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Preschool attendance and children's reading ability: A case of Narok County Kenya

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This article reports findings of a study conducted in public primary schools in Narok County Kenya. A sample size comprising 74 children in Grade 3 (37 who did not attend preschool and 37 who attended preschool), 18 head teachers, 66 lower primary school teacher's and five education officers were selected for the study. Learners' reading ability was tested using the Kenya Early Grade Reading Assessment Tests for English and Kiswahili adapted from Department for International Development end line survey of 2014. Interviews of head teachers, teachers, and education officers were conducted. Findings revealed that children who attended preschool performed better in English sub-tasks than those who did not attend preschool. However, those who did not attend preschool performed better in Kiswahili than their counter parts. Teachers revealed that they create extra time to support children who did not attend preschool, which explains why such children performed better in Kiswahili.

Keywords: challenges in teaching preschool; children's literacy; children's reading ability; interventions in preschool attendance; preschool attendance

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education provides a foundation for children's learning. It has an impact on children's readiness for primary school and transition to secondary education (UNESCO, 2015). McGettigan and Gray (2012) argue that familiarity with preschool helps children reduce feelings of anxiety on their first day in school; they note that children positively anticipate differences between preschool and school experiences. The first goal of Education for All (EFA) sought to expand and improve comprehensive early child care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children (UNESCO, 2015). Provision of quality preschool education is also one of the key priorities under the post 2015 educational agenda. Kenya has since made strides in achieving this goal by encouraging children aged four to five years to acquire preschool education, as enshrined in the *Fourth Schedule of the Constitution of Kenya 2010* (Republic of Kenya, 2010), *Kenya Vision 2030* and the *Basic Education Act of 2013* (Republic of Kenya, 2007, 2013). All these legal frameworks are meant to enhance access, equity, and quality in early childhood education, especially for children from the Arid and Semi-Arid Land (ASAL), and those from poor households.

Getting a good foundation in early childhood education yields future benefits, such as better learning in school and higher educational attainment, resulting in major social and economic gains for society. The efficiency of the entire education system can be increased by improving children's readiness to learn, reducing repetition of classes and dropout from school (UNESCO, 2015). Dockett & Perry (2010) maintain that parents who are keen on their children's progress when they start school sometimes get frustrated by

teachers who share information on their children's adjustment challenges to the school environment. They further argue that teachers, on their part, get frustrated when they try to discuss with parents how children react to school when children are pushed by parents to achieve academically at school. To support children to attain pre-literacy skills in a natural learning environment without being pushed for academic achievement actually requires parents and teachers to consult with one another. Children who have attended preschool find that they have fewer toys and play opportunities at home than they had in preschool, indicating that attending preschool gives children an opportunity to learn to interact with other children through play (McGettigan & Gray, 2012).

Preschool education also fosters development of basic skills that enable children to interact positively with peers. McGettigan & Gray (2012) noted that, in preschool, children learn how not to cry, not to be shy, and to be good; skills that promote interaction with other children. The children also learn rules of where and when to line up for class, and how to listen for the school bell and to adults. A child equipped with these skills can more easily avoid trouble with teachers and with other children when they go to school.

Learners lacking such skills risk being rejected by peers and perform poorly in academic lessons (Knight & Hughes, 1995, Taiwo & Tyolo, 2002). Therefore, early childhood education is a crucial stage when a child is expected to attain foundational pre-literacy, pre-numeracy, and life skills essential for school readiness and quality learning.

Uwezo (2014) revealed that 48% of children aged 3–5 years in Narok County, Kenya, were not attending preschool in 2013. The report further indicated that 80% of Grade 3 learners in Narok County could not do Grade 2 level literacy and numeracy tasks. Ouko (2015), in his study on determinants of Grade 1 children's achievement in literacy and numeracy, established that attending preschool before joining Grade 1 determines children's achievement. According to his study, children who attended preschool before joining Grade 1 scored better in literacy than those who did not. The differences in performance were found to be statistically significant. The findings further show that attending preschool education gives children a firm foundation in their literacy skills.

Early childhood education in Kenya was devolved to the county government and has been operating under a national early childhood policy framework developed in 2006. The framework, however, has not adequately responded to the needs of devolution in Kenya (Republic of Kenya, 2006). The policy has now been reviewed and aligned to the devolved government systems specified by the *Constitution of Kenya 2010*, which designated pre-primary education as a function of county government.

Language policy in Kenya

English is Kenya's official language and a language of instruction in the education system in Kenya. This has been the case since independence in 1963 (Nabea, 2009). However, Kiswahili is a co-official language and the national language used for communication by many Kenyans in rural and urban areas (Nabea, 2009; Ogechi & Ogechi, 2002), with many Kenyans being inadequate users of English for communication. Hungi, Njagi, Wekulo, and Ngware (2017), in their study on the effects of language of instruction on learning literacy skills, noted that learners taught literacy using Kiswahili out-performed their counterparts taught using English. This indicates that using the language of the catchment area that children are familiar with will influence how children acquire literacy skills. Mwoma (2017), in her study, revealed that using a child's mother tongue/first language to introduce reading is more effective for enhancing children's literacy skills.

Different countries in Africa adopted language policies depending on the country's political orientation and local circumstances (McIlwraith, 2015). The language policies aimed to promote all Indigenous languages in a country to a national level to be used in public functions, including education. In the colonial era, Kenya adopted English as the official language. Since then, various government commissions on education have endorsed the use of English as a language of instruction in primary and secondary schools through to University, while Kiswahili is used in education to enhance national and regional unity because it is the language that is most commonly spoken in rural and urban Kenya (McIlwraith, 2015; Nabea, 2009; Oduor, 2010).

The Ominde Commission of 1964 recommended that English be used as a medium of instruction from primary to university level. The Mackay Commission of 1981 endorsed this position on the use of English as a Language of Instruction while Kiswahili was made a compulsory examinable subject in primary and secondary school (McIlwraith, 2015; Nabea, 2009; Oduor, 2010; Omollo, 2014). The Gachathi Report of 1976 recommended the use of the mother tongue as a language of instruction from Grade 1 to 3; this was further endorsed by the Koech Report of 1999. Even with these recommendations and endorsements, English and Kiswahili languages are the most preferred languages of instruction in most primary schools from Grade 1 to university. This, therefore, explains why most schools in rural and urban areas use the two languages, negating the good intentions of the language of instruction policy.

Learning to read

Reading helps learners expand their thinking skills, concentrate, and enlarge their vocabulary. However, reading is a complex act requiring many years of experience and use in order to do well. Successful reading and writing involve comprehension, fluency, mastery of essential strategies, and motivation (Strategic Marketing and Research, 2013). English reading and speaking are based on the alphabetic principle focusing on letter sounds which acquire meaning when the sound units are combined. Before reading or spelling, children must understand that written words are made up of sounds or phonemes.

Piper and Zuilokowski (2016), in their study on the role of timing in assessing oral reading fluency and comprehension in Kenya, noted that students did not read fluently in either English or Kiswahili, having a mean fluency rates of 9.8 words correct per minute in a Kiswahili passage and 14.3 words correct per minute in an English passage. Similarly, there were low results in reading comprehension with an overall mean of 9.8% correct in English and 15.1% correct in Kiswahili. The low percentage was an indication that children were not able to answer comprehension questions correctly.

Uwezo's (2014) Annual Learning Assessment report revealed that, in 2013, overall only one out of every five children in Grade 3 was able to do Grade 2 work. According to the Uwezo's report, learning levels in Narok County were below the national average. On average, one out of five, and three out of ten children in Grade 3 could read a Grade 2 English and Kiswahili story, respectively. It is against this background that this study was undertaken as a community-driven research, to assess Grade 3 children's reading ability in relation to attending preschool education.

Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA)

The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) test focuses on oral reading fluency with timed and un-timed items, testing children's comprehension skills in literacy (Piper &

Zuilkowski, 2016). Over the years, there has been expansion in the number of children accessing primary education in Kenya; however, that has not translated into school quality (Piper & Zuilkowski, 2016; Sifuna, 2007). As alluded to earlier, most children in Kenya are taught English as the language of instruction and Kiswahili is a compulsory language that is examined at the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education as well as in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education. Thus, children from as early as Grade 1 are taught to read using the two languages, English and Kiswahili, neither being their mother tongue (Dubeck, Jukes, & Okello, 2012; Piper & Zuilkowski, 2016).

This article documents findings from a study seeking to answer whether attending preschool influences children's reading ability; specifically, the study sought to answer three research questions:

1. Is there a significant difference in reading abilities between Grade 3 children who had attended preschool and those who had not?
2. Why do children not attend preschool?
3. What challenges do teachers experience when teaching children who had not attended preschool?

METHODOLOGY

A mixed methods research approach involving concurrent quantitative and qualitative data collection was employed for this study (Creswell, 2012; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Quantitative data was derived from children's literacy assessment using the Kenya EGRA tools for English and Kiswahili adapted from Department for International Development (DFID) end line survey 2014. Qualitative data was derived from key informant interviews and group interviews.

Site of the study

The study was conducted in Kenya, one of the East African Countries. Kenya is bordered by Tanzania to the South, Uganda to the West, South Sudan to the North West, Somalia to the North East and Ethiopia to the North. Narok County is found to the Southern part of Kenya and is inhabited by the Maasai people, who are pastoralists. As indicated earlier, Narok County has been performing poorly in literacy skills (Uwezo, 2014) despite the general improved access to primary education because of the free primary education policy. Two sub-counties (Narok North and Narok South) were selected for this study since schools in these sub-counties were being supported by the funders of this study. The focus of this study was Narok County, which, according to Kenya's 2014 education statistics, has 587 public schools and 32,469 children in Grade 2 in 2014—who could have been in Grade 3 in 2015 when this study was conducted—with an estimated mean class size of 55 learners (Ministry of Education Science and Technology, 2014). However, chances are that the numbers could be higher or lower as actual enrolment for all the schools in Narok County was not recorded during the study, this factor being one of the limitations to the study.

Research participants

Participants for this study comprised Grade 3 learners who attended preschool before joining Grade 1 and those who did not attend preschool. The purpose of selecting the two categories (attendees and non-attendees) was to establish whether there was any difference in their reading abilities. Eighteen head teachers from the selected schools also

participated in the study to give their perception on preschool attendance and children's reading ability as well as the challenges teachers face in teaching children who had never attended preschool. Teachers who were teaching lower primary participated in the study to give their perspective on whether preschool attendance influence children's reading ability and whether they experience any challenges teaching children who did not attend preschool.

Sampling technique and sample size

Systematic random sampling was utilized to select schools that participated in the study. Twelve schools from Narok North Sub-County and six schools from Narok South Sub-County were sampled for this study. Systematic random sampling was also utilized to select boys and girls who attended preschool while purposive sampling was utilized to select those who did not attend preschool in Grade 3. A total of 74 Grade 3 learners were sampled for the study from a total of 711 Grade 3 learners (399 boys and 312 girls) from the 18 public schools that participated in this study, comprising 37 children who attended preschool and 37 who did not attend preschool. Eighteen head teachers, 66 teachers, and five education officers from Narok County also participated in the study.

Research team

The assessors were graduates from universities who were from the locality speaking both English and Kiswahili as well as the local language (Maasai) to ensure that they speak the local language for children who might have problems understanding the two non-local languages. The assessors were inducted for two days by experts conversant in the use of EGRA tests for assessing children's literacy skills. The induction was to familiarize assessors with the EGRA assessment tools as well as provide them with an opportunity to pre-test the tools to have a feel of the actual assessment. A one-day debriefing session was held to allow assessors to share their field experiences as well as seek clarification from the trainers on any difficulties encountered during the pre-test of the tools.

Data collection tools

Data collection for this study was carried out in June-July 2015. A triangulation of methods was applied to collect data. Learners' literacy skills in English and Kiswahili were assessed using EGRA tools. Key informant interview schedules were utilized to collect data from head teachers, County Director of Education (CDE), County Quality Assurance and Standards Officer (CQASO), Teacher Service Commission County Deputy Director (TSCCDD), Sub-County Quality Assurance Standards Officer (SCQASO), and Sub-County Education Officer (SCEO). Group interviews were conducted for teachers teaching lower primary grades. Desk review was conducted to inform the study in relation to children's school attendance and their reading ability.

Measures

The measures used to collect data on children's reading ability was EGRA literacy assessment tests focusing on English and Kiswahili, the two official languages of instruction in most Kenyan schools. The difficulty levels of EGRA tests followed the expectations of the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development for Grade 1 pupil's literacy. The assessment tools tested letter sound knowledge, vocabulary, word decoding, oral passage reading, and sentence reading and comprehension. The assessment consisted of both timed and un-timed tests. The timed assessment was to ensure that all children

had equal opportunities to read the letter sounds, words, and passage. The un-timed assessment was to ensure that children could read sentences and a simple story and answer simple questions concerning the story.

The assessment tools consisted of 100 letter sounds, passages of approximately 60 words with five comprehension questions, a timed story of approximately 40 words for both English and Kiswahili with four reading comprehension questions. In assessing vocabulary, children were required to name body parts, and place objects in different positions as directed by the assessor.

Assessors administered the tests starting with letter sounds, followed by simple words, then vocabulary, paragraph, and, finally, the story for both English and Kiswahili. Each of the timed tasks took 60 seconds and the assessor would put a slash on the letter sound or word the child read at the end of 60 seconds and ask the child to stop. The assessor could encourage the child to continue reading while taking note of the letter sounds or words not read correctly by making a mark.

Reliability and validity of Data

To enhance reliability of the findings, triangulation of data sources was utilized; that is, responses via quantitative statistics from EGRA were corroborated with verbatim responses from interviews (Creswell, 2012; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Credibility of the findings was enhanced by the principal investigator ensuring that data from various participants was captured to generate enough themes to answer the research questions. Further, trustworthiness of qualitative data was enhanced using verbatim responses from participants.

Data analysis procedures

Both quantitative and qualitative data were cleaned in preparation for entry and transcribing, respectively. A coding frame was developed following themes of the study, and an entry platform on STATA 13.0 was developed for quantitative data based on the EGRA tools for English and Kiswahili. Qualitative data was then transcribed and made available in word format. Analysis of qualitative data followed the thematic analysis procedures, and descriptive and inferential statistics were applied to analyse quantitative data. A t-test was utilized to test for significant differences in means in children's reading ability between those who attended preschool and those who did not.

The principal investigator offered an initial preliminary analysis based on the preliminary findings from quantitative data on Grade 3 children's reading ability assessment data and a read through of the field notes. The intent was to identify issues that needed further clarification and inconsistencies, and to craft further questions to allow for more data collection.

Once the data collection period concluded, the dataset was analysed as per the analysis framework and themes developed for the purpose of the study. Further, the information from interviews with groups and individuals was analysed to corroborate and validate the information.

Ethical considerations

Approval to conduct the study was granted by the County Director of Education Narok County. Permission to conduct the study in each school and to assess Grade 3 children's

reading ability was granted by head teachers of the schools that participated in the study. Oral consent was obtained from participants. To enhance confidentiality, no names of participants or schools are mentioned in this article. Letters of the alphabet have been used to identify the schools that participated in the study. Participants have been identified as teacher, or head teacher by the letter representing the school when using verbatim responses. Education Officers interviewed have been identified by their titles and not names.

RESULTS

Findings for this study were obtained through learners' assessment tests as well as interviews. The interviews focused on participants' knowledge and perceptions of children not attending preschool before entering Grade 1; reasons why children do not attend preschool; and challenges teachers experience when teaching children who had not attended preschool.

Preschool attendance

The study was designed such that an equal number of children who had and had not attended preschool were sampled from each school for assessment. The total number of pupils assessed in English and Kiswahili was 74 as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Preschool attendance by gender

Gender	Attended preschool	Had not attended preschool	Total
Boys	20	17	37
Girls	17	20	37
Total	37	37	74

Table 1 shows that slightly more boys than girls attended preschool before joining Grade 1. To gain insights on preschool attendance, the study explored the reasons why children could not attend preschool before joining Grade 1. Findings from groups and individual interviews are presented below.

Reasons for children not attending preschool

It emerged from interviews that some children do not attend preschool because of cultural practices that give preference for education for boys rather than girls and the tendency for early marriages among girls. Participants revealed this by saying: "Cultural factors where parents give preference to educating boys than girls contribute to girls not attending preschool (SCEO)."

Illiteracy among parents and lack of role models from successful people from the community who attended preschool and are excelling were also reported as reasons for children not attending preschool. The CDE and the SCEO pointed out that "[s]ome parents are illiterate and therefore do not see the importance of taking their children to preschool (SCEO)."

Lack of preschool centres in remote areas coupled with long distance from home to school were mentioned as contributors to children not attending preschool. The CQASO revealed that: "[l]ack of early childhood centres in the remote parts of the county has made parents to hold their children at home until they are big enough to walk to school,"

Preschool attendance and children's reading ability

The CDE added: "Distance from home to school is a barrier for parents to allow their children attend preschool."

Fear of attack by wild animals was reported as a reason that prevent parents from allowing young children to attend preschool. The TSCCD and the CQASO confirmed this by saying: "Wild life may scare young children from going to preschool."

Poverty was also identified as a reason why some children do not attend preschool. During the dry season, many animals die and parents are unable to raise money to pay fees for attendance of children at preschool. The head teacher from school F noted this by saying: "When there is drought like the one in March, animals die and this makes parents poor. Thus they prefer to keep children at home to reduce on school related cost" (Head Teacher School F)."

Another cause is polygamy, in which some families have many children whom they are not able to educate, prompting them to educate some children and have others herding cattle. As one head teacher from school F put it: "Families in the area are big, polygamous and with many children per wife. Fathers decide on the children who need to join school per wife. The rest of the children are asked to go herding (Head teacher school F)."

While attending preschool education is deemed critical for providing children a firm foundation in literacy skills, it is apparent that several factors are bound to prevent young children in Narok County from attending preschool. The factors include, lack of preschools in remote areas, cultural practices, lack of role models, polygamy, and fear of being attacked by wild animals. The findings imply that Narok County government should put measures in place to ensure that all children have an opportunity to attend preschool before joining Grade 1.

Preschool attendance and children's reading ability

The first research question sought to establish whether there was a significant difference in reading abilities between children who attended preschool and those who did not. Reading ability was measured based on seven sub-tasks: letter sound fluency, decoding fluency, segmenting, reading fluency, and vocabulary. It also focused on reading comprehension and sentence comprehension.

A t-test was utilized to establish whether there were significant differences in mean scores between the reading abilities of children who attended preschool and those who did not. Statistical significance was defined at 0.05 with a 95% confidence interval. Tables 2 and 3 show the results of the tests to this question.

For English reading ability, the results indicate that, overall, children who attended school had slightly higher mean scores in five out of seven subtasks than children who did not attend preschool. However, the difference in mean scores between the two groups was not statistically significant at $p > 0.05$. The findings imply that while children who attended preschool performed slightly better than those who did not, chances are that teachers spent more time supporting those who did not attend by coaching them, which enabled them to improve in their reading ability.

Table 2: Effect of attending preschool for English

Subtask	Attended preschool		Had not attend preschool		Significance
	Mean	Standard error	Mean	Standard error	
Letter sound fluency (clspm)	18.8	2.6	20.0	3.1	0.77
Decoding fluency (cnwpm)	21.2	2.2	19.4	2.3	0.56
Segmenting (%)	20.8	4.3	17.8	3.9	0.61
Reading fluency (cwpm)	38.4	3.9	37.3	3.7	0.84
Vocabulary (%)	53.1	2.4	56.8	2.6	0.31
Reading comprehension (%)	24.3	4.6	23.2	4.1	0.86
Sentence comprehension (%)	55.1	5.1	41.4	6.2	0.09

Significant at $p < 0.05^*$

Results for Kiswahili subtasks were opposite to those observed for English. In Kiswahili, a statistically significant difference at $p < 0.05$ was noted in decoding and listening comprehension subtasks between children who did not attend preschool and those who attended. The results indicate that children who did not attend preschool read non-words better and had better understanding of the Kiswahili story read to them than those who attended preschool, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Effect of attending preschool for Kiswahili

Subtask	Attended preschool		Had not attend preschool		Significance
	Mean	Standard error	Mean	Standard error	
Letter sound fluency (clspm)	22.3	2.9	27.5	3.7	0.28
Syllable fluency (cspm)	38.2	3.3	46.6	3.6	0.09
Decoding fluency (cnwpm)	16.6	2.0	24.3	2.5	0.02*
Reading fluency (cwpm)	26.8	2.7	34.7	3	0.05
Reading comprehension (%)	30.3	4.9	33.5	4.7	0.64
Listening comprehension (%)	47.0	4.5	62.2	5.7	0.04*
Words/Nonwords (%)	59.7	3.5	56.1	3.7	0.48

Significant at $p < 0.05^*$

The significant difference noted in listening comprehension and decoding fluency in Kiswahili among children who did not attend preschool could be attributed to the fact that teachers spent more time coaching these children, which was not the case for children who attended preschool.

Challenges experienced by teachers in teaching children who had not attend preschool

The third research question sought to establish the challenges teachers experience in teaching children who had not attended preschool. It emerged from qualitative data analysis that various challenges are experienced by teachers. Children who had not attended preschool experience difficulties in reading and writing as a result of missing

the basic pre-literacy skills acquired at preschool. Teachers, in responding to this challenge, spend extra time supporting them. Participants revealed this by saying: “Most of the non-attendees do not know how to read and write” (Head teacher school A). Creating extra time to attend to children who did not attend preschool could explain why they performed better in Kiswahili in listening comprehension and decoding fluency.

Delay in completing grade work was cited to be a challenge that derails syllabus coverage on the part of teachers. Such children were reported to be lagging behind those who attended preschool. As mentioned earlier, it required teachers to create extra time to coach children who had not attended preschool so they can catch up with those who had attended. Some children also became disappointed when they were not able to perform as well as their peers in literacy tasks. The head teacher from school C reported this by saying: “These children get disappointed when they realize they cannot answer a question that was in the lower level (Head teacher school C)”.

Although findings from children's assessment create an impression that children who had not attended preschool were better at reading in Kiswahili, the qualitative data reveals that teachers experience challenges supporting them so that they can catch up with their peers. Kiswahili, being a national language spoken at home and in school, becomes easier for children who had not attended preschool to use, while those who attended preschool have an advantage when using and understanding English, which is also often used in teaching subjects in school. It is imperative, therefore, to encourage parents to take their children to preschool to acquire the pre-literacy skills that prepares children to acquire language skills at higher levels of learning. This is especially important since children who had not attended preschool were challenged by writing exercises and English comprehension.

DISCUSSIONS OF THE FINDINGS

Preschool attendance

Access to good quality preschool education impacts positively on a child's educational outcomes in primary school with effects reflected into later life (UNESCO, 2015). Dockett and Perry (2010) established that starting school early is associated with later school success both socially and academically. This is because the foundations for all learning are laid in the early years of a child's development. Notwithstanding the importance of preschool education, the current study revealed that 37 children assessed did not attend preschool, implying that such children might have missed an opportunity to acquire the foundational basic literacy skills. Among the foundational skills they missed are pre-writing and pre-reading skills; this was evident because they experienced writing and reading problems—except for listening comprehension in Kiswahili.

It also emerged that slightly more boys than girls attended preschool before joining Grade 1. Cultural practices where boys are given preference for education and girls left to perform household chores and looking after their younger siblings coupled with early marriages were cited as factors that influence non-attendance at preschool. Other reasons given include: illiteracy among parents, lack of preschool centres in remote areas, fear of wild animals, and distance from home to school.

There is need, therefore, for education stakeholders to ensure that all children are supported to attend preschool before joining Grade 1 to enable them to acquire

foundational basic literacy skills. This requires the county government to work hand-in-hand with other education stakeholders to advocate for preschool attendance in remote areas by constructing preschools, and to task chiefs to ensure that all children in their jurisdiction attend preschool before joining Grade 1. Sensitization seminars for parents on the importance of preschool education should also be encouraged.

Preschool attendance and children's reading ability

Research has shown that there is a direct link between preschool education and academic achievement. Children who have been exposed to preschool education prior to joining primary school make better use of learning resources than those who had not been exposed (Myers, 1992, Taiwo & Tyolo, 2002). Taiwo and Tyolo (2002), in their study, noted that children with preschool experience out-performed those without such experience. Such children tended to acquire certain skills that enable them to make an easier transition to the primary school environment. McGettigan and Gray (2012) also noted that familiarity with preschool helps children reduce their feelings of anxiety on their first day in school.

Findings from the current study were consistent with these studies in regard to children's performance in English and the qualitative data from teachers. However, in terms of literacy skills in Kiswahili, the findings were contrary to those found by Taiwo and Tyolo. The current study revealed that children who had not attended preschool had better mean scores in Kiswahili sub-tasks than those who had attended preschool. This could be influenced by the fact that Kiswahili is a national language that is spoken in rural and urban areas and, therefore, children found Kiswahili sub-tasks more familiar than sub-tasks carried out in English. It is important that the language policy requiring use of the language of the catchment area for instruction in schools should be reinforced, even while the official language (English) is introduced for instruction in schools. Kiswahili, being a national language spoken in rural and urban areas, should be utilized as a neutral language of the catchment area that children can easily use and understand, especially in the early years of learning.

Findings from interviews revealed that teachers experience many challenges in introducing literacy skills to children who had not attended preschool, compelling them to create extra time for individual attention to children who had not attended preschool. The findings, therefore, may be used to inform policy at the local and national levels to ensure that all children, especially those from pastoralist communities, are encouraged to attend preschool by sensitizing their parents on the importance of preschool education.

CONCLUSION

Attending preschool is critical for laying the foundation on children's literacy skills. Findings revealed that slightly more boys than girls attended preschool before joining Grade 1. To improve preschool attendance among young children, the county government in collaboration with parents, NGOs, and other education stakeholders should do the following:

- Sensitize parents to the importance of preschool education by discouraging engagement in cultural practices that disadvantage girls from attaining education, such as early marriages or giving boys preference over girls for receiving education. Equal chances in education for boys and girls should be encouraged.

- Encourage construction of preschools in remote areas and closer to villages to guard children from walking long distances to existing preschools; this will also lessen the chances of children from being attacked by wild animals—especially important for children living close to the wildlife reserves.
- Encourage chiefs and assistant chiefs to be vigilant, requiring parents in their jurisdiction who do not comply with the *Basic Education Act 2013* to enrol their children in preschool before joining Grade 1.

Teachers, on their part, should implement the language policy by utilizing Kiswahili for instruction because it is the national language used in rural and urban areas. This will give learners who had not attended preschool an opportunity to acquire knowledge and concepts in the language they are familiar with.

Limitations

This study has two major limitations. First, the study focused on an equal number of children—those who attended preschool and those who did not—since the purpose was to compare their reading ability. The decision was arrived at since it was realized there were fewer learners who had not attended preschool before joining Grade 1 who were learning in Grade 3. This explains why the sample size was small since there were only 37 children who had not attended preschool and were in Grade 3 in all the sampled schools.

Second, our analysis on children's reading ability focused on the number of words children read correctly within 60 seconds without focusing on what would happen if children were not timed on the same tasks. Given the small number of participants in this study, findings cannot be generalized to other schools with similar characteristics but, instead, a similar study should be conducted using a larger sample that can be generalized to schools with similar characteristics.

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Preschool attendance and children's reading ability

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