, and social studies. Efforts, however, to educate the 'whole child' through social and emotional learning have proved to be important in improving the pupil's mental and physical health, alongside academic success (Durlak et al., 2011). Nonetheless, evidence shows that social competence and learning are related and should also be the focus of education. As a social environment, a school is where students get involved in classroom activities by self-regulating and harmoniously interacting with peers and teachers (Belsky, et al., 2006), and where expectations and norms are established.

Pupils not only learn academics in the classrooms but also how to acquire academic content basically through interacting with others (Westby, 1997). As a result, social competence skills are important for pupils to learn alongside academic skills. According to Lopes and Salovey (2006), emotional control, for instance, makes students concentrate and engage in classroom activities by positively interacting with others in the school community. Consequently, schools must develop pupils' social capabilities to produce not only responsible and good but also knowledgeable citizens (Zins et al., 2007). It is important to identify the contexts within which social competence skills programmes can have a commendable impact. Several aspects have been identified as being central to the effective implementation of social competence skills programmes; teachers being one of the important aspects (Graczyk et al., 2006).

Since teachers are the primary deliverers of learning instructions at schools, their perceptions about and support for social competence skills learning can have an impact on the adoption and sustainability of the learning programmes. Their beliefs also are the key indicators of their judgments and perceptions, which in turn, affect their teaching practices (Pajares, 1992). First of all, teachers' confidence in supporting social competence skills are linked with their adherence to the programmes and classroom management during lessons (Ringwalt, et al., 2003). In

addition, teachers are more likely to continue enhancing the development of social competence skills when they feel comfortable with and passionate about the programme (Rohrbach et al.,, 1993). Therefore, teachers' confidence has been associated with their perception concerning both the importance of; and challenges in relation to teaching social competence skills.

Another aspect that affects the effectiveness of social competence skills teaching is the teacher's commitment. Teachers have to be committed to promoting their ability to incorporate social competence skills into their classrooms against professional development. According to McCormick et al.,,(1995), professional development increases the likelihood of implementing social competence skills learning significantly. The commitment to social competence skills learning professional development from all school stakeholders, including the endorsement of a shared vision by the school community, is crucial for school success (Brackett, et al., 2011). The commitment of teachers to social skills competence learning influences their ability to support the pupils to attain both social competence and reading skills and to model the same skills they support in pupils.

The third important aspect determining teachers' adherence to social competence skills teaching programme is their perception of the importance of social competence skills to pupils' academic success, including reading (Buchanan, 2009). Acknowledging the important role of social competence skills is among the barriers to pupils' academic attainment. Teachers who perceive the development of pupils' social competence skills to be crucial just like other subjects (maths and others) are more likely to set aside time to incorporate social competence skills into their daily teaching practices (Pajares, 1992).

Furthermore, the extent to which teachers perceive that their schools support social competence skills teaching can influence the impact of the social competence skills' teaching and learning process. Leadership by heads of schools may affect the implementation of the programme at its inception, and continue to affect its sustainability over time. It is a fact that the teaching and learning effects are much stronger when the school administrations provide support and implementation quality (Ransford, Greenberg, Domitrovich, Small, & Jacobson, 2009).

Research has been done on the perceptions of teachers about educational prosperity, and the impact of their perceptions and expectations. According to Hayes (2013), perception is an important factor influencing early educational practices. In his study on perspectives of preschool teachers in Australia, Peters (2002) found that teachers perceived social competence skills as the most important factor for the development of practical skills related to independence, self-help, ability to listen, ability to read, sit still as well as taking turns; which have a positive link with reading skills acquisition.

Gresham, Elliott, and Black (1987) contend that the type of social competence skills perceived by teachers as critical for the pupil's academic success has implications for their selection of skills to teach. Thus, research has portrayed teachers to value academic-related skills more highly than social skills (Gresham et al., 1987). It should however be noted that schools are a social environment, and a lot of what pupils do to be achievers takes place in the form of social interactions among pupils themselves as well as other school community members. According to Knapczyk and Rodes (n.d), these social interactions do not occur only on the playground, school halls, and cafeterias, but they form the foundations of classroom instruction and manifest themselves in the teaching methods and activities teachers use while teaching the core basic skills.

Another study by O'Kane (2007) in Ireland, on the transition from preschool to primary school, found that early school teachers perceived three social competence skills as basic for reading performance among pupils at the primary school level: independence and self-help skills, communication and language skills, and the ability to concentrate sit and listen. Reading performance according to O'Kane involves understanding written text, developing and interpreting meaning, and using meanings of texts appropriate to the purpose and situation. Many teachers thought that children should be sent to school based on whether they have developed those skills in conjunction with their age. O'Kane's study forms a critical basis for the current study as it builds on the importance of pupils who are socially competent in relation to their reading performance.

Studies conducted in Tanzania indicate that some primary school pupils cannot read Kiswahili fluently by the time they complete their primary education (Ngorosho, 2011). Several factors have been put forward about pupils' poor reading acquisition. These factors are such as lack of in-

service training for teachers, lack of teacher incentives, a large number of pupils in one class and lack of teaching and learning facilities relevant to reading the Kiswahili language in schools (Lymo, 2015); inadequate mastery of literacy teaching methods, shortage of textbooks, supplementary books, and other reading materials, pupils' truancy, and regular changes of the curriculum without proper training of teachers on the changes (Ligembe, 2014); shortage of teachers, low teachers' salary, as well as the poor home environment (Ngorosho, 2010). Literature on the link between social competence skills and reading skills acquisition from Africa and Tanzania, in particular, is limited. Studying such a phenomenon in the Tanzanian context, therefore, would add a practical understanding of its impact in the African context. It is this background that necessitated this study; to investigate teachers' perceptions of the relationship between social competence skills and reading skills acquisition among standard four pupils in public primary schools.

METHODOLOGY
Scrutiny of the topic at hand required an in-depth understanding. As such, a qualitative research approach was appropriate to address the need of the study. Therefore, the author employed an in-depth interview to illuminate teachers' perceptions of the relationship between social competencies skills and reading skills acquisition. This study was conducted in Babati Township Council, Manyara Region in Tanzania. The region was purposefully selected to participate in the study because it is one of the moderate-performing regions in standard seven leaving examinations (Uwezo, 2017). The Council, Wards, and Schools were also purposively recruited to participate in the study because Babati Township Council has a mixture of urban and peri-urban schools. This mixture was important as the author's interest was to balance between good readers (in urban schools) and moderate readers (in peri-urban schools). A total of six out of eight wards were selected to participate in the study, with 17 schools out of 30 also selected from the six wards. Many schools were sampled from Bagara Ward because the ward was the largest, and had scattered schools; some in Babati town and others along the sides of the town (interior).

Table 1: Distribution of wards and schools

Ward	School
Maisaka	Sinai
	Kiongozi
	Maisaka
Nangara	Ziwani
	Nangara
Singe	Gendi
	Managha
Bonga	Bonga
	Himiti
Bagara	Darajani
	Babati
	Harambee
	Kwaang'w
	Komoto
	Oysterbay
Babati	Hangoni
	Waang'waray

Teachers (both subject and heads of schools) were purposively selected alongside their schools.

This study involved all standard four Kiswahili language subject teachers. The Kiswahili language was preferred because it is one of the emphasised items in the 2014 Education and Training Policy, as the national language (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, 2014). It is also used as a medium of instruction in public primary schools in Tanzania.

This study employed semi-structured interviews for collecting data. Questions were prepared and administered to the head teachers and subject teachers. The format and sequence of questions were dictated by the context and the experiences of the individual teachers, based on the researcher's best judgment at any given moment in the interview. Each interview session lasted for around 40-50 minutes. Interviews were meant to capture teachers' views on the relationship between possession of social competence skills, and reading acquisition in primary school pupils. Semi-structured interviews were preferred because they provided participants with the freedom to express their views on their terms.

The analysis of the interview data proceeded through the following three main steps: preparing and organising data; creating categories/themes; and coding, presentation, and interpretation. Preparation and organization of the data for analysis started in the field. This involved listening to each audio-taped interview. This practice not only enabled the researcher to familiarize himself with the data but also to obtain a general sense of the data. This was followed by a verbatim transcription of the interview proceedings. An inductive approach was employed to derive themes and allow unanticipated themes to emerge from the data set as well as help to determine whether the themes were well supported by the data from the field. The inductive phase involved reading the transcripts repeatedly.

After creating themes, transcripts were re-read for coding. This was done by identifying text elements – words, sentence (s), and or paragraph (s) – from each transcript and linking them into respective themes. Furthermore, all the coded data extracts for each theme were reviewed to determine whether they form a coherent pattern. This enabled the author to rework and refine the themes and related extracts. Data are presented simply and straightforwardly with rich descriptions supported by representative verbatim quotations. The interpretation of the findings is informed by a spiral-like movement, which involves going back and forth between the data and the evolving interpretation.

FINDINGS
Human beings are endowed with the abilities to hear, see, smell, touch, and taste; and they use these to sense the physical world and get aware of what happens around them. This process of sensing the physical world is completed by perception, which allows individuals to identify and recognize the presence of different kinds of stimuli, and evaluate and assign meanings to them (Broadbent, 2013). A person's attitude towards a phenomenon encompasses his or her point of view about that phenomenon (thought); how he or she feels about it (emotion), as well as the actions (e.g., behaviours) he or she engages in as a result of attitude towards that phenomenon.

Participants' Characteristics
While it was ideal to hear the voices of all the teachers in the region, their large number necessitated the sampling of 34 teachers (two teachers from each school) to represent the rest. Table 2 presents the background information of the studied teachers.

Table 2
Teachers' background information (N=34)

Variable		Number (N=34)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	6	17.7
	Female	28	82.3
Age	21-30	4	11.8
	31-40	16	47.0
	41-50	11	32.4
	51-60	3	8.8
Education	Grade A certificate	20	58.8
	Diploma in education	11	32.4
	Bachelor degree	2	5.9
	Master degree	1	2.9
Position	Head teacher	15	44.2
	Subject teacher	17	50
	Assistant head teacher	2	5.9
Teaching experience	1-10	5	14.7
	11-20	15	44.2
	21-30	8	23.5
	31-40	5	14.7
	40+	1	2.9

Table 2 indicates that more than half of the sampled teachers (28) were females. Very few (4) were young teachers (21-30 years); meaning that a good number of teachers who participated in this study were mature enough to fulfill their required teaching responsibilities. As it was anticipated by the researcher, many teachers (20) had Grade 'A' teaching certificates. This is because a grade 'A' certificate is the minimum required qualification for a Tanzanian teacher at the public primary school level. However, one teacher had a master's degree in education. Concerning teaching experiences, many teachers (23) had 11 to 30 years in the profession. Only one teacher had more than 40 years of teaching experience.

Teachers' Perceptions of Social Competence Skills in Primary School Pupils

The author inquired about the participants' perceptions of social competence skills in pupils. 31 participants (91.2%) out of 34 perceived a socially competent pupil as the generally punctual one. A punctual pupil

would go early to school, a pupil who would willingly engage in cleaning the school environment, attempt classroom assignments, and a pupil who never misses classroom sessions unnecessarily. In addition, a socially competent pupil was perceived as the one who would make follow ups of the comments given by teachers which relate to the assignments.

It was, however, argued that some pupils tend to display good social competence skills in schools, but not at their home. A good number of participants (24) asserted that the socially competent pupil displays the same skills at home and school as well. Participants added that well-disciplined pupils, for instance, can be traced from their families, and notorious pupils in schools normally display the same behaviours in their homes. Sometimes the situation can be worse at home because some pupils tend to be calm while in school as they fear teachers. The following quote from the Gendi Primary School subject teacher substantiates this view;

> A socially competent pupil here, first of all, I would identify him/her from the family he/she comes from. I first notice the way s/he is dressed when s/he comes to school. The way s/he responds to verbal interactions and instructions; you will just get to know him/her. Pupils who come from well-mannered families; families that protect their children are easily identified in and outside classrooms. They are different from those who come from anti-social families. You know that families differ in how they raise their children. There are families in which parents don't care about their children; children wake up in the morning, dress on their own, and sometimes come to school without eating, something which affects their state of learning. So, there is a big discrepancy between pupils who come from these two types of families.

It was further reported that socially competent pupils are easy to teach and handle in and outside classrooms compared to their counterparts. Participants considered pupils with poor social competence skills as those who are not cooperative, undisciplined, inattentive, disobedient, and other similar behaviours. Pupils with poor social competence skills, according to the participants, pose many challenges to teachers and fellow pupils. They require teachers' attention throughout the teaching and learning process. This may lead to unfinished lessons, and in the end, it affects curriculum coverage.

Additionally, the participants believed that a good number of pupils with poor social competence skills came from families with economic

hardship. It was found from the participants that a large number of pupils in Babati Township came from families with low socio-economic status, which according to the interviews, deprived them of social competence skills. The reason behind this is that parents or guardians from these families spend most of their time working to meet their daily basic needs, leaving no time to raise their children in proper manners. Similarly, the participants identified pupils raised by single parents as also lacking social competence skills. The Maisaka Primary School head said;

> Do you get me when I say that pupils come from families with hard life? Yeah, sometimes pupils come to school without eating anything at home. Sometimes they tell us that the parents are fighting all night, others come crying that their mothers have walked away as a result of fights. It's hard to raise these pupils in such situations, that's why they learn anti-social behaviours! It's like they raise themselves, they can't be socially competent.

It was also found out that some pupils lived with grandparents, mostly grandmothers, in the study area. The participants said that many youths in Manyara, especially girls had migrated to large cities such as Arusha, Dodoma, and Dar es Salaam for petty businesses or to work as barmaids. Participants further reported that because of their hard lives in cities, they tended to take babies they begotten back to their poor parents to raise in rural areas. This had a considerable in the raising of their children as old grandparents were not able to raise their grandchildren to the expectations.

Social Competence Skills on Pupils' Reading Skills Acquisition

The author investigated the teachers' perceptions of the link between pupils being socially competent and their ability to specifically read in the Kiswahili language. Participants were requested to provide their opinions on how they view pupils who are socially competent and their reading skills acquisition.

Generally, there was an agreement (among all the participants (100%) that pupils with social competence skills namely; obedience, attentiveness, cooperation, assertiveness, confidence, communication, self-control, and others, were likely to acquire reading skills faster than their counterparts. Such pupils were reported to be easy to teach because they would follow instructions properly, and would thus, understand what is taught easily too. It was noted from the participants that some pupils

with poor social competence skills also acquired reading skills easily. They referred to such pupils as exceptional. A subject teacher from Babati Primary School had the following to say in relation to social competence skills and reading acquisition;

> …just by looking at them, you will notice that socially competent pupils to a greater extent master reading skill easily, because, first of all, they are not afraid of trying new things. You will find them sometimes mispronouncing written words, yet they persist until they pronounce the word correctly. Their ability to interact with confidence also favours them. They confidently face teachers whenever they face a challenge in learning to read. There are those whom we can refer to as anti-social, but who still can acquire reading skills fast. These to me are exceptional, and I remember in college we learned about this group of pupils. But these are very few; most of the pupils with reading skills mastery are those who are socially competent.

Additionally, socially competent pupils were reported to be eager to read different materials, would ask questions in the classroom, and even go to the staffroom in case they needed more clarifications. This, in turn, increases their quest for reading, hence, acquiring reading skills faster than those with poor social competence skills. Teachers also reported enjoying interacting with socially competent pupils because they easily comprehend the classroom instructions compared to pupils with poor social competence skills. This results in teachers being more supportive in developing their reading skills.

DISCUSSION

As defined earlier, perception can be viewed as the process by which individuals interpret and organize sensations to produce a meaningful experience of the world. It was important to study the perception of teachers for social competence skills and reading acquisition in pupils. This is because teachers are considered central in nurturing both social and academic competencies.

Punctuality was emphasized, in and outside the school environment, as among the important aspects that define the pupil's mastery of social competence skills. Participants additionally stressed that socially competent pupils are teachable because of their high ability to follow instructions. It was reported that a large number of pupils with poor social competence skills came from families that were faced with hardship;

where parents and guardians spent most of their time trying to make their hands meet, rather than taking care of their pupils. More interestingly, there was a considerable number of pupils in the study area who were raised by single parents and grandparents. This had a great contribution to the poor raising of such pupils, hence the failure in acquiring proper social competence skills by pupils in the area. According to Farmer (2000), pupils with antisocial behaviour normally tend to have higher levels of conduct disorders and school dropouts. Therefore, pupils had to strongly behave on the prosocial behaviour dimension, and low on the antisocial behaviour dimension to be socially competent.

As for teachers' perceptions concerning social competence skills and reading acquisition, almost both head teachers and subject teachers (31 out of 34) in the schools studied thought that the two competencies (social and reading) are closely related; in the sense that socially competent pupils are more likely to succeed in reading compared to their counterparts. Teachers' perceptions according to Rosenthal (1994) have a great impact on the type of learning environment they create for learners, as well as their learners' academic success and beliefs about their own abilities. Learners perform better when their teachers perceive that they will succeed, partly because teachers handle learners differently when they hold high expectations for them.

The findings of the current study reflect those of Bowden, et al., (2003) who reported that teachers' attitudes, perceptions, and support of social competence skills can affect pupils' adoption, sustainability, and impact their reading ability. This is because they are the primary delivery of both social competencies and academic affairs. Pajares (1992) adds that teachers' perceptions of the relationship between social competence skills and reading success are key indicators of their beliefs and judgments, which, in turn, affect their teaching practices.

In their study on Teacher Perceptions of Students' Social Competence and School Adjustment in Elementary Schools in Lithunia, Magelinskaite-Legkauskiene, et al., (2016) found that teacher perception of social competence skills is an important factor in teacher perceptions of school adjustment in elementary grades. Teachers perceived that learning-related social competence skills activate motivational and cognitive processes that help in shielding the pupils from external and internal distractions and therefore facilitating academic prospects.

The consistency of the findings of the current study, and the existing empirical evidence has the basis on the fact that social competence skills, regardless of the differences in social and cultural contexts play similar roles in different aspects of human life. Teachers' expectations of learners' behaviour have the potential to promote educational experiences, including reading. It is also the fact that teachers are the pillars of schooling and learning, and their perceptions of the pupils' learning have an effect on every aspect of the educational process.

The participants were of the opinion that the pupils' mastery of these skills would help them catch up on the reading skills easily. Several studies also agree with the findings from the current study. Caprara et al.,, (2000) for instance posit that assertion skills are a catalyst for reading development. This would probably be because pupils with good assertion skills are confident in and outside their classrooms; they do not fear interacting with their peers, teachers, and other community members.

In addition, the current study also found that self-control and self-management skills were related to pupils' reading achievement, school/classroom adjustment, and even school readiness. Self-control includes the ability to control impulses, delay gratification, resist temptation and peer pressure, reflect on one's feelings, and monitor oneself (Han & Kemple, 2006). Duckworth and Seligman (2005) argue that self-control among school pupils cultivates the setting of high academic goals that yield an increase in effort resulting in higher grades. Concerning self-management skills, Davis et al. (2014) examined goal setting, academic self-efficacy, and self-management of grade three students. They came up with results that showed a positive relationship between skills and reading development.

Cooperation was highly ranked by the participants in the current study. The finding is related to what was found by Elias and Haynes (2008) that cooperation (i.e., relationship skills) at a time was significant to academic performance (reading and maths grades). In addition, previous research has shown that interpersonal competencies related to self-management are positively associated with reading achievement indices. For example, students with high self-discipline or self-management skills outperform their peers in reading ability, as well as on several other academic

performance variables, earning higher GPAs and standardized achievement test scores (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005).

CONCLUSION

Mastery of social competence skills is an important aspect of children's development. Social competence skills are more important at a younger age than in adulthood. The reviewed literature and the study findings show that the early years act as a foundation for individuals' development. Hence, imparting social competence skills in the early years is vital for the future success of children. With regard to reading skills, socially competent pupils are more likely to acquire and master reading skills than their counterparts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study focused on the relationship between the acquisition and mastery of reading skills in early primary school pupils and social competence skills. The findings revealed that social competence skills are important for the pupils' acquisition and mastery of reading skills in particular, academic performance, and life success in general. However, there were no specific practices that were meant for enhancing social competence skills in schools. Social competence skills in pupils were coincidentally developed while pupils were learning to read, or other academic subjects.

Adding a new curriculum with social competence skills teachings may be a big challenge in the teaching and learning process today. This is because schools are required to have pupils maintain higher levels of academic performance, or teachers' jobs may be compromised. Although it may be challenging to have an additional curriculum that imparts pupils with social competence skills, it has a lasting positive effect on the children's lives through positive social interactions and academic achievements as well. It is therefore imperative for the government through the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology to consider establishing social competence skills curriculum in the early years of basic education.

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