

Influence of Learners' Environments on Learners' Literacy Outcomes of Early Years of Education

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ABSTRACT

Learners' supportive environments have a significant effect on what goes on in the classroom. Supportive learning environments have the greatest impact on learners' literacy outcomes. Factors such as language policy and interactions in the classroom have a big influence on the learners' literacy outcomes. The present study investigated a group of grade three learners' literacy outcomes in lower primary schools in Bungoma central sub-county in relation to the factors that influenced the learning environments of the classroom. The descriptive survey design was used to sample participants in the study. A sample size of 91 participants was involved, consisting of 48 grade three learners, 24 grade three teachers, 12 head teachers, 6 parents, and a sub-county education officer. Simple random sampling was used to sample out grade three teachers, parents, head teachers, and a sub-county education officer. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Unstructured questionnaires were used to investigate the physical design of the classroom and their influence on literacy outcomes among learners in early years of learning in Bungoma Central Sub-County. Findings of the study indicate a negative correlation between learners' literacy outcome and the physical design of the classroom (class size) ($r = 261, p < 0.5$). Based on this finding, it is recommended that grade three teachers individualize teaching based on assessment results, embrace whole-class curriculum materials, and recognize individual differences. Policies must be established to guarantee that classrooms are conducive to learning and motivate learners to strive for higher academic accomplishment.

Keywords: Early Years of Education, Learners' Literacy Outcomes, Supportive learning Environments

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Unal and Unal (2009), classrooms are dynamic learning environments that influence learners' academic affectiveness and social and behavioral learning. The classroom learning environment is found to influence learners' opportunities used in educational systems as a foundation for further education (Neuman, 2014). Ultimately, quality classroom experiences contribute to the learners' long-term outcomes, including meaningful and satisfying adult lives in a democratic society. Roskos et al. (2017) demonstrate that factors in the classroom learning environment, such as language policy and interactions, are reported to contribute to learners' literacy success.

Nakpodia (2011), notes that the medium of instruction in the early years of education in African countries have been discovered to be a problematic subject. Psychologists recommend that indigenous languages be used as a medium of instruction. Nakpodia's research findings show that children understand concepts better when taught in the language they use at home. This should have an impact on literacy achievement. The issue of language policy is a worrying concern in schools in Bungoma sub-county, particularly in public schools.

Learning experiences in the classroom, on the other hand, are thought to have the greatest impact on learning (Brigg et al., 2016). This is where teachers' instructional methods are critical to the learning process. In the same vein, Theobald et al. (2015) comment that high expectations for all learners are communicated and utilized through formative and summative evaluations in a systematic manner, with clear objectives and chances for active participation in classroom activities. When learners interact with their immediate environment, it reflects a micro-system since stimulating environments in early-year schooling are linked to the brain's neuronal organization. Children in early years' education, especially those in pre-school and lower primary, require meaningful engagement with their teachers and peers in order to promote early intellectual development.

According to Bulotsky-Shearer (2014), learners in the socialization process require a healthy atmosphere and role models in order to improve their performance. Since the classroom is the first model that has an impact on

learners' performance, the supportive learning environments of the classroom are seen as one of the most significant elements for learning and education, even from a social standpoint. Its results have a significant impact on how learners develop. There is universal agreement among education and educational psychology specialists that having a goal in mind is essential for efficient interaction (Ayaga & Khasakhala, 2020). Learning is influenced by various elements such as attention, motivation, and emotions. According to educational psychologists Piaget and Bandura, learner qualities such as prior knowledge, cognitive abilities, learning styles, and intellectual capacities need to be addressed. The current study seeks to establish a primary teacher of early childhood education to enable learners to develop 21st-century learning skills and approaches in a literacy-rich environment.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A well-socialized learner is characterized as a learner who has high motivation to learn, is positive towards acquiring literacy skills, attends school regularly without being tardy or absent, and socializes well with the teachers as well as their peers (Tavares, 2016). These foster academic achievements in performance in all examinations in a learner's schooling lifetime. Graham et al. (2018) comment that peer interaction fosters the development of literacy skills in a classroom. The teacher plays the role of a facilitator, facilitating the learning and teaching processes.

Sato (2013) asserts that peer interaction and corrective feedback are important for accuracy and fluency. Corrective feedback during peer conversation was used to assess the effect peer interaction has on second language acquisition. Learners are found to sharpen both their language production and that of their teacher.

According to Bronfenbrenner's (2001) theory, language use in interactions plays a critical role in thinking and learning, including both the use of ordinary language and more specialist subject language. Lobaton (2011) demonstrates that learners' cognitive processing, sorting, and understanding of concepts and the development of subsequent knowledge are all dependent on language use in interaction, while Lojk (2017) noted that peer interaction and learners' related behavior in the classroom context during literacy lessons contribute strongly to children's development and learning of literacy skills. Further, children's language and literacy skills are similar to those of their peers. Tavares (2016) noted that learners speak more and even produce longer turns in a conversation when socializing with peers. They also did more to maintain the conversation by developing simple topics of their interest, introducing new ideas, making suggestions, and even asking each other questions. Hence, this language practice is found to enable learners to practice the use of language in a wider range of ways with their peers. Tavares (2016) asserts that learners speak more and even produce longer turns in a conversation when socializing with peers.

In the preschool classroom, children are found to be transitioning from a solitary to an interactive behavior pattern (Graham et al., 2018). With this shift in social behavior, children had greater possibilities for social, cognitive, and language skill development through peer contact. However, Kim (2015) indicated that it is important for Grade 3 teachers to pay considerable attention to learners' bilingual experiences with their peers. The study indicates that both developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood education and the developmental theory of the ecological system support the notion that positive engagement with peers is a primary way preschool children learn literacy skills. Teaching, according to Muthwil (2020), is a curriculum transformation act in which the curriculum is enacted and broken down into tasks and activities in the classroom. Through the curriculum and other policies, classroom interactions are tied to national policy. Studies have shown a linkage between classroom engagement and national policy education, which is then taught through the curriculum with the possibility of being implemented.

Mandillah (2019) draws the conclusion that the mother tongue plays a crucial role in the educational system and cannot be undervalued. This is due to the fact that mother tongue languages are invaluable assets to any nation's social, political, and economic advancement.

Fosco et al. (2016) showed a significant relationship between social behaviors and emergent literacy skills. Learners developed pre-academic competencies, for example, reading, mathematics, and writing skills, which serve as the foundation for future academic achievements. It is revealed that learners help each other to read text in the classroom as they correct those with difficulties with reading problems. However, Kyeyune (2015) comments that positive learning relates to behavior change, including paying attention to the teacher, being interested in exploration of new activities, seeking help, or accepting help; hence, children are found to exhibit a high volume of positive learning related to literacy achievements.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study used a descriptive survey design. The study was carried out in public primary schools in Bungoma Central Sub-County, Kenya. The population was drawn from all public schools in Bungoma Central Sub-County. The target group is composed of 72 primary schools and their head teachers. A county education director, 72 parents, 144 grade three teachers, and 4316 grade three students are among the other participants from the target demographic. The schools, students in grade three, head teachers, grade three teachers, and parents who are sampled from the selected schools were chosen using a straightforward random sampling procedure. Questionnaires and interview schedules were used to gather data. The pilot test results were used to evaluate the validity of the instrument. Experts in the field get involved to assess the appropriateness of the instruments and to lessen the risk related to content validity. Cronbach's alpha was used to measure reliability with respect to the operationalization of the constructs. The study questionnaires were deemed credible, as indicated by the alpha values of ($\alpha = 0.801$) for the Grade 3 teacher questionnaire, which exceeded the suggested threshold value of 0.7. For the pilot project, three of the sub-county's elementary schools were chosen. The pilot study encompassed 10 grade 3 teachers and their grade 3 pupils. Data from questionnaires was analyzed by use of descriptive statistics while that from interviews was subjected to content analysis.

IV. RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Learning Environments on Learners' Literacy Outcomes

The study sought to examine the influence of learning environments on learners' literacy outcomes. The parameters used to measure learners' learning environments, which aid in the acquisition of Grade 3 literacy skills in the classroom, include the availability of library materials, learners' skills to motivate reading, and language policy. The results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Teachers' Influence of Libraries and Access to Prints on Learners' Literacy Outcomes

Availability of libraries and prints	Frequency	Schools	Percentage
Libraries	4	4	33.3
Prints	10	10	83.3
Wall displays	7	7	58.3
Letter pockets/ cards	10	10	83.3
Learning Centers	2	2	16.67

The study findings revealed that out of 12 sampled schools in Sub-County 4, 33.3% had libraries, but these libraries were not found in the classroom. These libraries were found in the deputy head teachers' office and served the whole school. In some of the classrooms, 7 (58.3%) had been displayed with teaching and learning aids that made the walls talk. Letter cards were also found in the classroom; 10 (83.3%) reported having prints in the classrooms. These prints were textbooks, pictures, flashcards, and learners' work books. These prints are revealed to be used by teachers of grade three in the aid of the learning process in the classroom to make the content of what is presented more vivid and interesting to the learner. In some schools, 7 (58.3%) walls are displayed with pictures, magazines, and teaching and learning aids.

A classroom library was shown to frequently offer learners access to literature. This research suggests that having a central location in the classroom where learners have easy access to books can have a positive impact on learners' achievement. This suggests that access to printed materials and classroom libraries played a role in encouraging learners to become avid readers. Children's interest in reading was reportedly noticed, and they were provided with many opportunities to interact with books. The library also provides various opportunities for children to engage with literature through events and structured programming. Finally, parents of children in the early years of education appear to have a considerable interest in their children's reading achievement and, ultimately, their school success. Nonetheless, inspections and interviews with teachers of grade three and parents revealed that the performance of the majority of schools in the sub-county has dropped due to the low acquisition of reading skills.

The results of the study showed that schools with longer library programs, more time devoted to delivering information on literacy instruction to learners on a weekly basis, more time spent in collaborative planning with teachers, more opportunities for in-service teacher training, more resources dedicated to addressing challenges related

to library materials, and more computers with modern internet access had a higher percentage of learners scoring at or above the proficient level on reading tests. Another factor that led to learners' literacy development was the role parents played toward reading achievement. Study findings found that library materials and prints help learners develop a love of books and a sense of connectedness that learners need in order to want to read. This in turn led to a choice of reading materials, increased vocabulary, higher fluency, and the ability to demonstrate those skills in a variety of ways.

Apart from teaching literacy skills, libraries were reported to focus their collection development on the needs of their neo-literate users. This implies that relevant and interesting reading materials, for instance, simple storybooks, picture books, singing games, and rhymes for early readers with low vocabulary, were available there. Books, computers, and audio-visual materials were reported to be sensitive and needed to be protected from extreme weather conditions, including rain, sun, heat, and even humidity. They needed to be in a dry, temperate environment.

However, it was revealed that many schools in the sub-county had inappropriate buildings to accommodate these library reading materials. Another concern was insecurity and the problem of protection from theft. The buildings and library material need to be protected by bars and proper doors. Protective measures are very cost-effective and unaffordable for most libraries. This suggests that teachers in grade three of the early years need to establish libraries in their classrooms. This will help learners' literacy outcomes. The study findings from a participant in the interview schedule for head teachers revealed that to improve learners' reading outcomes, they had mixed reactions.

Some participants reported that teachers of grade three need to plan for reading remedial lessons, especially in the afternoon sessions, the availability of simple readers series, and reinforcement of Tusome Early Literacy Programs. Others commented that we need to have a steady teacher of literacy and motivate learner-teacher interaction and participatory activities that focus on literacy acquisition and are not limited to language policy. While another participant argued that not only learners need to be introduced to the recognition of letter sounds at an early stage, Factors like the book/learner ratio (1:1) will also be observed, as will teachers of grade three who take reading sessions for meaning. This is a contributory factor that influences teachers' attitudes toward learners' literacy outcomes. Poor reading habits and therefore a lack of comprehension skills; inadequate resources; non-committed teachers in grade three; non-use of a variety of teaching and learning resources; poor role models in their backgrounds, especially with factors that influence learning environments.

The study findings reported that failure to master letter sounds properly due to the use of the mother tongue as the language of instruction, not limited to parental support, was found to be one of the effects that lead to low literacy skills acquisition in schools in the sub-county. This finding is in harmony with the finding of the interview schedule from the education officer, who commented that most learners are from low-income backgrounds, hence their parents are not able to buy books and provide for their children's other basic academic requirements. Additionally, the ministry must ensure that in schools, parents are sensitized about their learners' academic achievement and that there are regular assessments by education officers.

However, in the sub-county schools, it was observed that performance was low. The document analysis revealed that in the entire county, very few schools in the sub-county have inadequate staff capacity and congested classrooms to accommodate the population in schools. Some of these schools have inadequate resources like books, desks, latrines, safe drinking water, and clear chalkboards, which limit learners participation in class competition. This may lead to learners engaging in other deviant activities, which may lead to poor transition, absenteeism, and truancy, hence a decline in performance.

This suggests that learners in grade three' generally do not have strong literacy skills. Children from low-income families fared substantially worse than their peers when it came to reading. The results of this study imply that achievement inequalities like this can contribute to worse grades and an increased likelihood of absenteeism from school. Interviews with head teachers revealed widespread agreement with these points of view. One headteacher said:

Most Grade three learners in my school cannot read simple paragraphs and sentences with fluency within the given time. However hand writing is the poorest skill acquired by my learners nowadays.

During the writing process, the researcher also observed that children could not write simple words due to an unfavorable learning environment. Most children are seated 4-6 learners on one desk, while others do not have desks and instead are seated on the floor. This seating position could not enable learners to acquire writing skills.

The study also indicates that learners with more books in their homes performed better academically. This implies that learners with 0-2 books 2 (20%) scored below expectation in the criterion test, while those learners with more books than 5 (50%) scored average-approaching expectation. While 20% had met expectations, these children

scored closer to expectations. Finally, one child was only found to have 10 (10%) books. This one was scored as exceeding expectations. It was also found out that children who have access to print reading materials have better literacy outcomes. This was therefore a sign of dismal performance in terms of both oral and written communication. Furthermore, the majority of learners' results are below the expected level, suggesting they lacked the necessary skills to successfully complete Grade Three material. Similar results are observed by UWEZO (2017): 31% in Kenya, 46% in Tanzania and 70% in Uganda of Grade 3 learners in East Africa could not read material at the level of the previous year's course. A lot of work needed to be done on the issue of literacy. Learning context is crucial, in fact.

According to one interviewee, teachers' assessments of parents' involvement and engagement with their students' literacy outcomes indicate that, for instance, reading achievement has been centered on the characteristics of the individual parents: "children of low-income households, single parents, and poorly educated parents have large risks for reading." This demonstrates how the skills and resources available to parents of middle-class and low-income children to improve their kids' academic performance vary significantly. Other responses imply that parents interested in learners' reading skills are discreetly, yet powerfully, engaged in their children's achievement. One respondent had the following to say?

I keep an eye on what they are reading and will sometimes read it myself to get a better understanding of what it is about. I also assist them in decoding difficult terms.

In providing such articulation, parents appear to be providing their children with invaluable support as they learn to read by helping them decode words. Activities extend the reading experience in school. This became clear when preschool literacy programmes emphasized both independent reading and shared reading. Furthermore, the early years of school provide activities that help children improve their reading skills. These activities are frequently repeated in lower level and pre-elementary schools around the country. In certain classes, pupils are required not only to read a book but also to write a brief paragraph summarizing the book's important points. Sometimes children need to do something artistic to go along with a book they read, and that something could be anything from a painting to a sculpture to a puppet show. Literacy-based activities like these have been demonstrated to improve a child's reading experiences by helping him or her attach more meaning to the text and draw deeper meaning from the tale being read. Children are more likely to spend time in a literacy-rich environment, like a library, just by going there, which increases their chances of perusing the shelves and taking out reading materials. However, what children learn from books is often expanded upon and made into a more meaningful literacy experience through these kinds of gatherings.

4.2 Levels of literacy Skills Acquisition among Grade Three Learners

This study aimed to determine the literacy levels of Grade 3 learners in public primary schools. As measured by a criterion test on listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Rating of literacy skills among Grade Three Learners

Literacy skills (%)	Exceed expectation (%)	Meet expectation (%)	Approach Expectation (%)	Below Expectation (%)
Listening	2.08	79.17	10.42	4.17
Speaking	4.17	29.17	25	41.67
Reading	10.42	16.67	20.83	45.83
Writing	4.17	16.67	27.83	52.08

According to the study results shown in Table 4.11, somewhat more than half (79.17%) of the pupils in Grade 3 are competent, meaning their listening abilities meet expectations. Regarding listening skills, almost 5 (10.42%) of the third-grade pupils reported approaching expectations, while 2 (4.17%) are below expectations. 1 (2.08%) of grade 1 learners were marked as exceeding expectations. This implies that the level of listening comprehension exhibited by pupils in Grade Three was unsatisfactory. Similar feelings were conveyed in interviews with head teachers. A head teacher remarked:

Most Grade 3 learners in my school cannot respond to questions when asked in English, they want the teacher to interpret in mother tongue. The learners is(sic) enable to listen every well to the conversation but struggle to answer in English.

The study also found that kids couldn't hold a two-minute discussion with the teacher during the listening assignment. The head teachers' opinions align with those of Allen (2015), who argued that proficient literacy acquisition is essential to the success of pupils. Additionally, Table 2 shows that 2 (4.17%) of the pupils who documented 12 (25%) of them reported approaching expectations, twenty (41.6%) recorded below expectations, and



fourteen (29.17%) performed to meet expectations in speaking skills. This demonstrated that the speaker's performance was unsatisfactory. Furthermore, the majority of pupils' below-average performance indicates that they lacked the abilities needed to do grade three activities.

Furthermore, based on Table 4.2, the research discovered that 5 (10.42%) of the grade learners exceeded expectations in reading sentences and paragraphs aloud, 8 (16.67%) met expectations, 10 (20.83%) approached expectations, and 22 (45.83%) fell short of expectations. The Bungoma Central Sub-County's third-grade students demonstrated poor reading skills, according to the results. Based on the findings of the study, 20 pupils (41.60%) in grade three found it extremely difficult to read even short paragraphs because of their substantial difficulties with word fluency inside sentences. Only eight (16.67%) of them had problems reading. For instance, *“some insects live and work together in large groups. These insects are able to survive by sharing a home, a job, and food. They're known as social insects. Such insects include honeybees, ants, and wasps.”*

According to UWEZO (2017), two-thirds of East African third-graders were unable to read tasks in the second grade. These results are consistent with the current study's findings.

Additionally, 6% of pupils in third grade read words faster without requiring as much time to decode them, according to the study. They had a lot of trouble with phonics exercises and patterns, though, and are unable to recognize letter sounds when reading words. They often stumbled and walked hastily when reading aloud. According to the findings, 40% of Grade 3 students had difficulty recognizing sound letters. Reading sentences and paragraphs was challenging due to issues with word recognition and blending. It could also be a sign of poor reading habits among students. These results support the notion that fluency is usually assessed through oral readings, even when proficient readers demonstrate this skill when reading aloud.

Further analysis was carried out using Pearson product moment correlation in order to establish whether there was a relationship between a supportive learning environment and grade three learners' literacy outcomes. The findings are presented in Table 3 that follows.

Table 3
Correlation between Supportive Learning Environments and Literacy Outcomes among Grade Three Learners

Correlation		Literacy outcomes	Supportive learning environments
Literacy outcomes	Pearson Correlation	1	.261*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.030
	N	16	16
Learning environments	Pearson Correlation	.261*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.030	
	N	16	16

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The study findings in Table 3 show that there is a weak positive correlation between supportive learning environments and grade three learners literacy outcomes ($r = .261, p < .05$). This means that literacy outcomes among grade three learners are associated with a supportive learning environment, although the relationship is weak. This further means that learning environment factors are not supportive, thus the poor literacy outcomes. Such results are consistent with the findings of Fosco (2016), who conducted a study on social behaviors and pre-academic competencies, such as reading, mathematics, and writing skills. The study found that the relationship between learners' social behavior and peer-to-peer interaction assisted in the development of learners' pre-academic competencies. This implies that when learners help each other to read text in the classroom, as they correct those with difficulties with reading problems, their literacy skills are improved, which serves as a foundation for future academic achievements.

The analysis also verified the findings by Winberg et al. (2022) that show that showing that learners' behavior change during motivation to read had significant effects on learners' literacy outcomes. This reveals that during literacy lessons, learners were found to exhibit a high level of positive learning by paying attention to the teachers, being interested in exploring new activities, and seeking help.

V. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

The teacher-learner interactions, language policy, and reading motivating behaviors of grade three learners in public schools had a significant influence on literacy outcomes. Leyster (2020) challenges encountered by Grade 3 learners are related to a lack of enthusiasm, limited English language practice, and multilingualism. Parental illiteracy, socioeconomic situations, and a lack of government help exist on multiple levels. Interaction between the learner and the teacher is more conducive to language acquisition than input simplification alone. This implies that engagement can be beneficial when there is a genuine sense of communication between the teacher and the learner. This can also be explained by the fact that learners' success with interactive reading materials was a result of their communication with their Grade 3 teachers during literacy lessons.

The researcher also discovered a correlation between the learning environment and the literacy outcomes of learners. Due to a Pearson correlation coefficient (r) of 0.9852, the findings further showed a highly significant positive association between learning environment and literacy achievement (0.985, $p = 0.015$). Therefore, a supportive learning environment has an influence on grade three learners' literacy outcomes.

5.2 Recommendations

The government should craft policies that ensure that the classroom atmosphere in all schools is conducive to learning and designed to push learners to compete effectively for higher academic achievement. This policy measure shall improve academic achievement, place attention on providing classroom facilities, enhance the quality of teaching methodologies, and foster teacher-learner engagement. The community must ensure that the school environment is friendly and conducive to learning. Provision of desks and planting trees to enhance a warm and learner-friendly environment is also recommended.

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