



TEACHER FACTORS INFLUENCING CHILDREN'S TRANSITION TO CLASS ONE IN NAKURU COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract:

Education plays a very critical role in human development. Essentially, it makes the person more robust, manageable and productive in many areas of human life. However, despite the remarkable success in education access through policy framework and other commitments by governments and stakeholders, pre-school to primary school pupils' transition experience many challenges that lead to pupil attrition in primary schools and lower school completion rates than expected. Transition rate is the probability a learner in a particular class will be in the next class in the succeeding year. For a school age population of approximately one million pupils in Kenya, the early dropout rates are significant and indicate that the country fails to realize the development of an important part of its human capital. In addition, the pre-school to primary school transition rates disparities are marked among the 47 counties. Therefore, the study sought to establish how teacher factors, curriculum factors and infrastructural factors affect children's transitioning into primary school in Northern Zone, Nakuru County. The study was carried out using descriptive survey design and targeted 29 head teachers and 87 class one teachers drawn from 29 public primary schools in the Northern Zone of Nakuru County. From these a sample size of 92 respondents was obtained using both purposive and systematic random sampling. Data was collected through questionnaires and interview schedules. Descriptive statistical analysis was done using, frequencies and percentages and the results presented in tables. The study found that teacher factors significantly influenced successful transition of the learners into primary school. In particular, teaching methods, teacher availability and teacher experience in handling transitioning pupils were important for learner transition into primary school. The study,

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therefore, recommends that the education stakeholders in the county should redouble their efforts to ensure that experienced and well trained teachers – preferably with some Early Childhood Development orientation- are placed at class one to handle transitioning learners.

Keywords: transitioning, class one, teaching methods, teacher availability, experience, preschool.

1. Introduction

Transition is a physical movement from one physical context to another. Fabian and Dunlop (2005) define transition as the movement from one place, stage, style or subject to another overtime. In relation to early childhood education, transition can be defined as the time between the first visit in the new educational context and the final setting (Fabian, 2007). In the current study, transition is taken as the upward mobility of pupils from their formative stages of learning at the pre-school level through class one. As more children enter school, however, it is apparent that many of them are enrolling too late or too early, repeating classes, dropping out or failing to learn (UNESCO, 2007). As a consequence, educational disparities are increasing.

Children entering school face an environment that is qualitatively different in terms of the curriculum setting and the people (Markets, 2002a). Research suggests that the transition period is an important developmental milestone in the learners lives both socially and academically (Mascareño, Doolaard & Bosker, 2014; Suzuki, 2013). Transition from pre-school to primary school gives the learners a difficult time in coping with the differences and challenges that the primary school posed. According to Arnold, Barlert, Gowni and Merali (2006) and Margetts (1999), children joining primary school go through many struggles in an attempt to cope with the new environment. Many children are worried about making new friends and scared of a new environment that is quite different from the previous one. The divide is greatest for children whose first language is not the same as the language of school instruction. Schools can bridge this gap by working with parents and incorporating culturally responsive practices that include the use of the child's first language. This practice promotes equity by including traditionally disadvantaged ethnic minorities.

In the school set up, the main issue of concern is whether the schools are ready for the new comers joining their lowest class. The 'ready schools' dimension focuses on the school environment. It includes practices that: foster and support a smooth transition for children to primary school and beyond; and promote learning for all children (Aulls, Shore & Delcourt, 2008). Ready schools characteristically create continuity and maintain learning expectations for children between early learning and primary school environments. With respect to children with disabilities, ready schools adopt inclusive approaches in lieu of exclusionary educational practices and discriminatory attitudes (Bennet, 2006). Other important quality characteristics include the practices schools use

to bridge the cultural divide between home and school (Thung'u, 2008). In general, the dimension of ready schools includes the overall quality of the school environment evidenced in such characteristics as sufficient class time devoted to learning; adequate supply of learning materials such as books and teaching aids; and effective teaching, pedagogic practices and teachers' competencies.

The 2006 conference of the Association for the development of Education in Africa (ADEA) in Gabon (ADEA, 2007) revealed many ways in which schools are not ready for children including long travel times to school, large class size, inappropriate curricula, rote-based teaching, shortage of materials and lack of proper training of teachers. The report also identified ways in which children are also not ready for school, due to poverty, inadequate nutrition and the impact of HIV/AIDS which has made it difficult for families to support their children. During the conference, a comprehensive policy framework addressing organization and partnership approaches to supporting young children in families, communities and school settings was proposed. Universal basic compulsory education however may take a considerable time before it becomes a reality because even after coming up with this framework, schools in the continent are still faced with transition challenges.

Transition in the school system can also be distinguished as vertical and horizontal transitions (Thung'u, 2008). Vertical transitions involve moves and changes for the child between educational settings such as pre-school and primary school or between home and pre-school when children start pre-school. Horizontal transitions involve children's transitions during their everyday lives, for instance from pre-school to primary school. As a result of poor transition, there is a higher drop-out in primary school, repetition and higher absenteeism rate among children in lower primary classes than those in upper classes (Nyamwaya & Mwaura, 1996). However, pupil transition from pre-school through class one has not been examined in depth in Kenya, thus, motivating the need for the current study to fill the gaps in existing knowledge on transition by examining how some school based factors affect transition.

1.1 Teacher Factors and Transition of Pre-school into Primary School

Teachers play a crucial role in the building of effective schools and ensuring smooth transition. Teachers are among the most crucial factors in building effective schools and ensuring school readiness. Teachers have been found to play a critical role in children's development and basically preparing them for another level of education (Essa, 2003), and promote children's perceptions of themselves as successful learners (Abadzi, 2006; Fay & Griffin, 2004). The availability of the teacher, qualification, quality of teaching, experience, style of disciplining learners, confidence, commitment, professional training for teachers, and how they deal with learners in classroom are important in the development of a child and can affect them positively or negatively as they begin school (Arnold et al., 2006). In addition, it is important for the teachers to communicate effectively to the transitioning learners since some of them have no ECDE or any formal educational experience at all.

Young children depend on adults to meet their needs for protection, learning and positive relationships (OECD, 2006). When children experience sensitive and responsive interactions with adults and receive scaffolded instruction, learning is more likely to occur. The quality of caregiver and child interaction can be measured in terms of: responsiveness and sensitivity towards the child; stimulation for development; positive regard; attentiveness; and warmth. A child's acquisition of knowledge and understanding is contingent upon opportunities that adults provide for demonstrating existing skills and building more complex ones. Early childhood professionals can help children learn concepts and ideas by engaging them in activities that interest them, pointing out key features of objects and asking open-ended questions that stimulate children's thoughts and creativity (Einarsdottir, 2013).

Teachers' professional qualifications have been linked with overall classroom quality. Primary school teachers with early childhood training are more effective in the early classes. Equipped with information on how young children learn and develop, they help ease the transition of children and families to schools much more than teachers who lack this background. Teachers with early childhood training are more likely to use developmentally appropriate practices in the classroom. An investment in primary teacher education with an emphasis on early childhood pays great dividends for educational efficiency and student learning. However, as Oberhuemer (2006) explains, teachers in the lower classes in primary schools are often looked down upon and relegated compared to their counterparts teaching in the higher classes. They are more unlikely to have received some specialized training to help them in the organization, management and teaching of learners whose ages range from 4 to 10 years as this is the age range of ECDE children.

The teacher as the determinant factor in the establishment of an effective classroom is also a crucial asset or major barrier when young learners begin formal education. When teachers support the social and emotional functioning of a child in the classroom, they improve the child's odds of later school success (OECD, 2006). Children who are motivated and connected to others in early schooling are more likely to be launched into positive development trajectories in both social and academic domains. Positive interactions among students and teachers help children feel more valuable, competent, appreciated and loved. Staff can meet children's needs verbally by responding to their concerns and offering encouragement and support, as well as non-verbally by smiling, looking pleased, making eye contact or using a pleasant tone of voice (Neuman, 2002).

Children benefit when early childhood and primary school teachers work together as a team. This creates an environment where teachers can develop workable programmes that can promote the transition of children between preschool and primary school (Neuman, 2005). Van Leer (2006) observed that the relationship between the two educational sectors, that is, preschool and primary school is neither strong nor equal. The study further highlighted that in order to give some cultural continuity between preschool and primary school, there should be a collaborative approach to sharing

information on practice and policies, while exploring images of transition, would help practitioners from both settings to work towards a common culture of smooth transition.

A study by Weikartm and Shweir (2011) in Michigan, US revealed that the teacher's success is attributed to programs having knowledgeable professional staff and providing quality education. The study recommended that professional teachers should be visionary, approachable, patient, caring and able to implement a balanced curriculum and organize diversified learning activities. Teachers place emphasis on developing positive learning attitudes good character and healthy living habits of children. The teachers would always assess children according to their developmental stages and the success of the child is their joy. Teamwork among the school staff is very important for quality outcome and a school with teachers who do not work together has a problem.

A study by O'Kane (2007) in Ireland identified that lack of communication between pre-schools and primary schools affected children negatively as they transit from one educational level to the next level. The study noted that there was limited congruence in approaches to learning; continuity of approach which would lead to optimal learning conditions for children was lacking. Findings from the study revealed that preschool practitioners and teachers of junior infant classes had a limited understanding of each other's working ideologies and environments. Further, the study suggested that there should be consistency and continuity between the two settings for the best interest of the children as they transit from one educational environment to the other and the two groups.

In Guyana, a study by Charles and Williams (2006) established that early childhood and primary school teachers work together in schools, conduct home visits and other after-school programmes. These practices promote communication and coherence in teaching styles between the two settings of education. In England, France, Ireland and Jamaica primary school teachers are trained to teach preschoolers and primary school children. Sweden has gone further in its approach, as all teachers in both pre-school and in compulsory school follow a common core of courses and they specialise in a particular area of teaching (Neuman, 2005). They also have a joint in-service training which provides an opportunity for staff members to learn from one another. All these are aimed at promoting professional continuity and smooth transition for the children as they begin school.

A study by Mureithi (2013) on factors influencing learners' transition from preschool to primary school in Thika-West District, Kiambu County- Kenya established that teachers' level of training, physical environment, language of instruction and teaching methods were the major factors influencing learners' transition from pre-school to lower primary. However, the study did not establish whether there was any correspondence between pre-school teachers and lower primary school teachers. This was in contrast to the Madrasa early childhood development and education programme in East Africa where teachers of lower primary school communicate with teachers from their feeder preschools (Mwaura, 2005). The organization aims at promoting transition through sharing effective practices between the two educational settings. Nonetheless,

the impact of this communication on encouraging successful transition into class one was not established. Moreover, there is no evidence as yet suggesting whether teachers of lower primary school communicate with teachers from their feeder preschools in public primary schools in Kenya. Therefore, the current study intends to investigate how teacher factors affect children when they join class one.

2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate teacher factors influencing children transitioning into primary schools in Nakuru County.

3. Research Methodology

This study was carried out using descriptive survey design. Best and Kahn (2006) state that descriptive research sought to establish factors associated with certain occurrence, outcomes, conditions or types of behaviour. Marczyk, DeMatteo and Festinger (2017) describe a survey as a method that enables one to gather information from a relatively large number of cases at a particular time. This study used these designs to determine the degree in which factors exist and try to discover the links or relationships that exist between them. The study sought to obtain descriptive and self-reported information on school based factors affecting children transitioning into primary school from several schools in Northern Zone, Nakuru County, hence, the descriptive survey design was most appropriate.

The study targeted all twenty-nine public primary schools in the Northern Zone of Nakuru County. On average, there are three class one streams per school. Thus, the target population consisted of 29 head teachers and 87 class one teachers. This target population was chosen because they directly deal with the children as they begin school and, hence, they were expected to be in a position to give reliable school based information on characteristics of this group of learners. All the 29 schools of the Northern Zone were purposely selected for the study. Since, the total population under consideration in this study is 116, the sample size was first computed using the table proposed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). Thus the sample size was 92 respondents.

3.1 Instrumentation

Data was collected through questionnaires for teachers and interview schedules for head teachers developed by the researcher. The selection of these tools was guided by the nature of data to be collected, time available and the objectives of the study. Questionnaires have quite a number of advantages which included: confidentiality and time saving while the interview schedule had the advantage of obtaining in-depth information from the respondents (Kothari, 2004). Questionnaires also had the advantages of low cost, easy access, physical touch to widely dispersed samples and also the fact that the results are quantifiable (Kombo & Tromp, 2006).

4. Findings and Discussions

The study's purpose was to identify the teacher factors influencing children's transition into primary school in Northern Zone, Nakuru County. Three constructs were used to measure this objective; teaching methods, availability and experience. A 5 point Likert scale was used to rate responses of this variable and it ranged from; 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Regarding this variable, the following subsections presents and discuss findings from the teachers and head teachers, respectively.

4.1 Teaching Methods and Pupils' Transition to Primary School

There was need to find out from the teachers whether children who join class one are not able to cope because the teaching methods used are not suitable. The responses from the teachers are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Teaching Methods

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	11	14
Agree	28	37
Neutral	11	14
Disagree	17	23
Strongly disagree	9	12
Total	75	100

It can be deduced from the findings in table 1 that the teaching methods being used were making it difficult for children joining class one to cope with learning as indicated by majority (51%) of the teacher respondents who agreed. The head teachers interviewed were also in agreement with the view that the teaching methods being used by class one teachers affect the transitioning children's ability to cope with the new level of education. According to the head teachers, most pupils joining class one are not quite prepared for the reality of learning in primary school. Others also said, "Some teachers are not quite prepared to handle beginners". Therefore, it is evident that the teaching methods were instrumental to pupil transition.

The findings on teaching methods agree with those of Mureithi (2013) who found that teachers' level of training, language of instruction and teaching methods were the major factors influencing learners' transition from pre-school to lower primary. The findings concerning the low level of preparedness of the pupils to join class one as reported by the head teachers also support those of Margetts (1999) and Arnold et al., (2006) who established that children joining primary school go through many struggles in an attempt to cope with the new environment.

4.2 Availability of Teachers and Pupils' Transition to Primary School

The teacher respondents were also asked whether teachers were always available to ensure the children who join class one settle down well. The findings from teacher's responses have been given in table 2.

Table 2: Availability of Teachers

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	14	19
Agree	34	45
Neutral	15	20
Disagree	8	10
Strongly disagree	5	6
Total	75	100

The results in table 2 suggest that in majority of the schools, teachers were available to ensure that the children who join class one settle down well as indicated by most teacher respondents who agreed with the question (64%). However, according to most head teachers interviewed, their schools did not have enough teachers trained in early childhood education and this affected their ability to handle the children transitioning to class one. One head teacher in particular observed that, "it was not just a question of the availability of teachers, but rather teachers trained and equipped enough to handle transitioning of early learners". Therefore, it was evident that children's transitioning to primary school was influenced by teachers' training on how to handle transitioning of early learners.

These findings agree with Arnold et al., (2006) that training of teachers for early education was important in enabling them to handle learners in classroom and can affect them positively or negatively as they begin school. The findings also underscore the fact that the lower primary school teachers were not adequately trained to handle transitioning pupils which is in agreement with Oberhuemer (2006) who found that teachers in the lower classes in primary school are more unlikely to have received some specialized training to help them in the organization, management and teaching of learners. However, contrary to study by Neuman (2005) which revealed that in England, France, Ireland and Jamaica primary school teachers are trained to teach pre-schoolers and primary school children, in the current context of the present study, it was observed that there were training gaps among teachers especially those handling early learners.

4.3 Teaching Experience and Pupils' Transition to Primary School

The study also sought to find out whether teachers who are more experienced handling young children are able to assist them settle down in class one. The findings are given in Table 3.

Table 3: Teacher Experience and Pupils' Transitioning

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	17	23
Agree	26	36
Neutral	8	11
Disagree	15	20
Strongly disagree	8	11
Total	75	100

According to the findings in table 3, majority (59%) of the teachers agreed that teachers who were more experienced handling young children were able to assist them settle down in class one. Responses from the head teachers were also in agreement, for example, they stated that, "transitioning to class one is a challenge to many learners that can be best handled by more experienced lower primary school teachers." "I don't know how that [successful transitioning] would happen without experienced teachers." These findings agree with Abadzi (2006) who cited teacher experience as an important determinant of children's transition from the preschool to elementary school level. According to Essa (2003), experienced teachers are instrumental in children's development and basically prepare them well for higher levels of education.

5. Conclusion

Based on the results of the study, it was established that teacher factors significantly influenced children's transition into primary school in Northern Zone, Nakuru County. In particular, teaching methods, teacher availability and teacher experience in handling transitioning pupils were important ensuring successful transition of the learners into primary school. Therefore, the study concludes that teacher factors significantly affected children's transition into primary school in the area and beyond.

5.1 Recommendations

The study recommends that the Nakuru County Government should redouble their efforts to ensure that experienced and well trained teachers preferably with some ECD orientation are placed at class one to handle transitioning learners. In addition, the following areas are recommended for further research; the effects of home based factors on children transitioning into primary school and the effects of learner disabilities on children transitioning into primary school.

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