

Challenges in Enhancing Letter-Name Knowledge Acquisition for Public Pre-Primary Children in Shinyanga Region

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ABSTRACT

Letter Name Knowledge is among the most vital emergent literacy skills that predict future reading and writing among pre-primary children, and teachers are central to learning. Much has been researched on the factors influencing letter name acquisition, including the child's characteristics in the home and school environment. Less research has been done on pre-primary teachers' views on the factors they encounter in enhancing letter name skills in children. This study investigated pre-primary teachers' challenges in enhancing letter-name knowledge among pre-primary learners in the Shinyanga District Council, Shinyanga Region. The study identified challenges pre-primary teachers encounter in enhancing letter-name knowledge. The study also assessed the challenges pre-primary teachers face in enhancing the knowledge of letter names for pre-primary children with the guidance of the Whole-Child Approach. A qualitative approach and phenomenological design were utilised for the study. (to the point of saturation) pre-primary teachers were involved in the interview for data collection. The obtained data were analyzed thematically. The findings identified the following challenges: pre-primary children's use of mother tongue, inadequate teaching and learning facilities and instructional materials, lack of teachers' professionalism, large class size and instructional burden, children absenteeism and implementation of pre-primary curriculum. In conclusion, the identified challenges influence pre-primary teachers' effectiveness in enhancing letter name knowledge acquisition for public pre-primary children in the Shinyanga region. The study recommends that the Ministry of Science and Technology (MoEST) create a mother tongue policy for pre-primary children for quality, fair and holistic comprehensive curricula provision in rural areas.

Keywords: Letter Name- Knowledge, Pre-primary teachers, Public Pre-primary Classes

INTRODUCTION

Letter-name knowledge (LNK) is essential for kindergarten preparedness (Knight, 2017). Before phonemic awareness, letter name knowledge is crucial for the child's understanding of the letters representing the sounds in speech (Paige et al. 2017). According to Chepchumba, Limo, and Koross (2019), LNK is one of the basic literacy skills and one of the best indicators (Edwards, 2010) that a child will succeed in reading and writing letters as they age. (Heilmann, Moyle & Rueden, 2018; Piasta, Petscher, & Justice, 2012). LNK involves recognising each grapheme's upper and lowercase shapes, which are crucial steps towards successful skills in reading and writing (Paige et al. 2017). The ability to recognize grapheme's upper and lowercase shapes and to read and write letters in pre-primary classes provides a critical foundation for a child's early literacy development and academic success in their later years (Alsubaie, 2022; Roberts, Vadasy, & Sanders, 2018; Larsen, Hjetland, and Schauber, 2022). Despite their relevance, Shinyanga District Council pre-primary teachers struggled to enhance their knowledge of letter names. In 2021, pre-primary teachers participated in an environmental print intervention.

The study examined how environmental print improves emergent literacy skills. Emergent literacy skills, including letter name knowledge, are behaviours young children show as they begin to respond to approximate reading and writing acts (Septian & Syaodih, 2020). For this reason, a researcher was interested in working on the challenges for effective letter name knowledge acquisition for children. The acquisition of LNK pertains to a child's capacity to recognize and produce names' alphabet letters (Kosanovich, Phillips, and Willis, 2020). Recognition requires children to identify uppercase and lowercase letters and distinguish their features (Paige, Rupley, Smith, Olinger, and Leslie, 2018). The production and recognition of letter names are indicators of acquired LNK. By being teachers of young children, teachers are obliged to ensure that no child under their care is left behind producing letter names correctly. In this context, the development of LNK is critical for brain and cognitive development and a foundation for future learning (Noble, Tottenham & Casey, 2005). As children age, without a proper understanding of LNK, effective intervention becomes more complex and costly (Perez-Johnson & Maynard, 2007). This paper reflects on

the practices pre-primary education in Tanzania has adopted to familiarize children of age five with LNK for one year to prepare for formal primary education (URT, 2023). The paper seeks to establish pre-primary teachers' challenges in developing children's LNK.

Research Objective and Questions

This study aimed to establish the current practices and challenges pre-primary school teachers encounter in developing LNK in Tanzania. In this regard, the study focused on the following lines of inquiry:

1. What are the possible challenges that pre-primary teachers face in developing LNK?
2. How the identified challenges influence holistic education

The Rationale for the Research

Pre-primary education is used interchangeably with preschool or early childhood education (ECE), focusing on services for children aged three to six (Mtahabwa & Rao, 2010). Several LNK issues in Tanzania justified the need for this paper. First, the education meant for pre-primary children in Tanzania has concentrated mainly on developing language and communication (listening, speaking, reading and writing). The development of LNK, a crucial dimension in language and communication in young children (Piastra et al., 2012) and the best predictors of future reading skills (Hammill, 2004), has been largely neglected. As a result, this negligence marginalises the foundation of language and communication development in young children. Secondly, a growing body of evidence globally indicates that many children start first grade without adequate early literacy skills. So often, this situation is linked to their parents' low socioeconomic status (SES), where these children are not exposed to literacy culture or supported academically by their parents and siblings. In Tanzania, scholars have acknowledged widespread cases of low-quality yearly childhood education (Ndijuye & Rao, 2018). Thirdly, the role of pre-primary school is not only limited to the production and preparation of literate children but also involves ensuring that children learn through play and discovery (Mitchell et al., 2008), which serve as pillars of good moral character.

Theoretical Framework

The whole-child approach in education guided the study in assessing the challenges pre-primary teachers face in enhancing letter name knowledge for pre-primary children. The approach guides educators to think more holistically and comprehensively about providing academic and non-academic support for learners (Slade & Griffith, 2013). John Dewey was the first philosopher to implicate the importance of educating the whole child. The Whole Child Approach, rooted in child development theory, proposes a broader definition of achievement and accountability that promotes the development of children. A whole-child approach to education is an umbrella approach that spans content areas and demands whole-school improvement (Slade, 2013). The whole-child approach in education involves five tenets: Healthy, safe, supportive, Engaged and Challenged (Wise & Siddiqi, 2022). Chiang, Meagher, and Slade (2015) elaborated on each tenant. Healthy: each child joins the school in good physical shape and learns about and practices a nutritious lifestyle. Safe: every child is taught in a physically and passionately innocuous atmosphere. Engaged: Every child energetically participates in learning and is linked to the school; supported: every child has admission to individualized learning and is encouraged by competent, attentive teachers. Challenged: each child is faced logically and equipped for achievement in school or additional study. Regarding the current study, the whole-child approach aligns with the curriculum and syllabuses for pre-primary Education (URT 2023). They both see the child as the main target of the curriculum and that the curriculum must consider every child's needs, requirements, age, ability, and culture. Regarding the holistic development of a child, pre-primary teachers must develop learning experiences pertinent to an individual child, considering the child's identity, areas of proficiency, and strengths.

Methodology

This study was conducted in Shinyanga district, Shinyanga region, Tanzania. According to UWEZO (2017), between 2011 and 2015, the Shinyanga region was reported to be among the seven areas showing low performance (32%) in Kiswahili. However, district-wise, Shinyanga district (44%) has been doing poorly in literacy for children aged 3–9 years. On the other hand, according to the EQUIP Tanzania baseline assessment in 2014, it was reported that the Shinyanga region is among the five regions where 77% of the children come from homes where Kiswahili is not the primary language

(language minority) spoken at home, it might be a reason why the region and the district in particular, is doing poorly in literacy, in Kiswahili. Additionally, in two analysis assessments of standard two of 2019 and 2021 (URT, 2020, 2022), Shinyanga regions 2019 performed 69.40%; in 2021, 48.72 % in reading dropped by 20.78%. The assessments showed children lack foundation letter-name skills, which decreases on time. Children who do not know letter names have trouble participating in classroom discussions about reading (Tirtorelli, Bowles & Skibbe 2017).

The qualitative approach was used to capture in-depth information. The present study involved public pre-primary teachers who teach children between the ages of 4 and 5, as stated in the pre-primary curriculum (URT, 2016). Twenty in-service public pre-primary teachers were involved in the study. They were purposefully selected from public primary schools. These teachers were chosen on purpose because they are the ones who instruct the pre-primary classes on the required competencies. The unstructured interview was used for data collection. The obtained information was analyzed, and challenges were identified, presented and discussed in themes. Data generated from the conversations (interviews) were transcribed and analysed thematically. As Huberman & Miles (1994) prescribed, this data analysis process involved three stages. The first stage involved transcription, where the data were summarized and reduced to make necessary adjustments. The second stage involved organising the data to generate significant themes, followed by data interpretation and conclusion.

Findings and Discussion

This study examines pre-primary teachers' challenges in the Shinyanga district council while improving LNK. The study's findings were gathered from qualitative data from unstructured interviews conducted with pre-primary teachers about the challenges they face when enhancing LNK. These opinions were presented and discussed in themes, and each theme was assessed based on the whole-child approach in education.

Children's Use of Mother Tongue

Mother tongue is arguably a natural instrument of human thought and communication. Burton (2013) defined the mother tongue as a language a

person acquires in the early years. In the present study, pre-primary teachers in Shinyanga District Council reported children's use of their mother tongue as a big challenge they encounter when enhancing the development of LNKin children.

Teacher A said:

It is challenging to teach letter names to children because of the limited knowledge of the Kiswahili language. Most children speak Kisukuma, their mother tongue, and they usually speak this language in school and even in classrooms. When it comes to uttering the letters in the Kiswahili language, they use Kisukuma. For instance, a Sukuma child cannot differentiate between an alphabet name of L and R. It takes them a lot of time to practice and acquire the appropriate knowledge of the letter's name. It becomes my responsibility to translate Kiswahili to Sukuma language and then from Sukuma to Kiswahili for effective teaching. In My class, children have an advantage because I am also from SUKUMA and can understand my students' challenges. (Teacher A)

The present study findings on children's use of their mother tongue is a challenge pre-primary teachers encounter when enhancing letter name knowledge. The present study concurs with Nzwala (2015) and involved Pre and Lower Primary student teachers. The present study findings are inconsistent with Njogu's (2015) in Kenya and Awopetu's (2016) study in Nigeria, which revealed that the mother tongue contributes positively to preschool learning. Parental language input is a critical component of the early learning environment (Rowe and Weisleder, 2020). Furthermore, Awopetu (2016), in an experimental study, found that utilising a mother tongue in early childhood classrooms improved learning. The importance of the language of instruction for quality and equitable education is recognized in the Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 4) (Kennett, 2021). Studies show that many countries prioritize national or official languages (second language) as the medium of instruction, often not the languages children speak at home (Kosonen, 2017). Nonetheless, a negative impact on learning is demonstrated to exist when home and school languages diverge, according to UNESCO (2016). A study conducted in 2010 by SACMEQ III data found a positive correlation between children's achievement, particularly in reading,

and the use of the language of instruction (Trudell, 2016). Moreover, reading skills are best enhanced by using the mother language (Mohohlwane, Taylor, Cilliers & Fleisch, 2023). Within the framework of this research, the simultaneous use of Kiswahili and the mother tongue for learning results in inadequate teacher-child interaction. Consequently, children cannot receive adequate support and are not challenged and engaged fully in acquiring letter name knowledge in their mother tongue, which is the most accurate predictor of literacy achievement. However, research has shown that using a child's mother tongue can increase the likelihood of family and community involvement in their education, decrease attrition, and improve classroom participation (Trudell, 2016). For instance, Kenya, a multilingual country in Africa (Akkari, 2022) and Finland in Europe (Hughes, 2023) are countries doing better in public early childhood education. In Kenya, Kiswahili and English are the country's official languages; the former is the national language (Oluoch, 2017). Children have a right to be taught in the language of the catchment area in classes (grades) 1-3, particularly in rural areas. Finland is a bilingual country by its constitution; Finnish and Swedish are official languages, and children who speak other languages are supported in their language development (Garvis, Harju-Luukkainen, & Flynn, 2018).

Inadequate Teaching and Learning Facilities and Instructional Materials

Facilitating the development of LNK requires a lot of teaching and learning materials and resources (Ilomo & Mlavi 2018). Instructional materials are all tools that teachers use to make learning more exciting and memorable (Tety, 2016). The teaching of LNK is made more accessible by the availability of instructional materials, resources and facilities. Pre-primary teachers gave opinions on their challenges regarding LNK facilities and instructional materials when enhancing LNK.

Teacher B reported:

A significant challenge for me in teaching pre-primary classes is the lack of a classroom specific to this level of children. Many pre-primary schools share the same classes as primary school children. In most cases, I must conduct my teaching outside, under a tree. When it rains, we are forced to mix them with those in primary education and most of the time, they

don't come to school. This is a challenge because I don't have a room full of resources for children to play and explore. Sometimes, there is no continuation in learning alphabet letter names....., which affects the use of teaching aids (Teacher B).

The present study's findings concur with Chepkong (2017) on the shortage of classrooms, which hinders pre-primary teachers from effectively enhancing LNK. Furthermore, Chepkonga (2017) found a significant relationship between learning facilities and quality of Early Childhood Development and education provision. The present study is also supported by Altun, Erden, and Snow (2018), Guo, Justice, Kaderavek, and McGinty (2012), Palmer, Fleming, Horn, Butera, Lieber, and Palmer (2018), and Xu, Hin, Reed, and Hutchinson (2014). These scholars indicate positive correlations between physical environment characteristics and the development of children's emergent literacy skills. For example, Guo, Kaderavek, & McGinty (2012) and Zhang et al. (2015) found that the quality of the classroom literacy area is significantly associated with children's alphabet knowledge and name-writing abilities. This suggests that a teacher can only uphold the standard of the class if it has specifically been assigned to pre-primary children. The findings show that pre-primary teachers intend to use teaching aids but have no space to hang or store teaching and learning materials. The present findings concur with Bitok (2015). The author's content availability of instructional resources depends on storage.

Teacher Professionalism

Tweve (2011) defines teacher professionalism as competence, performance, and conduct, representing the educator's aims, abilities, and standards and directly affecting teaching effectiveness. Teachers' professionalism was also reported by pre-primary teachers and identified as a challenge influencing the teaching of letter name knowledge to children.

It was reported by Teacher C as follows:

I teach letter naming without having proper knowledge. Teachers differ in the way we address letter names of the alphabet. For instance, for alphabet letters (B uppercase lowercase), I used to tell children to say (the Kiswahili alphabet) 'ba;' other teachers in the nearby school teach their

children to say 'be' (Kiswahili alphabet). Others use the letter names 'bu' (Kiswahili alphabet). From what I have shown, teachers tend to teach how they feel is appropriate because they lack the training to enhance LNK properly” (Teacher C).

The above quotation shows that teachers in the same district differ in developing children's LNK. Other teachers also reported their lack of professionalism in pre-primary education, as Teacher J observed:

Professionally, I was trained as a primary school teacher, but now, I was assigned to teach a pre-primary class in 2020..... I use my primary school teaching knowledge to teach pre-primary. Sometimes, I encounter many issues I cannot handle (Teacher J).

Another pre-primary teacher reported on the issue of professionalism, Teacher H said:

It is six years since I started teaching pre-primary classes, and I don't remember attending a seminar or workshop on teaching children. Even when I enhance my letter name knowledge, I use strategies I know myself, like children singing alphabet letters or reading environmental print with alphabet letters embedded with pictures. These are two strategies I know, and I remember using them when I was at kindergarten level; our teacher used to force us to sing alphabet letters to be able to give the names of the alphabet (Teacher H)

Pre-primary teachers in Shinyanga District Council are not professionals who teach pre-primary classes. A lesson from Finland and Kenya contradicts the findings. In Kenya, a teacher must possess a minimum professional qualification of a diploma in early childhood education (ECE) from a recognized institution to qualify to teach pre-primary school. A teacher must be registered by the Teachers Service Commission and possess a valid medical certificate of good conduct. Finland recruits the top third of each graduate cohort as school teachers (Ismail & Awang, 2017). The current study's findings are consistent with Ndijuye, Mligo, and Machumu (2020), Ali et al. (2022) in Tanzania and Kamwitha and Ibrahim (2020) in Kenya on adequately trained teachers in ECE. In emphasis, Ntumi (2016) in Ghana

found that most preschool teachers do not understand the early childhood curriculum as challenging. According to Hayden and Blaya (2005), children at the margins may be taught by those at the margins of the profession. The pre-primary teachers also reported a lack of continuous professional development regarding teaching ECE, which concurs with Ali, Mligo and Nsolezi (2022). Cabell and Downer (2011) found teachers receiving a higher level of support had children who made more significant advances in language and literacy than teachers using simply a curriculum supplement. Blachman, Tangel, Ball, Black, and McGraw (1999), as referenced in Olson, Wadsworth and Samuelsson (2010), demonstrated that kindergarten children whose teachers underwent training to prioritise phonemic awareness and letter knowledge exhibited more significant improvements in fundamental reading abilities compared to teachers who adhered to the standard curriculum.

According to Lieberman and Schwartz (2012) and Piasta & Wagner (2010), how early educators approach letter instruction matters for children's development of letter-name knowledge. The aforementioned illustrates the significance of teaching professionalism to pre-primary teachers in improving emergent literacy skills, such as letter name knowledge and overall literacy development. As demonstrated by Haslip and Gullo (2017), early childhood education serves as the initial social system to recognize children's capabilities and potential as active participants in societal progress, as well as the initial educator of children beyond the confines of the household. According to Mupa and Chinooneka (2015), a professional teacher can handle learning challenges in the early years when child growth and development are not exceptional. Mupa and Chinooneka (2015) said that professionalism is needed for pre-primary teachers to understand the children's skills and encourage, engage, and push them in learning and be conscious of their health. However, the failure to adequately prepare teachers who can educate all children is evidence of pedagogical, instructional, and conceptual problems in teachers (Haslip and Gullo (2017). Therefore, the lack of teacher professionalism challenges teachers and letter name knowledge acquisition. The biggest challenge hinders the child's holistic development as it touches on five Whole Child Education approach tenets. Being unprofessional, a teacher fails to engage, challenge, and support the children's learning.

Large Class Size and Instructional Burden

Large class size was also reported as a challenge in Early Childhood Education (ECE); as Kamwitha (2023) observed, large class size is of principal significance in teaching and learning. Class size has also been used globally as an indicator for measuring and assessing progress in pre-primary education (UNESCO, 2005). Pre-primary teachers in this study reported a challenge with large classes, having many children in one classroom, as Teacher F reported:

Many children in one class are a big challenge when teaching letter names. My class has more than a hundred pupils. With this number, it is impossible to promote meaningful LNK (Teachers F)

In addition to what has been reported by Teacher F, Teacher D Commented:

I teach more than sixty pre-primary children, and I am also expected to have a large class size of class one. Because of this, I am forced to use the same teaching aids for both classes (Teacher D).

These findings contradict what is stated in the Tanzania Pre-primary Curriculum, which states that the teacher-to-teacher ratio is supposed to be 1:25 (URT, 2016, 2023). Children in smaller classrooms gain more literacy skills by the end of preschool (Ali et al., 2022). Further, Ruggles (2003) found a relationship between class size and children's achievement. A study by Francis and Barnett (2019) found that smaller class sizes enable teachers to devote more time to each child and less time to class management. Pre-primary teachers who maintain a low teacher/child ratio are more inclined to provide individualised attention, facilitate interaction, and accommodate each child's unique aptitudes and drive (Kamwitha & Ibrahim, 2020). Furthermore, pre-primary teachers reported teaching a pre-primary class and class grade one a burden. The current study is consistent with Gonzales, Guimary and Gabunilas (2022), who found no correlation between the well-being and workload of instructors and their children's academic achievement. The discussion implies that other factors besides teachers' workload hinder the

effective teaching of letter name knowledge. Regarding a child's holistic development, the five tenets of the Whole Child Approach are also impacted by large class sizes and instructional burdens, as was discovered in the challenge of the lack of teacher professionals in early childhood education.

Children Absenteeism

According to Atkins and Kinder (2000), children's absenteeism is a habitual pattern of absence from school. The public pre-primary teachers in Shinyanga District Council reported children's absenteeism as a challenge that hinders the effective acquisition of LNK.

Teacher B reported;

Some children sometimes do not attend school continuously, which affects their learning of alphabet letter name knowledge. A child may stay at home for a week to three, even a month, and by the time they come to school, others are ahead in the lesson, and the truant child then lacks continuity; it is so difficult to go back and teach few children instead of going on with teaching, this influence pre-primary curriculum implementation” (Teacher, B).

It has been reported that child absenteeism hinders pre-primary teachers' ability to enhance the knowledge of letter names to children. The results align with the research conducted by Rhoad and Justice (2018), Anderson (2022), Ansari and Gottfried (2021), and Gottfried and Kirksey (2017). Rhoad and Justice (2018) conducted a study in preschool that found children who had frequent absences made less progress in literacy over the academic year, and other previous researchers focused on primary education. It means that the issue of children's absenteeism extends beyond the pre-primary classes and impacts subsequent educational levels. Studies show that if learners miss school, they do not learn, ultimately failing or dropping out (Mboweni, 2014). Children's absenteeism hinders them from getting full support from their teacher in learning and enhancing letter name knowledge. Children also may not be engaged or challenged because they lack continuity in acquiring letter name knowledge. On the other hand, due to children's absenteeism, pre-primary teachers fail to focus on the child's health as an implication of their growth and development. Conversely, due to children's absences from school

or class for some days, pre-primary teachers neglect to emphasize the significance of a child's health concerning their development and growth.

Pre-primary Curriculum Implementation

Implementing a pre-primary curriculum was also a challenge for pre-primary school teachers. In comparing a pre-primary curriculum of 2014 and that of 2016, Teacher 'C' reported;

...the other time uppercase and lowercase letter naming were taught together, went hand in hand, but the modern curriculum (2016) ... things have changed, a teacher has to teach LNK of the lowercase in pre-primary classes, and the uppercase alphabet name to be taught when a child is in standard one...my question is, how are these kids going to assimilate the letter names ...

Teacher C went on:

For instance, in pre-primary classes, a child is told to name the lowercase letter b as "be," and the upper uppercase letter B (be) will be enhanced in grade one. A teacher has work to refer to what has been enhanced while a child was in pre-primary level, a lot of work to be done for me and confusion to a child... and how about those who did not attend pre-primary classes? The issues here are confusing. We better leave teaching children letter names at the pre-primary level and teach them both letter names in uppercase and lowercase when they reach grade one or let them be enhanced in the pre-primary level (Teacher C).

The present study's findings showed a challenge in implementing the pre-primary curriculum 2016, which concurs with Ali et al. (2022) from Zanzibar. The pre-primary teachers were concerned with sequentially teaching lowercase and uppercase letters. The lowercase letters are enhanced at the pre-primary level, and uppercase letters to be mastered when children reach the one-primary education level. The pre-primary teachers see simultaneous teaching of uppercase to lowercase letters as good because it lessens the instructional burden of repetition. The present study findings, in line with Jones and Reutzell, Clark and Jones (2012) and Turnbull et al. (2010), show

that children learn lowercase letters by applying capital letters, which is inconsistent with the current pre-primary curriculum. It implies that the pre-primary teachers fail to support, engage, and challenge the children in acquiring letter name knowledge due to instructional burden.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study, it is concluded that pre-primary teachers enhance LNK in children. However, pre-primary teachers encounter challenges infacilitating the development of LNK for pre-primary children in Shinyanga and other regions of Tanzania, particularly in rural areas. The challenges include children’s use of their mother tongue, inadequate teaching and learning facilities and instructional materials, lack of teachers’ professionalism, large class sizes, frequent absenteeism of the children, and the pre-primary curriculum itself. The challenges affect the ability of pre-primary teachers to deliver holistic education to children. In breaking the reading code and adhering to the whole child Approach, the study recommends the following: the Ministry of Education and Technology (MoEST) should think about formulating a medium of instruction policy that can encourage the use of catchment areas for quality and equitable education; the MoEST should establish a policy regarding teachers’ professionalism level when teaching pre-primary classes; the MoEST should ensure that every school in the country has adequate classes to facilitate effective learning and instruction as well as schools to have the necessary instructional materials; school heads should ensure that pre-primary teachers are empowered by continuous professional development to achieve excellence in every child’s acquisition of emergent literacy skills, including letter name knowledge. Research must be done on pre-primary teachers' perception of using the mother tongue for quality and equity education provision.

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