

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

Evelyn Bernal, Drue Langeland, Natalia Pyatt, and Dr. Brenda Wawire

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 about classroom settings, challenges, child demographics, and reading practices at home and school that gathered in depth information about their learning settings, home and school language and literacy practices, challenges and barriers support at learners. Interviews are currently being analyzed on Dedoose using a codebook designed for this research project to identify trends in the data. Although data analysis is ongoing, several trends have appeared. Many parents reported facing reading challenges, economic issues, and the need for system change in schools. These challenges are related to limited resources and access to books. 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.

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



Image of children in classroom in Kenya



Image of rural Kenya



Student with a teacher



Map of Kenyan counties visited

Results

- Data collection is complete, but analysis is still ongoing.
- 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 out comes (Li, 2022).
- Strengths: understands critical stakeholders' perspectives across regions using a large sample size.
- Limitations: self-report bias, no child perspectives or direct observation.
- Future research including 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 further explored.
- Future research directions for this project also include the development of a developmental dyslexia screening tool

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