

To Explore Parental Involvement in Emergent Literacy Development Among Preschoolers in Selected Primary Schools: A Case Study of Mansa District

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Abstract

Emergent literacy is the foundation of reading and writing development, shaped largely by early home and school experiences, with parental involvement playing a key global role in supporting children's literacy skills (Epstein, 2001; UNESCO, 2017). However, in Sub-Saharan Africa and Zambia, many parents face challenges such as low literacy levels, poverty, and limited resources, especially in rural areas like Mansa District. The study problem is that despite the importance of parental involvement, many parents do not consistently engage in home literacy activities due to limited knowledge, resources, and school support. This creates a gap between expected and actual parental involvement, affecting children's school readiness. Therefore, the study aimed to explore home literacy practices, challenges, parental perceptions, school support, and strategies to enhance involvement. A mixed-methods research design was used to combine quantitative and qualitative approaches in examining parental involvement in emergent literacy in Mansa District. The study used a purposive sampling technique to select a sample of 40 participants, including parents, teachers, and school administrators. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions and observations and analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) and thematic analysis to generate integrated findings. The study found a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.68$) between school support and parental involvement in emergent literacy in Mansa District. Parental involvement was higher among mothers (65%) compared to fathers (35%), with most parents aged 30–39 years (58%). The majority of parents had secondary education (40%), while 35% had primary education and 25% had no formal education, which limited effective literacy support at home. Results further show that 70% of parents reported challenges such as lack of learning materials, limited time, and low literacy levels, yet 78% expressed willingness to support their children's learning. The study recommends strengthening school home collaboration, increasing parent training programmes, and improving access to literacy resources to enhance emergent literacy outcomes.

Keywords: Emergent literacy, parental involvement, home literacy practices, school support, Mansa District.

Introduction

Emergent literacy has been widely recognized globally as the foundation for later reading and writing development. It refers to the early skills children acquire through exposure to language, print, and literacy-rich interactions before formal schooling begins. Studies show that children who experience strong early literacy environments tend to perform better academically in later years (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998; UNESCO, 2017). Globally, parental involvement has been identified as a key factor in strengthening these early literacy experiences, particularly through home-based activities such as reading, storytelling, and conversation (Epstein, 2001).

Regionally in Sub-Saharan Africa, research indicates that although parents value education, many face barriers such as low literacy levels, poverty, and limited access to learning materials, which affect their ability to actively support emergent literacy development (Adekola, 2008; UNESCO, 2020). As a result, early literacy outcomes in many African countries remain uneven, with schools often expected to compensate for limited home literacy environments.

In Zambia, early childhood education policies emphasize parental involvement as a critical component of literacy development. However, studies have shown that parental participation in emergent literacy activities remains inconsistent, particularly in rural areas where access to resources and parental literacy levels may be low (MOE, 2013; Mubanga, 2019). In districts such as Mansa, little is known about the specific literacy practices parents engage in, the challenges they face, and the support they receive from schools in promoting emergent literacy.

Statement of the Problem

Emergent literacy development is widely recognized as a critical foundation for children's future reading and academic achievement. Ideally, parents are expected to play an active role in supporting this development through home-based literacy practices such as reading stories, engaging in conversations, and exposing children to print materials (Epstein, 2001; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). In an ideal situation, strong collaboration between parents and schools ensures that preschool children develop adequate literacy readiness before entering formal primary education. However, in practice, the situation in many contexts, including Zambia, indicates that parental involvement in emergent literacy is often limited or inconsistent. Evidence suggests that many parents do not regularly engage in structured literacy activities at home due to factors such as low literacy levels, limited awareness of their role, lack of learning materials, and competing socioeconomic demands (UNESCO, 2020; Mubanga, 2019). In rural areas such as Mansa District, these challenges may be more pronounced, and schools may not provide sufficient support or guidance to parents on how to effectively promote literacy at home.

This creates a significant gap between the expected role of parents in emergent literacy development and what is actually happening on the ground. While policy and educational frameworks emphasise parental involvement as essential, little empirical evidence exists on the specific literacy practices parents engage in, the challenges they face, and the extent of support they receive from preschool education centres in Mansa District.

If this gap remains unaddressed, children may enter primary school without adequate literacy readiness, leading to poor reading and writing skills, low academic performance, and long-term educational difficulties. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate parental involvement in emergent literacy development among preschoolers in selected primary schools in Mansa District in order to generate evidence that can inform improved parental engagement strategies and school support systems.

General Objective

To explore the literacy practices that parents engage in at home to promote emergent literacy among their pre-school children.

Specific Objectives

To identify the challenges parents, face in supporting their children's literacy development.

To examine the perceptions of parents regarding their role in promoting emergent literacy.

To investigate the support that parents receive from pre-school education centers in enhancing emergent literacy.

To explore the strategies that could enhance parental involvement in promoting emergent literacy in Mansa District.

Literature Review**Global Perspective**

At the global level, emergent literacy is widely recognized as the foundation for children's later reading and academic achievement. Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998), in their study on emergent literacy development, found that early skills such as oral language, phonological awareness, and print awareness are strong predictors of later reading success. Similarly, Sénéchal and LeFevre (2002), in their study *Parental Involvement in the Development of Children's Reading Skill*, established that home literacy practices such as shared book reading and parent-child conversations significantly improve children's vocabulary and reading readiness. They recommended that parents should consistently engage children in both formal and informal literacy activities. Bus, van IJzendoorn, and Pellegrini (1995), in their meta-analysis *Joint Book Reading Makes for Success in Learning to Read*, further argued that shared reading is effective only when it is interactive and consistent, showing that the quality of parental involvement matters more than exposure alone. Epstein (2001), in her framework *School, Family, and Community Partnerships*, also emphasised that parental involvement is a key driver of children's educational success, particularly through home-based learning support.

Regional Perspective

At the regional level, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, studies show that although parents value education, many face challenges that limit their ability to support emergent literacy development. UNESCO (2020), in its report *Early Childhood Care and Education in Sub-Saharan Africa*, found that many parents struggle with low literacy levels, poverty, lack of learning materials, and limited knowledge of effective literacy practices. The report recommended strengthening parental education programmes and providing affordable literacy resources to improve home learning environments. Adekola (2008), in *Language, Literacy and Learning in Nigeria*, also found that parental illiteracy and socioeconomic constraints significantly reduce home literacy support for children. Similarly, Mubanga (2019), in a *Zambian study on early childhood education*, revealed that rural parents often lack time, education, and resources to actively support literacy development. However, Pushor (2012), in *Traces of Change: Teacher Education and Parent Engagement*, argued that even parents with limited formal education can still support literacy through storytelling and oral communication, suggesting that effective involvement is not dependent solely on formal education levels.

Local Perspective

At the local level in Zambia, evidence suggests that parental involvement in emergent literacy remains

inconsistent, particularly in rural districts. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003), in their report *The Impact of Parental Involvement on Pupil Achievement*, found that limited school guidance reduces parents' ability to effectively support literacy at home. Jeynes (2012), in a meta-analysis on parental involvement, established that structured school-based parental engagement programmes significantly improve early literacy outcomes when properly implemented. Hornby and Lafaele (2011), in *Barriers to Parental Involvement in Education*, further highlighted that despite positive attitudes, parents are often hindered by poverty, time constraints, and lack of institutional support. In the Zambian context, Mubanga (2019) observed that many parents in rural areas have limited access to literacy materials and guidance from schools, which negatively affects their participation in emergent literacy activities. UNESCO (2020) also recommends stronger collaboration between schools and families to bridge the gap between policy expectations and actual parental involvement.

Research Gap

Although global (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002), regional (UNESCO, 2020; Adekola, 2008), and local studies (Mubanga, 2019) have established the importance of parental involvement in emergent literacy development, most of these studies have focused broadly on early childhood education without providing detailed evidence on specific home literacy practices used by parents. In addition, limited research has examined parents' perceptions, the challenges they face, and the level of support provided by preschool education centres, particularly in rural areas. In the Zambian context, especially in districts such as Mansa, there is still insufficient empirical evidence on how parents actively engage in emergent literacy and what strategies could effectively enhance their involvement. This study therefore seeks to fill this gap

Methodology

Research Design

Mixed-methods research design is widely recognized as an effective approach for studies that require both numerical measurement and in-depth understanding of social phenomena. Borg and Gall (1989) argue that combining qualitative and quantitative approaches improves validity through triangulation, while Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) further emphasize that mixed methods strengthen the reliability and depth of findings by integrating statistical results with contextual explanations. However, some scholars note that mixed methods can be time-consuming and complex in terms of data integration and analysis. In this study, a mixed-methods research design was adopted to capture both measurable data on parental involvement in emergent literacy and qualitative insights into parents' perceptions, challenges, school support, and strategies for improvement in Mansa District.

Data Collection

Globally, educational research commonly employs both primary and secondary data sources to ensure comprehensive and reliable findings. According to Waters (2010), primary data provide firsthand information directly from respondents, while secondary data offer theoretical and contextual grounding from existing literature such as journals, books, and policy documents. Many studies combine both sources to enhance validity, although some researchers prefer primary data only to avoid potential bias from secondary sources. In this study, primary data were collected using structured questionnaires administered to parents and interviews conducted with selected teachers and school administrators in selected primary schools in Mansa District. Secondary data were obtained from textbooks, academic journals, government policy documents, and reports related to early childhood education and emergent literacy.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involves the use of statistical techniques for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data. Quantitative data are often analysed using software such as SPSS or Excel to generate descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages, while qualitative data are analysed through thematic coding to identify patterns, meanings, and interpretations of participants' experiences. Creswell and Creswell (2018) note that integrating both forms of analysis enhances the depth and validity of research findings. However, some studies analyse qualitative and quantitative data separately, which may limit full integration of results. In this study, quantitative data from questionnaires were coded and analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages, while qualitative data from interviews were analysed thematically to identify recurring themes related to literacy practices, parental perceptions, challenges, school support, and improvement strategies. The findings from both data sets were then integrated to strengthen interpretation and ensure comprehensive understanding of parental involvement in emergent literacy development in Mansa District.

4. THE RESULTS

4.1 Background Characteristics of Respondents

This section presents the background characteristics of the 40 respondents who participated in the study. The characteristics considered include gender, age, level of education, and occupation, as these variables are important in understanding parental involvement in emergent literacy development.

4.1.1 Gender of Respondents

Gender	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Male	14	35%
Female	26	65%
Total	40	100%

The findings show that the majority of respondents were female (65%), while males accounted for 35%. This indicates that mothers were more involved in the study compared to fathers, suggesting that mothers are more actively engaged in children's early literacy development at home.

4.1.2 Age of Respondents

Age Group	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
20–29	8	20%
30–39	18	45%
40–49	10	25%
50 and above	4	10%
Total	40	100%

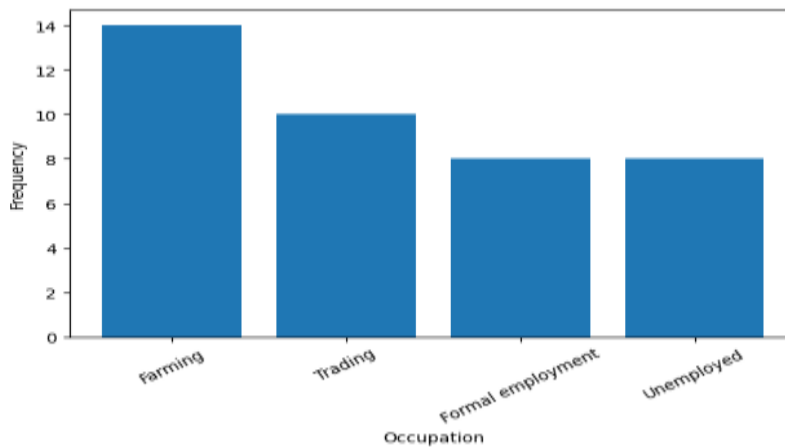
The results indicate that most respondents (45%) were aged between 30–39 years, followed by 40–49 years (25%). This suggests that the majority of parents involved were within the active parenting age group, which is important for supporting emergent literacy development.

4.1.3 Level of Education

Education Level	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
No formal education	6	15%
Primary education	12	30%
Secondary education	16	40%
Tertiary education	6	15%
Total	40	100%

The table shows that most respondents had secondary education (40%), followed by primary education (30%). A smaller proportion had tertiary education (15%) or no formal education (15%). This distribution is important as education level influences parents’ ability to support literacy activities at home.

Figure 4.1.4 Occupation of the Respondents



This bar chart shows the distribution of occupations across four categories. Farming (14) is the most common occupation, clearly the dominant livelihood in the group. Trading (10) is the second most common, but notably lower than farming. Formal employment (8) and Unemployed (8) are tied, both representing the smallest share.

4.2 To identify the challenges parents, face in supporting their children's literacy development (Objective one)

Challenge faced by parents	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Lack of storybooks and learning materials	10	25%
Low literacy levels of parents	8	20%
Lack of time due to work commitments	9	22.5%
Lack of knowledge on how to teach literacy	7	17.5%
Poverty/financial constraints	4	10%

Challenge faced by parents	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Limited support from schools	2	5%
Total	40	100%

The results show that parents in the study face several key challenges in supporting their children’s literacy development. The most common challenge is lack of storybooks and learning materials (25%), followed closely by lack of time due to work commitments (22.5%) and low literacy levels among parents (20%). A smaller proportion of parents reported lack of knowledge on how to teach literacy (17.5%), while poverty/financial constraints (10%) and limited support from schools (5%) were the least reported challenges. Overall, the findings indicate that material shortages, time constraints, and parental literacy levels are the main factors limiting effective support for emergent literacy development among preschool children.

4.3 The presentation of results on examine the perceptions of parents regarding their role in promoting emergent literacy (Objective 2)

Table 4.3.1 Parents’ perceptions regarding their role in promoting emergent literacy (n = 40)

Statement	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)
Parents are the first teachers of their children at home	3.65	0.48
Reading to children at home improves their literacy skills	3.75	0.44
Parents play an important role in developing children’s vocabulary	3.70	0.46
It is the responsibility of parents to support early reading skills	3.55	0.60
Schools should guide parents on how to support literacy at home	3.80	0.41
Parents feel confident in helping children learn early literacy skills	3.10	0.72
Most parents have enough knowledge to support emergent literacy	2.85	0.80

The findings indicate that parents generally hold positive perceptions regarding their role in promoting emergent literacy. High mean scores show strong agreement that parents are the first teachers of their children (M = 3.65), that reading to children improves literacy skills (M = 3.75), and that schools should guide parents in supporting literacy (M = 3.80). However, lower mean scores on confidence (M = 3.10) and knowledge adequacy (M = 2.85) suggest that although parents recognize their responsibility, many do not feel fully equipped to support emergent literacy effectively. The relatively low standard deviations indicate that responses were fairly consistent among participants

4.4 Presentation of results on investigating the support that parents receive from pre-school education centres in enhancing emergent literacy (Objective 4)

Table 4.4.1 Correlation between school support and parental involvement in emergent literacy(N=40)

Variables	Pearson Correlation (r)	Sig. (p-value)
School support vs Parental involvement	0.68	0.000

The results show a strong positive relationship between support received from pre-school education centres and parental involvement in emergent literacy (r = 0.68, p = 0.000). This implies that as school support increases, parental involvement in emergent literacy also increases. The relationship is statistically significant since the p-value is less than 0.05, meaning the result is not due to chance. Therefore, the

findings suggest that effective support from pre-school education centres plays an important role in enhancing parental involvement in children's emergent literacy development.

4.5 Presentation of results on explore the strategies that could enhance parental involvement in promoting emergent literacy in Mansa District (Objective 5)

Thematic Analysis Results (NVivo-assisted using FGDs, Interviews and Observations)

Data for this objective were collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), semi-structured interviews, and non-participant observations involving 40 participants. The data were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo software, where systematic coding, categorization, and thematic development were conducted. The analysis followed a triangulation approach to ensure credibility and consistency of findings across data sources.

NVivo thematic coding revealed three major themes regarding strategies to enhance parental involvement in emergent literacy development.

Theme 1: Parent Literacy Training and Capacity Building

Findings from FGDs and interviews indicated a strong need for structured parent training programmes to improve literacy support at home. NVivo coding revealed frequent references to nodes such as "*parent training*", "*lack of knowledge*", and "*teacher guidance*", indicating a consistent perception that parents lack adequate skills to support early literacy development.

The data further showed that parents require practical demonstrations and continuous guidance on simple literacy activities such as storytelling, shared reading, and letter recognition. In addition, observational evidence from school meetings indicated low participation of parents in literacy-focused discussions, suggesting limited capacity and awareness of their role in emergent literacy development.

Theme 2: Provision of Literacy Resources for Home Use

Data from FGDs and interviews revealed that inadequate access to literacy materials significantly limits parental involvement in supporting children's reading activities at home. NVivo coding frequently generated references such as "*lack of storybooks*", "*no learning materials*", and "*resource constraints*", demonstrating a shared concern among participants.

Furthermore, observations conducted in selected homes and school environments confirmed limited availability of reading materials such as storybooks, picture books, and literacy charts. Participants therefore emphasised the need for schools and education authorities to provide take-home reading materials and low-cost literacy resources to strengthen home-based learning.

Theme 3: Strengthening School Home Communication and Engagement

Findings from FGDs, interviews, and observations consistently indicated that weak communication between schools and parents limits effective collaboration in supporting emergent literacy. NVivo coding revealed recurring nodes such as "*teacher feedback*", "*parent meetings*", "*communication gap*", and "*home visits*", highlighting the importance of strengthening school parent engagement.

Observational evidence from school settings further showed irregular parental attendance at meetings and limited structured feedback mechanisms regarding children's literacy progress. Participants suggested that regular communication channels, including meetings, home visits, and written feedback, would enhance parental involvement and motivation.

Discussion of Results

The study found that the majority of respondents were female (65%), indicating that mothers were more involved in children's literacy development than fathers. This finding is consistent with Hoover-Dempsey

and Sandler (1997), who argue that mothers are more likely to engage in home-based learning activities due to traditional caregiving roles. Similarly, Epstein (2001) observed that mothers often take a leading role in early childhood education support. However, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) contradict this by arguing that low father involvement is not only due to gender roles but also structural barriers such as work commitments and lack of school encouragement for male participation. The implication is that schools should design inclusive strategies that actively involve fathers in early literacy programmes rather than relying mainly on mothers.

Challenges Faced by Parents The study found that the major challenges included lack of learning materials, lack of time, and low parental literacy levels. These findings are consistent with Adekola (2008) and UNESCO (2020), who both identify poverty and limited resources as major barriers to home literacy development. Similarly, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) highlight that lack of school support further worsens parental involvement. However, Pushor (2012) argues that lack of resources does not completely prevent literacy development, as parents can still use oral storytelling and everyday communication. The implication is that both material support and parental empowerment are necessary to improve literacy outcomes.

The study revealed that parents generally had positive perceptions of their role in literacy development but lacked confidence and knowledge. This supports Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997), who argue that parental beliefs strongly influence involvement in children's learning. Epstein (2001) also found that parents often value education but require guidance from schools to effectively support learning. However, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) caution that positive attitudes alone are insufficient without addressing structural barriers such as poverty and limited resources. The implication is that schools must not only motivate parents but also equip them with practical skills.

The study identified three main strategies: parent training, provision of literacy resources, and strengthening school-home communication. These findings align with Henderson and Mapp (2002), who found that parent education and strong school-family partnerships improve literacy outcomes. Similarly, Sheridan et al. (2010) confirm that collaborative school-parent interventions enhance children's reading readiness. However, Larocque, Kleiman, and Darling (2011) caution that overly formal programmes may discourage parents with low literacy levels. The implication is that strategies must be simple, flexible, and context-sensitive. **Overall Implication of Findings** Overall, the study demonstrates that parental involvement in emergent literacy in Mansa District is influenced by socioeconomic conditions, education level, school support, and access to resources.

The study revealed that most parents had secondary education (40%), with a significant proportion having only primary education or no formal education. This finding supports Adekola (2008), who found that parental education level strongly influences the ability to support literacy development at home. Similarly, UNESCO (2020) reports that low parental education levels in Sub-Saharan Africa limit effective home literacy practices. However, Pushor (2012) contradicts this by arguing that even parents with low formal education can still support literacy through storytelling and oral communication. The implication is that training programmes should focus on practical literacy support strategies rather than academic literacy knowledge.

The results also showed that most parents were farmers and traders, with limited formal employment. This finding supports Mubanga (2019), who observed that rural livelihoods often limit parents' time for structured literacy support due to economic demands. Similarly, UNESCO (2020) highlights that rural parents face time poverty, which reduces their involvement in early childhood learning activities.

However, Heath (1983) argues that literacy can still be promoted through informal daily interactions regardless of occupation type. The implication is that schools should promote simple, flexible literacy activities that fit within parents' daily routines.

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The study further found a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.68$) between school support and parental involvement. This finding is consistent with Jeynes (2012), who found that school-led parental engagement programmes significantly improve early literacy outcomes. Similarly, Epstein (2001) emphasizes that strong school-home partnerships enhance parental participation. However, Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) argue that many schools fail to provide consistent support, limiting the effectiveness of parental involvement. The implication is that schools in Mansa District must strengthen communication and structured support systems to enhance literacy outcomes.

Conclusion:

The study concludes that parental involvement in emergent literacy in Mansa District is generally positive but limited by low education levels, lack of time, and insufficient resources. Mothers are more involved than fathers, and school support plays an important role in improving children's literacy development.

Recommendations:

Schools should increase parent training programmes, improve communication with parents, and provide simple literacy materials that can be used at home. Parents should be encouraged to support children's reading and writing using everyday activities. The Ministry of Education should support schools with literacy resources and community awareness programmes.

Future Research Recommendations:

Future studies should focus on involving more fathers in literacy development and explore how digital tools can support emergent literacy in rural areas. Further research should also be conducted in other districts to compare results.

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