

Language Practices and Learning Experiences of at-Risk Learners from Kenya: Parent and Teacher Perspectives

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Abstract

Youth literacy rates in Kenya are severely low compared to the global average, creating lifetime educational and economic hindrances. Our research examines the language experiences/practices of children at risk of reading failure in Kenya and the barriers faced by parents and teachers in supporting children with reading difficulties. By understanding these experiences, we can identify how to provide a supportive learning environment and help future generations avoid reading and comprehension difficulties. Our team interviewed 70 parents and teachers in Kenya using Key Informant Interviews that gathered in depth information about their learning settings, home and school language and literacy practices, challenges and barriers, and support of learners. Interviews are currently being analyzed using the Dedoose Software guided by a codebook designed for this research project to identify data trends. Although data analysis is ongoing, several trends have appeared. Many parents and teachers acknowledge students face reading challenges, exacerbated by economic and resource constraints. This research - when shared with education stakeholders - can help find solutions such as educational programs supporting literacy development and suggests the need for future research on intensive schooling programs and targeted resources.

Introduction

- Reading difficulties are linked to difficulties in phonological awareness, language comprehension, and cognitive development (Knoop-van Campen et al., 2018; Moats & Tolman, 2020).
- Children in low resource and income settings, such as Kenya, face a high risk of reading failure due to limited access to learning materials and economic barriers (Kinyanjui, 2022; Makoria & Onderi, 2014).
- Little research has examined the parent and teacher perspectives or daily language practices supporting at risk readers.
- This study investigates the home and school language experiences of children at risk of reading failure and the barriers adults face in supporting them.
- Research questions:
 - **What are the home and school language experiences of children at risk of reading failure?**
 - **What barriers do teachers and parents face when supporting these children?**

Methods

- 70 participants (35 teachers, 35 parents) from 35 remedial schools across five Kenyan counties.
- Schools were randomly sampled from remedial programs of grades 3–5 in urban and rural areas.
- Data collection is complete, but analysis is still ongoing.

24 trained enumerators collected data over 3 weeks; Interviews were conducted with IRB approval and verbal consent

Procedures

Semi-structured key informant interviews (approx. 1 hour) with teachers and parents about children's reading, language experiences, and barriers to support

Measures

Qualitative descriptive and thematic analysis using inductive and deductive coding in Dedoose; Codes demonstrated high reliability (~85%)

Data Analysis



Figure 1. Image of children in classroom in Kenya



Figure 2. Image of rural Kenya



Figure 3. Student practicing reading skills with a teacher



Figure 4. Map of Kenyan counties visited

Results

- Teachers reported that bilingual instruction (mother tongue and English) is often confusing and intimidating for learners at risk of reading failure.
- Policy restrictions limit instructional flexibility in language and reading instruction.
- Many schools have limited access to books and reading materials.
- Teachers reported that limited parental education and financial barriers reduce home reading support contribute to absenteeism, affecting literacy development.
- Improving access to resources and home/school support may increase early literacy.

Discussion

- As expected, our preliminary findings identified absenteeism, home economic factors, challenges in parental engagement, and lack of home/classroom materials as barriers to support.
- School language experiences are varied—there is a mixed consensus on whether teachers allow multiple languages during learning.
- Contingent with the need for parental engagement teachers often cited, a thematic analysis revealed that “active parental engagement” and established home reading routines led to better learner outcomes (Li, 2022).
- **Strengths of our research:** understand critical stakeholders' perspectives across regions using a large sample size.
- **Limitations of our research:** self-report bias, no child perspectives or direct observation.
- Future research directions for this project include the invention of a developmental dyslexia screening tool.
- Future research such as direct observation of children's school and home learning/language practices may supplement qualitative findings. Multilingual instruction and strategies to increase parental involvement may also be worth investigating.

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