



Home-Learning Practices in Kenya: Views of Parents and Education Officers

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Abstract

In order for children to acquire meaningful education, families are advised to participate in learning activities at home. Such activities range from monitoring homework, problem-solving to reading with children during leisure time. But home-learning was claimed to receive little attention from key stakeholders among primary schools in Kenya's Kakamega County. This study therefore, was meant to explore the home-learning practices in the sampled schools. A review of the literature relevant to home-learning as well as interviews were conducted. The interview participants, who were purposively selected, included twelve parents, thirteen Parent Teacher Association (PTA) chairpersons and ten District Quality Assurance and Standards Officers (DQASOs). Guided by interview schedules, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted. The findings were presented in a narrative format backed by verbatim quotations. The findings revealed gaps with respect to the home-learning practices in the county. On this basis, efforts could be combined towards strengthening home-learning so as to improve both children's academic achievement as well as behaviour.

Keywords: Home-learning, Interviews, Kakamega County, Kenya, Practices.

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1. Introduction

Various studies suggest that the development of strong bonds between the family and school ensure that children acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills they require for life (UNICEF, 2003; Republic of Kenya (ROK), 2010; Florez, 2011). Among others, high levels of parental involvement correlate with improved academic performance, higher grades, more positive attitudes toward school, higher homework-completion rates, fewer placements in special education, academic persistence, lower dropout rates and fewer disciplinary actions (Xu and Filler, 2008). Sanders and Sheldon (2009) assert that the schools that have improved their partnership programme with the parents and the community have fewer learners sent to the principal, given detentions or suspensions. This claim is reiterated by Richardson (2009) who notes that better behaviour among learners is a major advantage of parental involvement.

As per The Net Industries (The Net Industries (TNI), 2013) although parental involvement may be reflected in current educational policies and practices, what this means is not always clear. Accordingly, parental involvement includes a wide range of actions but generally refers to both the parents' and family members' use of and investment in resources in their children's schooling. Such investment can occur in or outside of the school with the intention of improving children's learning. Parental involvement at home includes discussions about schoolwork, helping with homework and reading with children. On the other hand, parental involvement at school can be in the form of the parents volunteering in the classroom, attending workshops, and cultural and sporting events (TNI, 2013).

According to the Centre for the Education and Study of Diverse Populations (CESDP) (2012) parent participation should not be restricted to indicate only the parents, fathers and mothers. Instead, it should be interpreted broadly to include all the adults who play an important role in the child's family life, since other adults, including the grandparents, aunts, uncles, step-parents, siblings and guardians may be responsible for the child's education, development and well-being. Epstein *et al.* (2002) assert that the home - school partnership makes the school subjects more meaningful for the learners. This includes reading, writing, mathematics, science, planning for college, as well as for work.

In particular, it is important that families help children to learn while at home. Indeed, home-learning activities can be helpful to all families. Hence, there is need to build sound social networks and relationships between schools and diverse families Chrispeels and Gonzalez (2006). Home-learning involves families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curriculum-related activities and decisions. Thus, teachers should be encouraged to design homework that enables the learners to share and discuss interesting assignments (Epstein and Salinas, 2004). Jeynes (2007) asserts that parents who monitor their children's homework and school attendance into junior and senior high school continue to influence their achievement later in life.

Florez (2011); Epstein (2009) and the National Association of School Psychologists (2005) identify the possible channels for family participation as monitoring the completion of homework; regular communication with the school on the learners' academic progress and conduct; sharing resources and seeking partnerships with the educators; engagement in school decision-making and governance; volunteering as committee members of parent bodies, and engaging in recreational reading with their children. Madison (2000) observes that family-involvement programmes are effective ways of facilitating partnerships between the home and the school.

Most important, in a home- school partnership, the parents create school-like families which recognize that each child is also a learner. In such a case, the families reinforce the importance of school, homework and activities that build the learner's skills and feelings of success. On their part, communities, which include groups of parents working together, create school-like opportunities, events and programmes that reinforce, recognize and reward the learners for good progress, creativity, contributions and excellence.

It is worth noting that children's own perceptions of their parents' involvement and expectations are also effective and influential in their education. At home, the parents can demonstrate their involvement by reading to their child, assisting with homework, having regular discussions about the school or schoolwork with their child, and conveying their expectations for their child's future (Obeidat and Al-Hassan, 2009). On their part, the teachers need to contact the homes to notify the parents of a job done well or their child's progress, not only when they are lacking in their performance, or when their behaviour is causing problems.

Parents can have positive effects on their children's reading skills and boost their reading comprehension by reading to them and making sure there are always books available in the home (Erlendsdottir, 2010). Studies indicate an overwhelming connection between literary resources in the homes and the children's reading skills (Glasgow and Whitney, 2009; Sanders and Sheldon, 2009). Accordingly, although the teachers and the schools have a significant influence on the children's learning to read in the first grades, the parents still remain very influential later. The parents can also assist their children with the transition from one school level to another, or from one school to another.

Kenya's Ministry of Education (MOE) (2011) stipulates that the parents should form school committees to support the teachers in running the schools, to monitor their children's progress and to support the teachers in their work. Parents are also expected to assist the children with their homework; facilitate every child's access to school without discrimination, ensure that the school environment is free from crime, drugs and alcohol, ensure the proper use of the school funds and other resources, and ensure that the school environment is clean, and that the pupils have a sufficient supply of water and adequate sanitary facilities.

In spite of the numerous benefits that accrue from strong partnerships between families and schools, including home- learning to boost the quality of the education of children, it was claimed that these were hardly being developed in primary schools in Kakamega County, Kenya (MOE, 2010). On this basis, the key research question was posed as:

How effective are home-learning practices in primary schools in Kakamega County, Kenya?

To achieve the aim of this study, the following questions were derived from the main one:

a) What are the practices regarding home-learning in primary schools in Kakamega County, Kenya in the sampled primary schools as explored through interviews with parents, Parent Teacher Association (PTA) chairpersons and District Quality Assurance and Standards Officers (DQASOs)?

b) In the light of the findings of the literature study and the empirical inquiry, what recommendations can be proposed to enhance home-learning in primary schools in Kakamega County, Kenya?

2. Research Methodology

A combination of a literature study and an empirical investigation using interviews was employed in this study. Qualitative data were gathered by means of interviews. The interview participants, who were believed to be principal sources of the envisaged data, were purposively identified and included 12 parents, 13 PTA chairpersons in primary schools and 10 DQASOs. As per [Mugenda and Mugenda \(2003\)](#) as well as [Kathuri and Pals \(1993\)](#) it is the researcher's prerogative to select those respondents who stand to make realization of the aims of the study possible. Individual semi-structured interviews for the parents and the PTA chairpersons as well as DQASOs were done.

To enhance the validity of the instruments, a pilot study was conducted in two primary schools in the neighbouring Vihiga County. It is worth noting that these schools had similar characteristics to those of the ones involved in the actual study. In particular, the information obtained during piloting was used to revise the interview guides before they were used in the main study, as well as attending to any other anomalies. This also helped to avoid pre-empting the results. Hence, two parents, two PTA chairpersons and two DQASOs were interviewed using pilot interview schedules. All the data-gathering instruments were also scrutinized by relevant experts before their administration.

The data were analyzed qualitatively and presented in a narrative form, substantiated by verbatim quotations. The recorded interviews were first transcribed before being analyzed through content analysis. According to [Neuman \(2000\)](#) this is a technique that can be used to examine information or content, in written or symbolic material ([Neuman, 2000](#)). The emerging themes were linked to the literature reviewed. This was followed by presentation of the findings, drawing of conclusions and recommendations.

3. Findings and Discussions

[Florez \(2011\)](#) and [NASP \(2005\)](#) identified some of the potential avenues for family participation in learning at home such as the following, namely monitoring homework and education in general, leisure-time reading with the children, and participation in problem-solving teams. According to this study, both the PTA chairpersons and the parents reported that they regularly received reports of their children's progress in respect of their learning and conduct.

As one parent remarked, *"Reports regarding a child's progress in learning and behavior is guaranteed, at least twice a term."*

Accordingly, this was done through such means as report cards, particularly at the end of the school term of three months, SMSs, phone calls, and academic days involving specific classes.

Most of the participants noted that they occasionally had a discussion with the teachers concerning the learning progress and conduct of their children. The parents noted that they understood the assessment system as given on the report cards. However, report cards excluded illiterate parents.

"I can't read nor write. So I don't comprehend the system of assessment used on pupils' report forms," testified an illiterate parent.

[Epstein \(2009\)](#) advises that school-home and home-school communications need to be done in a language and reading level that all the family members can understand.

[Chrispeels and Gonzalez \(2006\)](#) assert that home-learning activities can be helpful to all the families, hence building social networks and relationships between the schools and the diverse families are important. The findings confirmed that most of the parent participants and all the PTA participants, except one, discussed the homework assignments with their children. The parents assisted and/or checked their children's homework by way of confirming whether the right homework was done, the difficulties encountered and the attention given to the teachers' comments and/or expectations, where appropriate.

"It is routine. I've to check my daughter's homework. I do assist her where necessary," observed a mother of a class three girl.

As one PTA chairperson remarked, *"In the recent past, I've helped my son to write good compositions in both English and Kiswahili languages. He now writes creatively."* Another parent noted, *"I've to do everything possible to be at home early enough to assist my daughter complete homework, especially in Mathematics."*

In the case of a parent who could neither read nor write, other family members were called in to assist with the homework.

She said, *"Older siblings of my child check her homework, they know how to go about this, and correct her accordingly."*

However, according to another illiterate parent, *"It is the responsibility of the individual child to do his/her homework. Why should the child be assisted to do it?"* he queried.

Clearly, there was a need to provide information to such parents concerning why as well as how to help their children do their homework.

The parents also identified many other favourite activities that they shared with their children at home or while the children were out of school, such as chatting during mealtimes, reading and/or telling stories, reading religious books and texts, taking walks, visiting farms, kicking a soccer ball and discussing local, national and even international affairs.

"Beginning Friday evening, preparations to attend church the next day, that is, Saturday commence [and this involves the children.] This includes reading the Bible and singing appropriate hymns," noted a PTA chairperson, a member of the Seventh Day Adventist denomination.

Another parent noted the value of shared excursions with the children.

She said, *"Visiting the tea farm, about four kilometres away from home refreshed children enough while not at school. The same applies to me. We all enjoy it."*

With the exception of one parent, all the participants considered themselves and the teachers as a focused team who worked together to provide the best as far as the children's education is concerned.

A PTA chairperson commented, "Both parents and teachers have to work as a unit if meaningful learning among children is to be achieved."

The participants agreed that they were tasked with a huge role to play in formally educating their children. Three parents mentioned their responsibility towards children, namely ensuring equity and equality, good health and nutrition, and safety and protection (ROK, 2010).

A PTA chairperson who had been inducted in the Child Friendly School programme said, "Issues concerning children like health, safety and equality are best addressed when efforts are combined among teachers and parents."

The parent who was an exception in this regard raised a common objection to parental involvement, that is, the perceived distinction between the professional education provided by the teacher and the informal education provided by the parent as primary educator.

She said, "Teachers are the professionals in so far as the teaching of the pupils is concerned. Why should I interfere with their work?"

Other than regular assessment reports in the form of report cards, the DQASOs reported to parents and the community about their children's learning through officers at the zonal level, at Annual General Meetings (AGMs), on education days, and at seminars and workshops involving the various stakeholders in the field of education. A gap in practice regarding learning at home which was identified by the DQASO participants was the absence of a homework policy at the district level, although each individual school was expected to have a homework policy. This allowed the schools to develop homework policies in tandem with their unique circumstances, including the availability of such infrastructure as electricity. However, the schools would benefit by the guidance provided by a district policy. Furthermore, it emerged that most schools did not involve the parents and the community in the designing of homework policies. Similarly, the findings indicated that home programmes to involve the parents in their children's reading, mathematics and other subjects were seldom organized by the schools. As Epstein *et al.* (2002) indicated, home-school-community partnerships make the school subjects more meaningful for the learners, including reading, writing, mathematics and science. And, as this study indicated, during their visits to the individual schools, particular education forums, seminars and workshops, the DQASOs rarely shared their ideas with the schools, the parents and the community on how to handle their children during the holidays or long-weekends.

4. Conclusions

There was general agreement that the parents needed to work as a team with the teachers to promote their children's education, including equity, equality, health as well as safety issues. Commendably, most of the parents discussed homework issues with their children. It also emerged that none of the districts in the county had a homework policy, and they rarely organized activities involving the parents in the children's reading and mathematics. Accordingly, every school was supposed to have a homework policy. However, the schools often never engaged the parents to develop a homework policy.

The parents were informed of the children's progress in learning and conduct, particularly through report cards, SMSs, phone calls and during academic days. Overall, the parents understood the system of assessment as given on the report cards, and discussed the comments given by the teachers with the children. When the children were not at school, the parents communicated with them by reading to them and telling them stories, including religious ones, went for walks with them, visited farms, played soccer and discussed current affairs, among other worthwhile activities.

The parents interviewed revealed that they seldom received information on the crucial learning standards based on the pupils' ages, grades as well as conduct. As a remedy therefore, the parents should be better informed about the curriculum that the children were following, encouraged to participate in developing homework policies at the school, and guidelines for their children's television viewing and their use of the internet. Generally, capacity-building, and proper sensitization among the key partners could go a long way in strengthening the family-school-community partnerships, including home-learning in the county.

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