

Effective teacher-parent communication strategies for enhancing children's learning in early-grade classes: a cross-contextual study

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Abstract. Teacher-parent communication is vital for improving children's learning at school and in their home environment. However, its practice is faced with varied challenges. Therefore, the study explored barriers to teacher-parent communication and proposed strategies to strengthen it, aiming to support children's learning in the early grades in Tanzania. This study employed a qualitative research approach, underpinned by a phenomenological design. Data were gathered through focus group discussions with 60 parents and in-depth interviews with 30 teachers and 10 head teachers who were purposefully selected. Thematic analysis was employed in the data analysis process. The results indicated multiple barriers to effective teacher-parent communication. These included teacher-related factors, such as the use of technical language and negative attitudes toward parents; parent-related challenges, including limited communication skills, prior negative school experiences, socioeconomic constraints, and inflexible schedules. Others included school administration issues, involving inadequate planning for school-community communication and pupil-related factors, such as a lack of trust in teachers and unrealistic expectations regarding parent communication. Therefore, effective communication requires collaborative efforts among teachers, administrators, and parents. Key strategies include fostering trust, using accessible language, respecting diverse perspectives and involving parents in classroom and school activities. Others involve providing engagement opportunities through workshops, seminars, and shared decision-making. The study concludes that teacher-parent communication depends on joint efforts from all key stakeholders (teachers, parents, pupils and school administration) involved in children's learning. It, therefore, recommends that each part play an active role in enhancing communication.

Keywords: teacher-parent communication, early-grade classes, children's learning

1. Introduction

Communication among school leaders, teachers, parents, and students is of great importance in creating an effective educational climate in educational institutions. More specifically, the communication between teachers and parents on pupils' learning and development has a great advantage in the understanding of pupils' performance and challenges [49]. Further, it improves parents' engagement in children's education, providing relevant guidance and counselling [50] and improving pupils' motivation to learning [24]. Therefore, school leadership and teachers not only need to be skilled in the art of teaching and learning but also should understand the skills towards efficient communication with the parents. Teachers' understanding fosters mutual respect and helps parents feel valued and included within the school community [30]. Therefore,

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*Educational
Dimension*



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teachers are supposed to use effective communication channels with parents, such as parent meetings, telephone, internet technology, school events and conferences, to enhance collaboration with parents.

The study by Loziak [29] suggests two approaches to fostering communication between teachers and families. First, communication related to general school involvement, including contributions of parents to the school and involvement in school activities such as school events (graduation, meetings, etc). Second, parents' support of students' academic development. Clear and consistent communication helps prevent misunderstandings and promotes a more harmonious school environment. This is because when parents are informed and involved, they become aware of what is going on in the classroom and feel a part of the classroom team [5]. Durisic and Bunjevac [12] contend that parents who are educated and involved in school activities are more likely to be empathetic and helpful and are less prone to draw unfavourable conclusions. Such collaboration helps in the development of optimal potential for students' development.

While teacher-parent communication is reported to be important in enhancing children's learning, studies by Ribeiro et al. [47] and Stamatis and Chatzinikola [49] show that healthy communication is not always evident. It is affected by different factors ranging from the school level, the family level and the environmental level. Additionally, Studies by Ozel, Bayindir and Ozel [40] and Ozmen et al. [41] present that the school leadership often fails to establish regular and efficient communication with established teacher-parent collaboration platforms such as school meetings and the parent-teacher association (PTA). Sometimes, school leadership fails to realise how crucial parent-teacher contact is to students' successful learning. Others lack relevant strategies that might be applied to improve teacher-parent communication [30]. Similarly, some teachers are not updated with the skills that facilitate effective interactions with parents [11, 19]. While teachers cannot establish clear communication, parents face a more difficult situation as they are waiting for the school and teachers to initiate communication [35, 37]. Thus, the study examined the barriers to communication between parents and teachers and practical communication strategies for overcoming these barriers. This could result in an effective and smooth learning environment among early-grade learners.

2. Literature review

Domestic and international studies provide that engaging parents in children's learning is critical, with teacher-parent communication being crucial [15, 20, 23]. Various studies endorse that partnership and communication between teachers and parents significantly enhance children's learning and development. However, studies show that teacher-parent communication faced challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019. Various studies, such as Engler [14] and Ribeiro et al. [47], focused extensively on interactions between schools and families during the pandemic. The results indicate that although the pandemic presented difficulties for both teachers and parents in this realm, efforts were made to swiftly find suitable solutions for managing the situation. For example, the study by Engler [14] showed an increased parents' demand to communicate with teachers during remote learning periods. In this sense, Papadakis, Alexandraki and Zaranis [42] viewed the use of mobile devices for children's learning at home. However, the learning through mobile devices, specifically apps, needs close guidance between teachers and parents. For instance, Vaiopoulou et al. [54] argue that following the integrated home technologies, parents need to make informed and appropriate choices and encourage children to engage in high-quality apps. Therefore, for parents to have such knowledge, they require communication and

guidance from the teachers. Without such guidance, there is a likelihood of parents' failure to support their children's learning accurately.

In addition, the literature presents numerous challenges that may affect the growth of productive teacher-parent communication. Scholars categorise these challenges in different ways. Some categorise them as psychological, physical, social, organisational, and technical [2, 41]. Hoover-Dempsey et al. [23] categorises communication challenges as related to school, teachers, or parents. The failure to establish alternative techniques, the lack of system expertise, and the inability to provide communication support are school-related difficulties. Parent-related ones include family status, practical issues (such as parents' rigid work schedules, etc.), and psychological obstacles (negative school experiences, etc.). Furthermore, Ozmen et al. [41] presents barriers both inside and outside the school that can hinder or interrupt communication. These include hierarchical, status-related, protection-related, psychological, semantic, and field-related. With such varied perceptions from the literature, it can be learnt that the barriers may differ from one context to another. However, there may be generalised challenges that stem from school or teachers and home or parents-related issues.

Parents' negative experiences with the school structure are also reported as a challenge that can affect communication with teachers [6, 8]. When parents feel unwelcome by the school structures, they tend to limit their interaction with the school. Parents' negative experiences lead to feelings of being neglected by the school. Siegel et al. [48] emphasises the need for schools to design advice programmes to help parents feel that the school structures are friendly and welcoming for easy communication. These advice programmes could encourage parents to ask for assistance and obtain information about their children's behaviour, school requirements, and learning. Giving parents such information can have two benefits: one, it can reduce their unfavourable perceptions of the school, and second, it can increase their interest in it [11].

Parents' socioeconomic status and time factors, as presented by Durisic and Bunijevac [12], are reported among the barriers hindering effective teacher-parent communication. Durisic and Bunijevac [12] argue that well-off parents are expected to cooperate more in school activities compared to less well-off parents. However, studies by Motshusi, Ngobeni and Sepeng [36] show that parents working in formal sectors are occupied with various responsibilities and do not have sufficient time to engage with the school. While such parents lack sufficient time to collaborate, the impact is not much reported because most of the school meetings' demands are converted to money demands that they can afford. On the other hand, the majority of parents from low-income families do not attend school meetings because most of the demands are converted into money demands [51, 56]. Genadek and Hill [17] contend that to overcome such challenges, the school may need to determine parents' work schedules and learn the appropriate time to involve parents. Teachers can also inform parents in advance of the kind of information they wish to convey, as well as the time they wish to conduct the meeting, so that they can fix their schedules accordingly. Also, the less economically advantaged parents need to be involved through designing the activities that make them feel respected, valued and that their socioeconomic status is not seen as a barrier to their participation [13].

The use of technical language during teacher-parent communication is documented in different literature as affecting communication between teachers and parents. The study by Lawal [27] indicated that with low parents' education level, technical terminologies limit parents' understanding of the message communicated by the teacher. For this reason, Aras et al. [3] and Lawal [27] suggest that teachers need to observe the kind of language they are using, either in written conversation or conversation. Thus, the terminology used should be simple and clear to the parents' level of understanding.

Similarly, during the school meetings, teachers should use friendly language that may allow parents' participation without feeling a sense of neglect or discrimination. Further, schools need to design various communication channels that can easily facilitate communication with parents. These may involve private conversations, group meetings, phone calls, conferences and technology meetings [30]. While most studies have been conducted globally, the studies conducted in the Tanzanian context in parental involvement involving Malingumu, Kigobe and Amani [31] and Paulo and Onyango [43] have primarily focused on parental involvement in general school matters, while communication is being reported as a challenge for effective partnership. However, the studies did not establish the reasons for communication barriers and the way to mitigate them.

2.1. Theoretical framework

The study was guided by Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence [15]. The theory recognises the overlapping roles of the school (teachers), family (parents), and the community in the learning of a child. Epstein, in the theory of overlapping spheres of influence, introduces six types of parental involvement, including parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. Of relevance to this study, communication was reflected because the study focused very specifically on teacher-parent communication for children's learning. According to Epstein [16], communication is the level of engagement influenced by creating a mutual school-to-home and home-to-school communication between the parents and teachers about pupils' learning at school. Epstein's theory postulates that without mutual communication between teachers and parents, children's learning becomes ineffective. Therefore, the two sides must work collaboratively to ensure communication. In order to ensure communication, the theory suggests various strategies that may foster teacher-parent communication. They may include organising conferences periodically and providing language translation if/when needed. However, it may also involve passing information through various channels such as phone calls, letters, emails, and other relevant means of communication that enable pupils' learning and the teachers and parents [39]. As per this study, Epstein's theory guided the researcher to understand the barriers facing teacher-parent communication and the strategies that may help to mitigate those barriers.

2.2. The current study

Tanzania's Education and Training Policy of 2014 revision of 2023 [53] calls for effective teacher-parent partnership for effective pupil learning. Several guidelines have been established to ensure teacher-parent partnerships involving the establishment of a PTA at each school. However, studies by Kigobe et al. [26] and Mbogo [32] report limited collaboration, specifically, communication between teachers and parents. Despite that Kigobe et al. [26] and Mbogo [32] presented limited collaboration, specifically communication, there is a scarcity of literature depicting the barriers to effective communication and the ways they can be mitigated in the Tanzanian context. The current study, therefore, explored the barriers affecting teacher-parent communication and suggested ways to improve it. In this regard, two objectives guided this study:

1. To explore the barriers to teacher-parent communication for enhancing early-grade pupils' learning.
2. To suggest effective strategies for enhancing teacher-parent communication for early-grade pupils' learning.

3. Methodology

3.1. Approach and design

A qualitative research approach in the data collection and analysis procedures informed the study. A qualitative approach was used because of its strength in offering in-depth information on the phenomenon under study [9]. Further, Merriam and Grenier [33] contend that a qualitative study examines how individuals interpret their experiences and systematically construct their meaning. Within the qualitative approach, the phenomenological study design was used to offer an opportunity for informants to provide their perspectives about teacher-parent communication for improving early-grade pupils' learning. Neubauer, Witkop and Varpio [38] argue that a phenomenological study design is effective, as it provides researchers with an opportunity to describe content-rich comprehension of lived experience. The researchers preferred the design to gather some common shared experiences of parents and teachers on their communication strategies for children's learning across different contexts. In a phenomenological study, an understanding of the phenomenon is elicited, and insight is gained by interviewing knowledgeable and experienced participants in the phenomenon [9]. Therefore, the design enabled the researchers to capture a more holistic and contextual portrayal of a given phenomenon, while also minimising bias and enhancing validity. Giorgi [18] argues that the key to reducing bias is for the researcher to ensure bracketing. Bracketing involves the researcher controlling their presuppositions, biases, and not allowing his/her meanings and interpretations or theoretical concepts to enter the unique world of the participant [28].

To ensure this, the researchers warranted that the data collected through semi-structured interviews and focused group discussions (FGDs) were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve the original meaning of the participants. In essence, the researcher re-read the field notes and re-listened to the audio recording of each interview to become familiar with the words of the interviewee and develop a holistic sense. Further, the data analysis and interpretation solely relied on the meaning derived from the data rather than the researchers' orientations. Further, the data obtained were shared with the research participants (member checking) to ensure the validity of the data collected.

3.2. Study location, population and sample

The research was carried out in two districts, namely Ukerewe and Mkalama in Tanzania. The two districts were selected because they were reported to have the least parental engagement in pupils' learning [52]. Ten schools were involved in the study, five per district. The selection of the school ensured the involvement of urban and rural schools, determined by the District Education Office allocation. The study involved 30 teachers, 60 parents, and 10 head teachers. However, the number of participants was guided by the saturation of the data. Teachers were purposely sampled as they were core instructors in early-grade classes. Specifically, the study involved pre-primary classes to grade two classes in Tanzania. Such classes were selected because they are the classes implementing the 3Rs curriculum (reading, writing and arithmetic) in Tanzania, and the level of foundation skills is assessed at grade two. The head teachers (HTs) were purposefully involved because they were responsible for overseeing and mentoring teachers to deliver the learning experiences using the available guidelines effectively. Similarly, purposeful sampling was used to select parents (PTA members) (PTA) while respecting gender and pupils' class level. This is based on the fact that the guideline for PTA members involves two parents per class (one male and one female). Parents were involved because they are recognised as key figures in monitoring and improving education provision and outcomes in terms

of academics, and their children's learning.

3.3. Data collection methods and instruments

Semi-structured interviews and FGDs were utilised to gather data. Teachers and head teachers participated in semi-structured individual interviews while parents participated in the FGDs. The interview and FGD guides were subjected to expert appraisal for language editing and removing ambiguity in questions in order to ensure validity. Further, the questions were piloted at one school in order to assess whether they answered the intended objectives. Further, this helped to remove redundant questions. Ten FGDs were conducted with parents of early-grade children (pre-primary to grade two), specifically, members of the PTA for each class. Each FGD had six parents (two from each class as per PTA guidelines, one male and one female). The interviews with teachers and HTs and the discussion with parents took place in a school natural setting. The interviews took a maximum of 30 minutes, while the FGDs took a maximum of one hour per group. The interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded during the conversation. Field notebooks and digital devices were used to keep important information collected from participants for further reference and interpretation.

3.4. Data analysis

Data were thematically analysed guided by six steps developed by Braun and Clarke [7]. The gathered data were transcribed from the audio recordings into text after listening and re-listening to the digitally recorded data. This enabled them to make sense of the data collected. Transcription was performed immediately after data collection. Verbatim transcription was adopted to avoid any potential bias in sense-making that may occur with summarising [4]. After translation, the researchers developed a codebook that helped in coding the collected data. Codebook development was data-driven as it emanated from these specific research objectives. After coding all responses, the codes for each question were exported to an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. The recurring codes were merged, and categories were created using a pivot table. After completing this process, themes were created. The process of developing themes alongside coding and categorisation was repeatedly conducted to identify further areas not coded. Theme reviewing and theme creation went hand in hand. The code extracts were periodically examined throughout this process to see if they consistently related to themes. However, themes not sufficiently supported by data were merged into one another. Each theme was then given a distinct definition and name, which aided in the report-writing process.

3.5. Ethical consideration

The study requested ethical clearance and research permits from the relevant authorities. After reaching the study sites, the HTs signed a consent form allowing teachers to participate in the study. Additionally, the participants offered their consent to be involved in the interview and FGDs. However, the study's purpose was also explained to the participants, enabling them to understand the matter and the importance of their participation in the study while maintaining their autonomy and freedom. To maintain confidentiality, the names of participants were kept anonymous, and the study's responses were kept confidential.

4. Results

4.1. Barriers to teacher-parent communication for enhancing children's learning

The analysis of the findings depicted that the barriers affecting teacher-parent communication could be grouped into four subthemes in terms of source of origin,

namely, barriers caused by parents, teachers, school administration and pupils themselves. The explanations are given in the table 1.

Table 1

Barriers to teacher-parent communication for enhancing children's learning.

Theme	Subtheme	Code
Teacher-parent communication barriers	Communication barriers resulted from parents	Limited communication skills Unfriendly experiences from the school Family social economic status Inconsistent parents' support Non-flexible parents' timetable Cultural difference
	Communication barriers resulted from teachers	Using technical language Looking down upon non-performing pupils Negative attitudes to parents Engaging in unethical behaviours
	Communication barriers resulted from school administration	Poor school-community communication planning
	Communication barriers resulted from pupils	Lack of trust in teachers Unrealistic communication with parents

The data as presented in table 1 indicate various categories of barriers affecting teacher-parent communication, including those emanating from teachers, parents, school administration, and pupils.

4.1.1. Communication barriers resulted from parents

The findings indicated that various communication barriers are emanating from parents. For instance, limited communication skills were reported to be a barrier affecting teacher-parent communication. In this regard, participants argued that parents cannot speak Swahili effectively. Therefore, it becomes difficult for the teachers to understand them easily. This results in misunderstanding or incomplete information being exchanged about children's academic progress. One teacher noted, *"Other parents cannot speak Swahili effectively, they only speak Kikereuwe, and therefore, it becomes difficult to understand what they communicate"* (Teacher 15, School F, September 2024).

Concerning language challenges, cultural differences were also identified as a barrier affecting teacher-parent communication in the sense that the particular communities strongly emphasise male domination and authority. Therefore, because most participating parents in their child's education are women, they feel uncomfortable questioning the teacher's decision or suggesting improvement. One teacher noted, *"In this community, women have much respect for men, even the society feels that arguing with the teacher is like lacking discipline to him/her, and therefore, they fail to give their ideas"* (Teacher 18, School F, September 2024).

While teachers reported cultural differences impacting teacher-parent communication, parents reported unfriendly experiences from the school and teachers hindering their communication with teachers. In this regard, parents reported that teachers have unwelcoming language, especially when they approach them in cases of pupils' mistreatment. Parents believe that teachers are always harsh when they are informed of their actions. Therefore, diminishes parents' interest in communicating and discussing different issues with them. One parent noted, *"Teachers are not good friends to us. When your child tells you that the teacher has mistreated them, when you ask the teacher, he/she feel that you are intimidating him/her. They become too defensive"*

and sometimes hate the child” (Parent 10, School B, September 2024).

Some parents being inconsistent in supporting matters concerning children’s learning and inflexible timetables was also reported to affect teacher-parent communication. In the aspect of parents being irresponsible, all respondents shared their views that there are parents who take less responsibility for their children’s education, such as monitoring their academic progress, buying learning materials and social behaviours. Therefore, even when they are approached about their children’s matters, they do not respond. One head teacher said, *“Some parents believe that their responsibility ends with enrolling their children in school, and they may not actively follow up on their children’s progress. Even in cases of absenteeism, they might not take the necessary steps to inform the class teacher”* (Head teacher 2, School B, September 2024). While head teachers and teachers said this, some of the parents were concerned with the difficult daily timetable that denied them the physical opportunity to communicate with teachers. The difficult timetable resulted from the search for a job and other employment opportunities. Therefore, the search for family needs makes them busy, to the extent that they fail to communicate closely with the teachers.

Lastly, the socioeconomic status of parents was also reported to affect teacher-parent communication. It was reported that in most cases, low-income families feel stigmatised or misjudged by teachers because of their economic status. Therefore, they feel shame and less confident in communicating with teachers. They feel worried about being criticised or labelled by teachers. Concerning this idea, head teachers argued that sometimes teachers may consciously or unconsciously make decisions based on a family’s socioeconomic status, which can affect the attitude and nature of their communication.

4.1.2. Communication barriers resulted from teachers

It was informed that teachers’ use of technical language during communication with parents limits their participation and support in children’s learning. Presenting this issue, parents reported that teachers are using complex formal language and instructions to parents, making it difficult for them to understand easily. While parents reported this, teachers argued that it is the subject language and that there could be no other means. Furthermore, parents added that teachers sometimes are not friendly in approaching sensitive topics, such as a child’s underperformance or behavioural issues. It was noted that some of the teachers communicate in a less empathetic and constructive manner that fosters cooperation rather than defensiveness or conflict, especially when dealing with cases of children’s misbehaviour.

Engaging in unethical behaviours was also reported as a barrier to effective teacher-parent communication. The analysis of results showed that some teachers engage in relationship affairs with pupils, resulting in conflicts with the community, especially parents. When parents conflict with teachers, it becomes difficult to communicate well with them. One parent asked, *“How is it possible to communicate with a teacher who does not respect himself and can’t distance himself from pupils?”* (Parent 6, School A, September 2024).

Furthermore, the analysis of the findings showed that one of the barriers towards effective teacher-parent communication is teachers’ negative attitudes towards parents. Negative attitude was viewed in different aspects, including parents’ socioeconomic status and education level. It was informed that sometimes teachers have segregationist behaviours towards parents with low economic and educational status. Thus, they see them as if they have limited contribution to school and children’s learning, therefore, limiting their communication with them. Segregation among parents erodes the trust between parents and teachers. When parents notice the signs of disrespect, condescension, or judgment, they feel unwelcome or unvalued. This bias does in-

fluence how parents perceive and communicate with teachers. One parent stated, *“Sometimes teachers perceive that we do not have anything to share or help because of our situation. They do not respect us, and they respect those with money. Therefore, we also left them and proceeded with our activities. Importantly, they cannot expel our children from school”* (Parent 17, School C, September 2024). This expression shows that parents sometimes ignore communicating with teachers because they are not given due respect.

4.1.3. Communication barriers resulted from school administration

It was also stated that, for effective teacher-parent communication, the school administration needs to make clear plans for communication with the parents and community at large. However, most of the school administration do not do so. This means that the school has put in place a sufficient mechanism to ensure smooth teacher-parent communication. The lack of stipulated mechanisms and school plans for enhancing communication results in poor communication between teachers and parents. Among the reported plans by teachers and parents included are teacher-parent meetings, engaging in developing a school action plan and parents’ visiting day. One teacher suggested, *“In case when you find the head of school does not plan for community involvement in school matters such as parents’ meetings, it becomes difficult for parents to see the importance of communicating with the teacher”* (Teacher 4, School B, September 2024). This expression implies that school management needs to be at the forefront in ensuring that the community is involved in all matters regarding the school. By so doing, this will simplify parents’ participation, especially communication with specific classroom teachers.

4.1.4. Communication barriers resulted from pupils

The analysis of the data indicated that among the communication barriers reported as being caused by pupils, a lack of trust in parents and misinformation to parents were reported. Parents presented that young children develop more trust in teachers compared to parents when it comes to academic matters and learning. Therefore, when parents want to support them in their learning, they hesitate, thinking that they may not guide them on the right path. This may diminish parents’ interest in supporting them and leaves the process to the teacher, thereby reducing the communication between teachers and parents. One parent informed, *“These young children tend to fully trust and follow what their teacher says. Therefore, in some cases, I choose to step back and allow the teacher to continue guiding them”* (Parent 37, School G, September 2024). In addition, parents and teachers also reported that sometimes pupils give wrong information to parents. Therefore, wrong information results in parents’ failure to communicate with teachers accordingly. It was noted that some pupils in the upper classes misbehave at school, but when they are punished, they do not tell exactly what they did. They provide unrealistic information. Mostly depicting that they have been mistreated. As a result, parents get angry with teachers, therefore diminishing their communication with teachers. For instance, one teacher said, *“Sometimes pupils force us into conflicts with parents. This is because they hide their bad behaviours from their parents, and we are seen as if we are punishing their children for no reason, and they do not feel happy”* (Teacher 24, School H, September 2024). The teacher’s expression indicates that when parents become irritated, communication with teachers becomes hindered, thereby affecting their relationships

4.2. Effective strategies for enhancing teacher-parent communication

After identifying the barriers impacting effective teacher-parent communication in support of children’s learning, the study explored the strategies for collaborative engagement among teachers and parents as presented in the table 2.

Table 2

Effective strategies for enhancing teacher-parent communication.

Theme	Subtheme	Code
Effective strategies for enhancing teacher-parent communication	Strategies for teacher implementation	Building trust in parents
		Involving parents in the classroom activities
		Guiding parents
		Designing effective communication channels
		Using simple language
		Respecting parents' differing views
		Respecting all pupils regardless of their abilities
	Strategies for school administration implementation	Planning for parents' meetings
		Planning workshops and seminars for parents
		Engaging parents in decision-making
		Engaging parents in school-related events
	Strategies for parents' implementation	Setting convenient timetables for parents' meetings
		Respecting their responsibilities to children
		Setting a timetable for children's support
		Respecting and trusting teachers
		Understanding their children well
		Paying school-visits

4.2.1. Strategies for school administration implementation

The findings from the respondents showed that to improve teacher-parent communication, the school administration has a role to fulfil. Among the roles reported were planning for the parents' meetings. Parents' meetings were said to improve communication because parents could find the school environment friendly and participate in planning for school development and learning. This could make parents own the decisions made and make it easy to make follow-ups. By so doing, they could be communicating with the teachers. For instance, one parent substantiated, *"The head teacher should have quarterly meetings with parents. When we come to meetings, we visit even the class teachers to know the progress of our children"* (Parent 2, School A, September 2024). The expression entails that the school management can have quarterly meetings. Further, attending the meetings can help parents to communicate directly with teachers. From this view, it can be learnt that through meetings, teachers and parents may strengthen their relationship, being responsible and trusting each other. In support of school meetings, teachers also argued that when parents are invited to school meetings, they get an opportunity to be involved in school decision-making. Emphasising this argument, one teacher said that when parents are involved in the school decision-making process, they feel a sense of school ownership. Therefore, the head of schools should involve parents in all school decisions to facilitate easy teacher-parent communication.

While parents' meetings were suggested as a strategy for enhancing teacher-parent communication, setting appropriate times for such meetings was a parents' concern. It was reported that, sometimes, the school schedules meetings during farming seasons or in the morning, which causes parents to fail to attend because they are in farming activities. In this regard, they suggested that meetings should be held during the afternoon sessions and during the seasons in which they are not involved in farming or harvesting. One parent testified, *"The problem is that they request us to come to school during the rainy season when we are engaged in farming activities for family needs. But if they invite us during the dry season, it becomes easy because we are always at home during those periods"* (Parent 4, School A, September 2024). With the

parents' expression, it can be learnt that parents are ready to attend different school activities, such as school meetings or school visits. However, the school's scheduling is unfriendly to them. Therefore, the joint decision on the right time for school-parent meetings is paramount to ensure parents are attending school events.

Additionally, involving parents in school events was suggested as a strategy that could enhance communication. Among the school events that were suggested were family day, graduation day and other events such as building classes. Involving parents in such events was reported to increase closeness with teachers, and therefore, they feel free to communicate and contact them. One teacher said, *"We become one family with parents when we involve them in joyful events rather than conflicting situations only"* (Teacher 7, School C, September 2024). The teacher's voice indicates that the events make parents happy, cooperative, and ready to communicate with teachers as if they are part of the school community. In addition to school events, seminars and trainings for parents on the means of communication with the teachers and their importance were reported. This was thought to be an important strategy as it could improve parents' communication skills with teachers and help them understand the importance of communication with teachers. During the discussion with parents, they informed us of the need for the head teachers to guide them on how to communicate, what to communicate, and why communication is important. From this view, they argued that understanding these aspects could lead to improved communication.

4.2.2. Strategies for teachers' implementation

Furthermore, several strategies were proposed for teachers to implement in order to facilitate effective and meaningful communication with parents. One of the strategies includes building trust with parents. Parents argued that teachers need to trust parents that they have supportive ideas towards children's learning and school development. By so doing, parents will be ready to communicate and share their ideas with teachers. One parent said, *"Teachers should also listen to us so that we may give them constructive ideas, how can you talk to a person who doesn't like to listen to you?"* (Parent 12, School B, September 2024). This view entails that trust between teachers and parents is essential for enhancing the relationship. This went hand in hand with respecting parents' differing views and attitudes. The head teachers said that teachers should be open and positive to receive different ideas from parents, whether they like them or not. Accepting all views will make parents trust teachers and know that they are respected and valued. When parents are aware that they can offer their ideas and be respected by teachers, they will be ready to communicate and share ideas.

Using simple language was also reported as a strategy that teachers can use to enhance teacher-parent communication. The simple language was informed by the concept that teachers also need to guide parents. However, the language that is used remains more technical and professional. Therefore, parents fail to understand and fail to give feedback easily. Therefore, to improve communication, teachers need to use the language and instructions that are easy for parents, taking into consideration that they differ in terms of education, age and socioeconomic status. A parent argued that *"Teachers should be using simple language to understand them easily and know how to support children. Sometimes they use difficult instructions to the extent that we can't respond to them"* (Parent 6, School A, September 2024). This signifies that if teachers use simple language, parents can easily understand and reply to what they have been guided.

Designing different communication channels was also reported as a strategy for improving teacher-parent communication. It was informed that technological communication channels are sometimes not friendly to parents. Especially parents with low

levels of education and those with low socioeconomic status. In this regard, parents said that teachers should design friendly communication channels such as parent invitations, home visits, letters and homework. These communication channels were thought relevant to all levels of the parents. One parent said, *“Teachers should not only use the phones but use other means of communication, because sometimes we lack airtime and internet bundle”* (Parent 17, School I, September 2024). It is from this essence that one can learn that the use of phones limits parents’ participation because sometimes they lack communication airtime and internet bundle. Therefore, having more than one communication channel will help smooth communication.

Respect for all pupils regardless of their academic abilities was also reported as a strategy that made parents feel positive about the teacher and see that their children are not segregated in terms of their academic abilities. Instead, they see the teacher collaborating to improve the child’s learning. For this reason, they will strive to communicate with the teacher for children’s learning and development. However, when teachers look down upon struggling pupils, parents also become demotivated to cooperate with the teacher. This may, in one way or another, result in limited communication. This is because they will see that the teacher offers limited support for their children’s progress.

4.2.3. Strategies for parents’ implementation

Additionally, some of the strategies were recommended for parents to adopt in order to enhance effective communication with teachers. One of the recommended strategies emphasised the importance of parental engagement in monitoring their children’s academic responsibilities, including the regular monitoring of learning progress and access to learning materials. Through monitoring children’s academic progress, they could communicate with teachers. With this view, one head teacher noted, *“Parents should understand and take their responsibilities, mostly monitoring their children’s progress, that is when they can know the challenges facing their children”* (Head teacher 6, School G, September 2024). The expression by the headteacher is the indication that if parents use their time to monitor their children’s progress, they will easily notice different communication agendas with teachers. In regard to monitoring their children’s progress, participants viewed that parents should visit the school or make a phone call to the teachers, which could enhance teacher-parent communication. One teacher capitalised on the fact that when parents visit schools, it becomes easy for them to understand in detail the challenges facing pupils at school. This is because at home, they have sufficient time to talk with their parents.

Furthermore, another strategy involved developing trust in teachers. It was said that some parents had lost trust in teachers because of different unethical behaviours which hindered their communication. Consequently, it was noted that establishing trust is essential for effective communication, as parents acknowledged that not all teachers engage in unethical practices. During the interviews, head teachers noted that parents feel more comfortable sharing information about their children, home life, and some challenges they may face when they trust teachers. This can help teachers to offer the required support. Additionally, it was said that trust helps parents have more confidence as they will see their contribution being positively considered rather than being regarded as criticism by teachers. Ultimately, this reduces the anxiety during communication with teachers as parents feel that they can have honest discussions. One head teacher commented, *“Trust builds freedom of communicating without fear. Parents are supposed to be close with teachers and trust them so that they can discuss their children’s academic and social matters”* (Head teacher 4, School D, September 2024). This view suggests that when trust is established, it creates an environment where parents feel comfortable discussing both the academic and social well-being of

their children without fear or hesitation.

The findings also revealed that for effective teacher-parent communication, parents need to set a timetable for supporting their children's learning at home. Through supporting their children, they will be able to understand the academic challenges facing them and initiate communication with the teacher to provide relevant support. One teacher said, *“Our communication relies on the child. Therefore, if parents do not get time to interact and support the child, it becomes difficult for him/her to understand the progress or challenges. Ultimately, cannot communicate”* (Teacher 20, School I, September 2024). This contention indicates that for the parents to have communication with the teachers, they need to inspect and monitor their children's learning. This idea is supported by the argument that was raised by parents themselves, who argued that parents need to understand their children well in order to communicate with teachers. Understanding their children well focused on understanding their academic progress, and their behavioural and health-related issues. For example, some parents noted that other children may be facing health challenges. If such information is not communicated to teachers, they may mistreat them unknowingly. However, teachers argued that sometimes it becomes difficult to have fruitful communication because some parents do not even understand their children well. Therefore, it becomes difficult even to counsel them regarding their children. This was also supported by the interview with the head teachers, who argued that parents must understand the history of their children well so that it becomes easy for the teacher to communicate and help them accordingly. This means that if teachers are correctly informed, it may become easy to provide the required individualised assistance.

5. Discussion

5.1. Barriers to teacher-parent communication for children's learning

Informants' views about the barriers affecting teacher-parent communication depict that parents' related barriers, such as limited parents' communication skills with teachers, significantly impact the communication process. This is because the language of instruction at school differed from the language spoken at home, therefore making it difficult for them to communicate accordingly. Similar findings also appear in the study by Lawal [27], who depicted that language and expression difficulties by parents are among the factors limiting teacher-parent communication. As noted in the current study, the difference in language between teachers and parents reduces parents' confidence to express their concerns to the teacher. Poza, Brooks and Valdés [45] also presented the same argument that, in most cases, the school administration lacks sensitivity to language differences. For example, during parent-teacher conferences, teachers usually address the audience in the school's formal language. Addressing parents in the formal school language denies them an opportunity to share their ideas, especially those whose native language is not formal. Therefore, schools need to foster an inclusive environment that can embrace the use of the native language.

Furthermore, parents' socioeconomic status was reported to affect teacher-parent communication most of the time. In this regard, the findings showed that sometimes parents from low socioeconomic status tend to look down on themselves and, therefore, neglect collaboration. However, teachers may also look down upon parents of low socioeconomic status. The two affect their level of communication. While the current study depicted teachers as looking down upon parents coming from low-income families, the literature focuses much on parents themselves as a barrier. For instance, Durisic and Bunijevac [12] argues that well-off parents are expected to cooperate more in school activities compared to less well-off parents. Terek et al. [51] and Yoleri [56] said that the majority of parents from low-income families do not attend school

meetings regularly because most of the requirements are converted into monetary demands. However, Han and Fox [21] present that sometimes well-off families and those who are formally employed may lack sufficient time to collaborate because of tight schedules. Differently, the current study depicted that all parents, regardless of their status, can be affected by tight schedules and therefore lack time to collaborate. Therefore, it is important to design a mechanism that can ensure smooth collaboration regardless of the parents' socioeconomic status.

In addition, evidence from the current study shows that for effective communication between teachers and parents, teachers should not use technical language. With this view, technical instructional language becomes a barrier towards effective communication. Equally, Annulyse [1] indicated that low parents' education level and technical terminologies do limit parents' understanding of the message communicated by the teacher. In addition, Annulyse [1] concludes that the use of difficult words (vocabulary) negatively affects communication with school teachers during parents-teacher activities. In this regard, Aras et al. [3] support the current study's findings that teachers need to observe the kind of instructional language they are using, either in written conversation or conversation. Thus, the terminology used should be simple and clear to the parents' level of understanding. While the current study findings indicated technical language is a factor affecting teacher-parent communication, the study by Yizengaw [55] indicates that there is a correlation between the parents' education level and communication with the school. It is from this view, Annulyse [1] suggest that teachers should use simple and familiar vocabulary to communicate the message to parents. This could help to accommodate all parents regardless of their education level.

5.2. Strategies for enhancing teacher-parent communication

The current study findings indicate that teachers need to create an equal and friendly environment that can ensure that all parents feel equally treated without discrimination. As presented in the current study findings, the study by Durisic and Bunijevac [12] provides that inviting parents to visit the school or classroom fosters a favourable environment for their involvement in the educational process. In addition, Milosavljević Đukić et al. [34] supports that parents' invitation to school serves as the foundation for productive dialogue between the family and the school. Thus, by communicating with the school community, parents build a constructive relationship that benefits the child and the school by fostering trust, confidentiality, and empathy as suggested by Ozmen et al. [41].

In addition, the role of the school management in ensuring teacher-parent communication was reported as an important factor in enhancing communication between teachers and parents. The current study, similar to other studies such as Kelty and Wakabayashi [25], indicated that heads of schools need to involve parents in decision-making, develop mutual trust and respect, engage parents in school events and conduct meetings at friendly times with parents. For instance, Harris and Goodall [22] reported that when parents are engaged in decision making, they feel comfortable communicating and make follow-ups on the progress made. The school's welcoming culture has a great impact on teacher-parent communication [44]. Thus, when parents feel that the environment is welcoming to them, they feel free to communicate with the school and teachers. Such findings concur with Epstein's theoretical framework of parental involvement. Epstein [16] inform that children's success is a shared responsibility between parents, schools, and the community. Therefore, involving the parents and community in decision-making is fundamental for school success and children's learning.

As presented by Epstein's theory, educational success is a shared responsibility, and

the current study findings depict that parents have different roles to play for successful communication with teachers. Among many included mutual respects, paying a school visit, and setting a timetable for children's learning activities. Concerning mutual respect between teachers and parents, the study by Cook et al. [10] also indicated that when parents and teachers respect each other, they develop trust. Trust enables them to feel free to contact each other. While it was reported that parents in the current study had conflicts resulting in mistrust, the study by Rahim [46] indicated that parents in Pakistan had a good relationship with teachers, and their children had good learning outcomes. This could imply that mutual respect between teachers and parents may result in effective communication. Helping children with learning at home, as suggested by Motseke [35], was also reported as parents setting a timetable for children's learning in the current study. Like the current study findings, Motseke [35] indicated that when parents have time to support children's learning at home, they get an opportunity to communicate with teachers on some aspects where they face difficulty. Similarly, teachers understand areas for improvement and communicate effectively with other teachers.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

From the study findings, it can be learnt that the barriers affecting teacher-parent collaboration are the result of teachers, parents, pupils and school leaders. Therefore, a joint effort is required to improve their communication. School leaders and teachers should understand the socioeconomic status and language differences of parents to communicate with them effectively. Further, a school's welcoming environment has a great impact on teacher-parent communication. A positive school climate motivates communication, while a negative school climate inhibits parent communication. Therefore, school administrators and teachers should foster a welcoming environment for parents to easily participate, and encourage them to visit the school whenever they can. Following parents' tight schedules for school visits, it is suggested that the school management should plan parent meetings by considering the schedule of parents' activities and report the agendas to parents early. Providing the agendas early may help to reduce meeting time, hence help parents to continue with other activities in a timely manner.

Additionally, parents' readiness for communication depends on their level of respect and trust. If teachers trust parents, they can easily develop communication with them, and vice versa. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers and schools respect and trust parents, regardless of their education level or socioeconomic status, and use suitable language that is friendly for all parents for effective communication.

7. Study limitations

This study was limited to early-grade learners in two districts. Despite its contextual differences, the findings may be difficult to generalise to all parents in Tanzania. In this regard, another study should be conducted involving parents from a broader context of Tanzania in rural and urban areas. Further investigation is also important to study the relationship between parents' demographic characteristics, such as age, education level, gender, and socioeconomic status and communication. It may be important, as revealed in the current study, that such factors might have an impact on parents' ability to communicate with teachers and schools. However, a quantitative study covering a large-scale study of demographic characteristics may be warranted.

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