

Stakeholders' perspectives on parental engagement in Tanzanian pre-primary schools: Exploring opportunities and challenges

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Abstract. The purpose of this study was to explore the stakeholders' perspectives on parental engagement in pre-primary schools in Nzega District, Tanzania. This study, therefore, explored how stakeholders define parental engagement and identify behaviours that are indicative of it. The study was qualitative, and a phenomenological design was adopted. It consisted of six focus group sessions with a total of 34 parents. A semi-structured interview was conducted with five pre-primary school teachers, four head teachers and five chairpersons of the school committees in the six selected schools. It deployed Braun and Clarke [2] six steps of qualitative data analysis. Results showed that there was a slight variation within and between stakeholder groups on how they define and experience parental engagement. To enhance common understanding, participants felt the need to enhance parents' competencies to support their children's learning at home and in school. This study, therefore, recommends the need for intervention programmes that will empower parents to effectively engage in their children's learning opportunities at home and in pre-primary schools.

Keywords: parental engagement, pre-primary schools, stakeholders' perspectives

1. Introduction

Parental engagement has received worldwide recognition as one of the school strategies for supporting children's early learning at home and in schools [13]. Studies have shown that parental engagement in early learning, both at home and in schools, plays a vital role in children's socio-emotional, motor, as well as cognitive processes [1, 8, 9, 19]. Based on the evidence, parental engagement has become a key component of education policy. For example, under UN commitment, Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) acknowledges the rights of parents to engage in their children's educational activities. Similarly, the Curriculum Framework for the Sustainable Development Goals (CFSDGs) requires educational systems to design a flexible local-based curriculum that enhances community engagement in various school development endeavours [26]. Implicitly, parents should be encouraged to engage in their children's education, as this is a crucial strategy for enhancing their children's learning at home and in school.

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*Educational
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2. Literature review

2.1. The concept of parental engagement

Parental engagement in pre-primary schools is a multifaceted concept involving a broad range of activities in which parents, caregivers, and family members work with teachers to support children's learning at home and in schools [10, 13, 27]. Gross et al. [7] define it as the efforts and actions that parents take to improve their children's learning in collaboration with teachers and other members of the school community. It can be reflected as activities performed by parents at home and in schools to support their children's learning [27]. This may include moral support [22] and volunteering in classroom-related activities, supporting with homework, providing children with instructional materials, or attending school events [8]. Although these definitions emphasise the cooperative responsibility between parents and teachers in supporting children's learning, they hardly provide guidance on how parental engagement practices should be implemented.

To define this concept further, a number of parental engagement models capturing different ways in which parents support their children's learning have been advanced. For example, Van Voorhis et al. [37] identified four key strategies for enhancing parental engagement in pre-primary schools: parental engagement in home learning opportunities that promote literacy and numeracy skills, parents' participation in classroom-related activities, school intervention initiatives aiming to support parental engagement, and parenting activities that support child development and wellbeing. Similarly, in the context of the ecological model of human development, children's progress from the home environment to school requires a well-coordinated and supported collaboration between those who are involved, particularly parents and teachers [3]. These models have played a significant role in bringing clarity and organisation to the concept of parental engagement [8, 13, 27].

However, it is not clear whether parents and teachers share a common understanding of the concept of parental engagement and their respective roles and responsibilities in supporting children's learning [8]. For example, evidence reviewed suggests that the majority of the parents were still immersed in the traditional perspective of parental engagement, such as paying school contributions, helping with transport, or buying school uniforms [21, 28, 29]. In contrast, teachers may emphasise parents' understanding of their children's learning needs, supervision of homework, participation in Parent Teacher Associations (PTA), participation in school leadership, attending school meetings and volunteering in school-related activities. These are two unique perspectives of conceptualising parental engagement [7, 29]. Given the role of parental engagement in education policy and practice, there is a notable lack of research concerning stakeholders' perspectives on parental engagement in pre-primary schools.

2.2. Parental engagement in Tanzanian pre-primary schools

In Tanzania, the need for parental engagement in children's learning is well documented in the Education and Training Policy of 2014 (Revised Edition, 2023), the curriculum and syllabus for pre-primary education of 2023, and the Child Development Policy of 1996 [20, 33, 34]. Parental engagement in Tanzania reflects the democratisation of education, where parents, caregivers, and family members work with teachers to support their children's learning [13, 29]. However, stakeholders' differing perceptions about parental engagement in pre-primary schools are considered to be a significant challenge to the implementation of parental engagement policies [30]. It is drawn from Uwezo's [36] baseline survey that 20 per cent of parents in Tanzania did not engage in their children's early learning opportunities like meeting teachers, doing homework supervision, and making follow-ups on their children's academic progress. Moreover, Uwezo [35] reports that in Tanzanian public primary

schools, 20 per cent of parents did not meet teachers to follow up on the academic progress of their children, and over 57 per cent visited teachers only once or twice per year. Mngarah [22] argue that parental engagement is insufficient in Tanzania due to the community's perception that children's education is the sole responsibility of the government.

This study explored stakeholders' perspectives of how they define and operationalise parental engagement in pre-primary education. Extensive research has demonstrated that parental engagement in early learning, both at home and in schools, plays a vital role in children's socio-emotional, motor, as well as cognitive processes [7, 13, 29]. Given the importance of parental engagement in pre-primary schools, exploring stakeholders' perspectives will help to show how parents engage in their children's education and will give some insight into possible improvements.

2.3. Research questions

1. How is parental engagement in pre-primary education viewed?
2. How do parents currently engage in their children's early learning?
3. Does the current approach need to be improved, and if so, how?

3. Theoretical framework

This study was inspired by Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1917–2005) Ecological Systems Theory. The theory provides an important framework upon which the link between home and school can be established. The ecological systems theory demonstrates the inter-relatedness between the home and the school environment and their profound influence on child development. The theory asserts that children's learning occurs when they engage directly with the environment in a complex pattern of interaction [4]. Bronfenbrenner emphasises that child development is affected by the environment, both the immediate home environment and the school setting [18], which in turn influences parent-teacher engagement with children. Thus, instead of concentrating on the child, it is very important to consider the broader aspect of the surrounding environment in which the child develops and his interaction within it [10]. The theory states that child development occurs within a set of interconnected systems.

In most cases, the applicability of the ecological systems theory to child development emphasises the integration between the two microsystems of the school and the home, hence resulting in the mesosystem. Lase et al. [15] insist that a child learns through interacting or copying what parents do, and the parents do guide them in ways that suit them. In this study, there was a need to understand how the integration of the two critical institutions (home and school) could be used to support preschool children's learning. The utilisation of this theory facilitated an examination of the home and school learning environment, which gave insight into the collective role of school and home in supporting preschool children's learning. Moreover, it enhanced a deeper understanding of the role of parents in supporting the development of their children's cognitive, motor, and socio-emotional processes.

Moreover, parental engagement in children's learning is greatly influenced by the nature of the community; hence, the preschool curriculum must take into account the needs of the communities to which the parents belong [32]. According to Myende [24], the community should be positive and able to overcome obstacles related to parental engagement practices. Fischer, Barnes and Kilpatrick [6] illustrates that parents' social networks at the workplace, at home, or school determine their level of information transfer and support to their children's cognitive, socio-emotional, or motor development. Furthermore, the child's transition from one microsystem to another entails contact with parents who play an essential role in exposing the child to parts of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour [17]. This transition may only

benefit the child's development if it is carefully orchestrated to develop them into well-rounded individuals. According to Rey-Guerra et al. [27], if school values are not reinforced at home, even if schools can alter children's behaviour while in school, the likelihood that these changes will stay in children's character is lower.

4. Methodological considerations

4.1. Research approach and design

This qualitative study was part of a more extensive study that sought to explore stakeholders' perspectives on parental engagement in Tanzanian pre-primary schools. Qualitative research involves exploring the problem in order to understand its magnitude through participants' multiple perspectives [12]. Additionally, a phenomenological design was used to understand participants' perceptions and experiences of parental engagement. This research design facilitated the exploration of how participants define parental engagement and identify key behaviours that are indicative of parental engagement in pre-primary schools [16]. The transcendental phenomenological research design was explicitly used to describe parents' experiences in engaging in their children's early learning [23]. The transcendental phenomenology was also considered important in identifying opportunities and challenges for enhancing parental engagement in pre-primary schools.

4.2. Participants

The participants in this study were head teachers, pre-primary school teachers, parents of pre-primary school children, and school committee chairpersons in Nzega district, Tanzania. According to the Uwezo's [36] assessment that was conducted across 56 districts in mainland Tanzania, Nzega was noted to have the lowest level of parents engaging in children's learning activities at 32% compared to 87% in Iringa urban. The researchers used three sampling techniques. First, they used convenience sampling to study the 6 pre-primary schools in both Nzega District Council and Nzega Town Council in April 2021. These 6 schools were a sample of the 186 pre-primary schools in the district. After the head teachers had agreed for their schools to participate in the study, the researchers randomly selected 34 parents of the pre-primary students whose names appeared in the 2021 registration books. The pre-primary teachers gave the researchers the parents' mobile numbers, and they contacted them requesting their participation in the focus group discussions. The selected parents were living near the schools. In addition, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 5 pre-primary school teachers, 4 head teachers, and 5 school committee chairpersons. The recruitment of these participants was done through purposive sampling.

4.3. Data collection procedures

The researchers conducted 14 semi-structured interviews and 6 focus group discussions. The semi-structured interviews were used to gauge teachers' perspectives regarding the current state of parents' involvement in pre-primary schools, including their perceptions, existing practices, and potential opportunities to improve parents' engagement. Probes and prompts were used strategically to generate rich, nuanced information from the teachers on these key aspects of parental engagement [16]. Six focus group discussions were conducted face-to-face by the researchers and the assistant researcher, with an average of 8 participants per group. To encourage discussion, two of the focus groups were heterogeneous, which included both pre-primary school teachers and parents of pre-primary students (table 1). The remaining four focus groups exclusively engaged with parents of pre-primary children to create a safer environment for discussion. The focus group interviews were conducted in the

school premises and lasted for an average of 45 to 60 minutes. The conversations were audio-recorded for analysis. The discussions were conducted in Kiswahili, the language with which all of the participating parents spoke.

Table 1

Overview of stakeholder groups represented in six focus group interviews.

Focus group interview	Stakeholders	Location
1	2 pre-primary school teachers 1 head teacher 1 school committee chairperson 4 parents	School A
2	2 pre-primary school teachers 1 head teacher 1 school committee chairperson 4 parents	School B
3	7 parents	School C
4	7 parents	School D
5	6 parents	School E
6	7 parents	School F

4.4. Ethical considerations

The ethics committee of the University of Dodoma approved the study. Then, the permit was presented to the district council directors in the Nzega district after being introduced by the Tabora regional administrative secretary. Moreover, the participants' anonymity and privacy were considered at every stage of the research process. The researcher was solely responsible for data collection and administration. To ensure confidentiality, the study used numbers and letters instead of actual names for the study participants and schools respectively.

4.5. Data analysis procedures

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. A thematic analysis was done to examine the experiences of stakeholders and assess their ideas for improvement [2]. The transcripts were open-coded by the authors. The coding was restricted to data that reflected how parents viewed parental engagement in pre-primary schools and how the practices could be improved. Themes were defined, including their relationships to one another, by ongoing comparison with interviews and discussions with all authors. When it was considered necessary, codes and theme definitions were adjusted. The process entailed selecting, defining, and refining the themes, which facilitated the elimination of theme duplication and the choosing of clear and concise titles during report writing.

5. Results

The overall theme shared by the participants was the stakeholders' perspectives on parental engagement in pre-primary schools. During focus group discussions and individual interviews, the participants discussed how they perceived parental engagement as well as their engagement experience in pre-primary education. In addition, their uncertainties about the current practice, as well as their opinion on how to improve the situation, were discussed. When comparing the results based on the data collected, no significant differences were noted regarding the stakeholders' perspectives on parental engagement in pre-primary schools. However, when comparing the results among stakeholder groups, there were slight variations within

themes. Within each theme, emerging differences in the stakeholders' perspectives were identified. Participants' perspectives on parental engagement in pre-primary schools fell into three major themes: firstly, stakeholders' view of parental engagement; secondly, patterns of parental engagement; and thirdly, ideas for improvement.

5.1. How stakeholders view parental engagement

This theme reports on the extent to which stakeholders understood the concept of parental engagement. The definition provided by most of the participants builds on the primary responsibility of parents in supporting children's learning. Stakeholders' views about the concept of parental engagement are summarised in table 2.

Table 2

Stakeholders' views about parental engagement in pre-primary schools.

	Teachers (n=6)	Head teachers (n=5)	Chairpersons of school committees (n=4)	Parents (n=34)
Paying school contributions/fees	4	3	4	34
Helping with transport	4	4	3	30
Buying school uniforms	5	4	4	34
Involving in child's life and education	5	5	2	12
Involving in decision-making at school	1	1	0	4
Knowing their children's progress at school	5	3	3	30
Volunteering in classroom activities	1	1	0	2

The following are some of the definitions provided by parents:

It is about taking care of the child, including paying for transport, buying uniforms and exercise books, and if your child likes playing like mine, you will even buy toys. It is also about health care and providing food to children. (Parent2/FGD-D)

It is all about providing school requirements on time so as not to interfere with their studies when it comes to the provision of educational resources like teaching aids, school contributions and others. During parent-teacher meetings, it was highlighted that our schools lacked chairs and desks; therefore, we were urged to explore the possible potential resources to meet this challenge. (Parent5/FGD-B)

Parental engagement is characterised by parents who attend PTA meetings, check their children's exercise books, prepare instructional materials, and communicate with teachers. It may also involve parents who read to and count with their children, speak about their school experience, and enhance active learning at home and in school. (Parent2/FGD-D)

The concept endorsed by most teachers was about parents being responsible for supporting their children's lives and education. For instance, during individual interviews with teachers, it was indicated that parental engagement was about the partnership between home and school to support their children's learning. Based on this understanding, one teacher explained:

It is sincerely important that parents work with teachers and support their children. This is about financial assistance and investing time and effort to

support your child's learning. This may include assisting with homework and ensuring punctuality to home and school learning activities. (Teacher-D)

Explaining the same issue, other teachers said:

I define parental engagement as parents who actively support their children's learning. This includes participation in PTA meetings and checking and supervising homework. Engaged parents also read with their children and engage in conversation with the child about school activities. (Teacher-A)

Parents should actively support their children's learning by attending school meetings, knowing what they learn, helping with homework, or counting/reading with them. Sometimes, parents may be required to be physically present at school and prepare a supportive home learning environment. (Teacher-D)

5.2. Patterns of parental engagement

This sub-theme highlights patterns of parental engagement in pre-primary schools. Consistent with Van Voorhis et al. [37] model, the parental engagement patterns identified by participants of this study include school-based aspects, home-based aspects and parents' knowledge about what is happening in their child's school. The patterns of parental engagement are summarised in table 3.

This study explored stakeholders' perspectives on parental engagement in pre-primary schools. It was found that few parents volunteered in classroom activities, were involved in decision-making at school, or donated instructional materials to the school. For example, teachers in interviews never highlighted school-planned events where parents could volunteer in classrooms despite the fact that schools viewed parents as important assets in supporting preschool children's learning. As is shown in table 3, although all participants mentioned none of the school-based aspects, most parents reported paying school contributions, helping with transport, or buying school uniforms as the common type of school-based parental engagement. On the other hand, school meetings were perceived as a typical one-term event where discussions would involve challenges the school was facing and where parents' inputs were needed. In this regard, one parent clarified:

School meetings are used to discuss the school's contributions, children's appearance, and the best ways to handle children with behavioural challenges. (Parent2/FGD-E)

The foregoing comments imply that parents had limited opportunities to contribute their strengths to the welfare of their children despite the schools' acceptance that they were significant assets in supporting their children's learning. It was further reported that schools were offering a limited number of meetings, and when invited, parents were given limited opportunities to talk. It was noted that the head teacher was the one who was speaking for the entire meeting. By focusing on this, one of the parents reported:

Schools cannot be well managed if parents are not well engaged. These schools belong to the parents and the community at large. It is unbecoming for the head teacher to dominate every meeting by simply giving instructions. By the way, the school management prepares all of the agendas, and the parents' task is just to endorse them. (Parent6/FGD-B)

Table 3

Patterns of parental engagement.

	Teachers (n=6)	Head teachers (n=5)	Chairpersons of school committees (n=4)	Parents (n=34)
School-based parental engagement				
Attending school meetings	4	2	3	10
Ensuring children attend at school	3	3	3	30
Donating instructional materials to school	2	0	1	5
Involving in decision-making at school	4	5	1	12
Transporting children to and from school	5	3	3	30
Volunteering in classroom activities	4	4	1	8
Paying school contributions	3	4	4	33
Home-based parental engagement				
Reading with their children	3	3	2	22
Talking about the culture	0	0	0	1
Getting children ready for school	5	4	2	31
Communicating to children that education is important	4	3	1	27
Helping with homework	4	3	2	18
Taking children to tuition centres	1	0	0	5
Providing toys/computer apps	2	1	1	12
Enhancing teaching at home	2	2	2	17
Encouraging children to do their best at school	5	3	3	32
Helping with educational materials at home	4	3	2	13
Keeping a close eye on the children's attendance	5	4	3	29
Creating a supportive home learning environment	1	0	0	2
Parental knowledge about what is happening in their children's school				
Distinguishing teachers' role from parents' role	1	1	0	4
Understanding the objective of pre-primary education	1	2	0	8
Feeling positive to work with teachers	3	3	1	13
Parent knowing the impact of engagement in their children's education	3	3	1	15

On the same note, one of the head teachers was rightly cited, stating that it is difficult to call a meeting as scheduled in the school calendar because most of the parents do not attend, and those few who attend normally have their hidden agenda, which almost aims to disturb our meetings. He commented:

You may prepare an agenda in advance and invite parents to the meeting, but when they arrive, they tend to forge their own agenda. For example, instead of discussing the agenda, they may start blaming teachers for children's poor academic performance. Besides, parents' attendance in these meetings is very poor. (Head teacher-E)

Despite having a clear motivation to support their children's learning by keeping

an eye on their attendance, parents appeared to have negative perceptions of parent-teacher communication to the point that they tended to avoid it. It was found that if the teacher invited them, they would perceive that their children were not performing well or they had some behavioural challenges. Interviews with parents revealed that parents communicated only with teachers when their children faced some challenges at school. In one case, the parent maintained that teachers were mostly accountable for taking the initiative to communicate regularly:

It is the teachers' responsibility to ensure communication with the parents. Since I have trusted him to take care of my children, he should ensure communication with me. (Parent3/FGD-A)

On the other hand, teachers revealed that, despite the schools' attempts to engage parents in their children's early learning opportunities, the parents did not respond as the majority of them failed to engage themselves in their children's early learning activities. It was reported that some parents were not bothering to attend school meetings called by teachers; only a few of them did so. As a result, teachers felt that they were not aware of what was happening at school. Teachers considered this situation as parents' lack of awareness and accountability. Talking about this issue, one teacher stated:

I don't know how better I can explain this, but parents are reluctant to attend school meetings despite the regular calls to do so. They do not like to collaborate with teachers. This may be because of a lack of awareness of education. This situation is terrible! (Teacher-F)

Interviews with stakeholders revealed that parents' understanding of their children's learning needs, school policies on parental engagement, and willingness to volunteer in school-related activities were not considered key aspects in school-based parental engagement performances. These findings contrast with those of the study by Jabar et al. [11], which revealed that no parent-related factors, such as family structure, family human and social capital, and parents' expectations, were significantly related to school-based parental engagement.

Based on the individual and group interviews with parents, the findings showed that most parents were undertaking parental engagement at-home learning activities. The study findings displayed in table 3 indicate that the majority of the parents were participating in a variety of home-based activities for their kids, often unintentionally. However, most of the pre-primary school teachers disclosed that they were uncertain about the nature of parental engagement in home-based opportunities. For example, on this, one teacher reported:

I don't know exactly how parents use home learning opportunities to support their children's learning because I have not followed up effectively. (Head teacher-B)

However, during group interviews with parents, most of them reported to have been talking with their children about school experiences, getting children ready for school, and helping their children with instructional materials. Table 3 shows the proportion of parental engagement in their children's home learning. Moreover, during individual interviews with parents, few of them acknowledged creating a supportive home learning environment, but they focused on saving money to buy toys and computer programs/apps instead. Some parents expressed engagement with their children by checking their exercise books and helping them finish their homework

on time. Other forms of home-based parental engagement mentioned in this study included encouraging children to do their best at school and enrolling children in remedial classes (tuition centres):

My primary form of assistance is to provide her with educational supplies, including exercise books, textbooks, and uniforms, and pay for remedial classes (tuition). Also, I help her learn to read, write, and count while supervising her. I also teach her the necessary life skills and provide her with additional reading and writing materials. (Chairperson-B)

Teachers perceived home-based parental engagement to be a key aspect in supporting preschool children's learning. However, one teacher explained that while some parents appeared to be committed to supporting their children in their learning, others were not. She described the following scenario where some parents showed no interest in the supervision of their children's homework:

We have challenges with some of our parents who are not ready to supervise their children in doing their homework. Surprisingly, some of them refuse to supervise their children in doing their homework for the reason that they are not professional teachers and that teachers are paid for the same job. (Head teacher-B)

Thus, teachers suggested that parents needed to be involved in deciding their children's learning rather than being told to support their children's learning. A consistent response from one of the pre-primary school teachers was that:

Parental engagement in children's early learning opportunities at home depends on the parents' aspirations and understanding that their support to their children is useful and can help to improve their learning process. (Teacher-A)

Therefore, one head teacher advised that parents should be made aware of their role in supporting their children's learning at home. He realised that regardless of the barriers to their engagement, some parents were ready to actively engage in their children's learning when proper procedures were followed. Likewise, another head teacher insisted that encouraging parents to engage in their children's early home learning opportunities would lead to new and better practices. He also commented:

Parents can volunteer for a variety of activities. Parents are accustomed to this lifestyle of volunteerism. If parents are determined, they can accomplish great things and improve the educational system: nothing is impossible. (Head teacher-E)

Moreover, some parents who were interviewed in this study lacked awareness of the aim and objectives of pre-primary education. They aspired to see their children gain numeracy and literacy competencies while ignoring their emotional and social skills. This finding suggests that the parents lacked awareness of the variety of competencies to be acquired by their children during pre-primary education. In one case, during the focus group discussion, the parents viewed pre-primary education as the academic preparation for primary school rather than the holistic development of a child. Surprisingly, the parents were not exactly sure about what children were supposed to learn in the pre-primary school syllabus. One parent said:

The challenge is that I am not a professional teacher. So, I may teach a child something that is either above or below what he is supposed to learn. As a parent, I know that a pre-primary child is supposed to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic. (Parent4/FGD-B)

Moreover, it was reported that some parents did not understand that schools had an open-door policy. It was explained that parents still relied on traditional practices that regarded teaching as the responsibility of educated and professionally qualified people. It was revealed that most of the parental engagement practices involved out-of-classroom activities like contributions in monetary forms, building school infrastructure, and monitoring children's discipline. However, the participants indicated that parents had opportunities to learn from teachers and their peer colleagues who had different experiences about engagement in children's learning. On this, one participant said:

Parents can learn proper ways of moulding children when they have good communication with teachers and fellow parents. (Chairperson-B)

5.3. Ideas for improvement

Stakeholders regarded seminars and workshops as an essential strategy to enhance parental engagement. It was reported that without the provision of seminars, parents would not have the opportunity to learn how to support their children's learning. They suggested that empowerment programmes should be organised in a short period to allow them to proceed with other income-generating activities. For example, one parent, during the individual interview, explained that it was a challenge for them to participate in long-term educational programmes because they were busy with their daily household and income-generating activities. She said:

Parents' training should take into account the fact that many parents are busy with income-generating activities. Therefore, such training can be conducted in the form of meetings, workshops, seminars, or radio programmes. (Parent1/FGD-B)

Moreover, during group interviews with teachers' members of PTP, it was argued that parental engagement interventions would be successful if parents were actively engaged in planning and implementing the intervention programmes. Commenting on this idea, during a group discussion with PTP members, one parent proposed that the process of identifying programme content and facilitators should involve the participants. He said:

If the organisers can share the purpose of the programme with us and choose a convenient location for training, it will be easier for parents to participate effectively. (Parent2/FGD-E)

On the other side, this situation suggests that rather than being instructed to attend, parents should be involved in the decision-making process about the implementation of the parental engagement initiative. However, during a group interview, another parent responded that:

Parents' participation in parenting initiatives depends on the participants' consciousness and understanding that empowerment programmes are useful and can make substantial changes to their children's learning process. (Parent3/FGD-E)

It was also reported that parental engagement interventions should involve the larger parent community because if only representatives attend the training, the larger community of parents will not be involved. Furthermore, those who attend can easily mislead those who have no opportunity to attend. In relation to this claim, one of the parents stated:

I remember when I was studying, a teacher whispered something to one student, who in turn whispered the same to another student, and the chain continued. Surprisingly, the last student in the chain had a different message from what the teacher initiated. What I mean is that all parents need to participate in training. (Parent4/FGD-B)

In addition, the interviews with teachers revealed that the intervention programmes should communicate whether the training programmes will be associated with other incentives like allowances or not. For example, one teacher explained a situation where some parents refused to attend the second day of training delivered by teachers PTP members on a note that when facilitators attended meetings, they were paid allowances, but the parents were not:

These teachers attended two weeks of training, and we heard that they were paid for that. But we don't receive even a transport allowance. How can one attend one-week training without allowances? Such training won't be effective. (Teacher1/FGD-D)

6. Discussion

This study explores stakeholders' perspectives on parental engagement in pre-primary schools in the Nzega district, Tanzania. The study results present important information on how parental engagement is perceived, implemented and assessed in pre-primary schools. Overall, the study revealed a limited consensus on how stakeholders in pre-primary schools understand and implement parental engagement. The majority of the participants defined parental engagement as parents' responsibility rather than a shared responsibility between parents and teachers as defined by the Tanzanian curriculum and syllabus for pre-primary education of 2023 [20]. This makes the study one of the few that demonstrate a lack of agreement among stakeholders on how parental engagement is defined in Tanzanian pre-primary schools.

Participants identified a wide range of parental engagement patterns reflected by common models previously discussed in the literature. These include donating instructional materials to school, paying school contributions, attending school meetings, parents taking the role of decision-makers, parents actively engaging in children's health care, or parents being aware of their children's progress at school [13, 27]. However, within the patterns, there was a variation in how stakeholders view parental engagement based on their group [7]. For instance, most of the teachers firmly understood parental engagement in pre-primary schools as a shared responsibility in which parents, caregivers, and family members work with teachers to support children's learning at home and in school. However, the majority of the parents viewed paying school contributions, keeping a close eye on the child's attendance, encouraging children to do better at school, helping with transport, or enhancing teaching at home as significant indicators of parental engagement.

Proportionally, fewer parents described creating a supportive home learning environment, taking children to after-school programmes, volunteering in classroom activities and buying toys/computer apps as indicators of parental engagement. In contrast, the majority of the teachers endorsed getting children ready for school, attending

school meetings, paying school contributions, volunteering in classroom activities, and being involved in making decisions about children's education. In fact, this situation is contrary to what is stipulated in the principles guiding parental engagement in Tanzanian pre-primary schools. The country curriculum and the syllabus for pre-primary education of 2023 require active community, family and parental engagement in classroom-related activities [20]. These variations are important as they can explain parents' level of engagement in their children's learning, teachers' perception about working with parents and how parental engagement initiatives can be enhanced [9].

Moreover, the findings in this study partially align with the four categories of parental engagement described by Van Voorhis et al. [37]. For example, the model is describing engaging parents in their children's learning activities at home without necessarily indicating how those activities could be implemented [7]. Parents who do not get support on how to assist their children in learning at home may further accelerate the difficulties they already face in the implementation of the school curriculum. It is clear that parents have an important role in supporting their children's learning at home and in schools (supervision of homework, reading with the child, talking to teachers, and volunteering in classroom-related activities), but schools should also understand that parents are not professionally qualified people when it comes to the question of teaching and learning. This highlights the importance of schools organising empowerment programmes that help parents understand their roles in supporting their children's learning in pre-primary schools and promote inclusivity in curriculum implementation [13, 29].

Another objective of the study was to explore how parental engagement in pre-primary schools should be improved. This study found that parents were ready to actively engage in their children's learning when proper procedures were in place. Although stakeholders' perceptions differ, the majority of the parents highlighted empowerment programmes like seminars and workshops as their key considerations when planning for parental engagement intervention. The study by Hoffman et al. [9] on the effects of school readiness intervention on family engagement during the kindergarten transition showed that the KITS programme in the United States of America (USA) improved parent-teacher communication, parents feeling positively towards the school and supported children's learning at home. Another study exploring the effects of parental involvement intervention to promote child literacy in Tanzania reported a significant improvement in children's decoding skills, reading fluency and reading comprehension [13]. According to Damen et al. [5], parental engagement initiatives have led to long-term improvements in child outcomes, including cognitive, social, and motor skills. Parent empowerment programmes also increase positive parent-child relationships while decreasing negative parenting behaviours and parent-child conflict [14].

Debates are ongoing about the effectiveness of parental engagement interventions. The argument centres on the idea that many intervention initiatives that target to enhance parental engagement are often beneficial for a short term [9]. Other scholars contend that most of the intervention initiatives lack methodological rigour, hence limiting the room to conclude their effectiveness in enhancing children's learning outcomes. These tensions have resulted in diverse perspectives on the effectiveness of parental engagement interventions [9]. However, a number of studies approve the need for empowering parents to engage in their children's early learning [13, 28, 29]. In this case, Stacy, Gutierrez and McMillian [31] recommend parental engagement initiatives that facilitate dialogue and the exchange of experiences between the key stakeholders. Myende and Nhlumayo [25] further argue that an intervention initiative that is friendly and participatory to parents increases their motivation and volunteering spirit. Therefore, this study demonstrates the need for education authorities and

policymakers to consider the comprehensive use of the context-based approach in implementing parental engagement initiatives.

The present study sample is limited in its representativeness to Nzega District in the Tabora region despite attempts to include a wide range of participants. Thus, the findings may not accurately reflect the current state of parental engagement in Tanzanian pre-primary schools. To draw more reliable conclusions, further research with a more extensive and more diverse sample from other regions is recommended, including rural schools, which might have different experiences regarding parental engagement. Additionally, exploring stakeholders' perceptions, such as policymakers, parents, teachers, experts, and children separately, could provide more detailed insights. Nevertheless, the present study has stakeholders' perceptions that align with the international literature on parental engagement in pre-primary education in Tanzania, including issues related to the concept of parental engagement, patterns of parental engagement and parental engagement intervention initiatives.

7. Conclusions

Parental engagement can be perceived differently by stakeholder groups. Due to particular developmental characteristics, it might prove difficult for all stakeholders to define parental engagement or understand its dimensions as stated by the curriculum and syllabus. This is especially relevant because the study participants hold different perspectives on what constitutes parental engagement in pre-primary schools, variations that can significantly affect the design, implementation and evaluation of parental engagement initiatives. Thus, researchers, policymakers, teachers and parents should consider working closely when designing and implementing parental engagement interventions. Therefore, this study suggests the need for a collaborative effort to identify key areas in which parents can be supported to help them maintain an active role in supporting their children's learning.

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