



## Untapping The Potential of Parental Engagement in Early Learning in Zanzibar

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### Abstract

Children's academic success has been consistently linked to the involvement of parents in pre-primary education. Specifically, the objectives were: to identify forms of parental involvement; explore reasons for parents' involvement; examine challenges affecting effective involvement, and suggest strategies for improvement. This study assessed the nature of parental involvement in Zanzibar's pre-primary education based on Joyce Epstein's six types of parental involvement framework. The study utilized a mixed-methods design, involving 90 parents from ten pre-primary schools in South district Zanzibar. Quantitative data was collected through a questionnaire from 90 parents while face-to-face interviews were done with 12 pre-primary teachers. Quantitative data were subjected to descriptive statistics, and qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The mean scores and standard deviations (SD) from qualitative data across involvement categories revealed strengths in parenting, communication, and home-learning activities involvement while volunteering and decision-making recorded lower levels. Parents' reasons for their involvement include developing child's progress and better learning, doing their responsibilities, following up for the child's encouragement, and building relationships with the school. Challenges for ineffective involvement include time constraints, limited teacher support, and lack of awareness. Recommendations emphasize fostering awareness, improving parent-school relationships, and encouraging active participation.

**Keywords:** Parental engagement; parental involvement; pre-primary education

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Parental involvement in pre-primary education (PPE) is critical in fostering children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. This study seeks to assess the nature of parental involvement in PPE in Zanzibar, focusing on the "Six Types of Parent Partnerships Framework" developed by Joyce Epstein and her colleagues at Johns Hopkins University (Bower & Griffin, 2011). This framework provides a robust model for analyzing and designing family-involvement programs, encompassing six categories: parenting, communication, volunteering, home learning, school governance, and collaboration with the



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community. For this study, school governance and collaboration with the community were combined, and relevant elements from the remaining categories were adapted to suit the Zanzibar context.

PPE is a compulsory education level in Zanzibar, where children begin two years of schooling at the age of four before advancing to primary education. Parents often cite reasons such as socialization, fostering independence, and preparing children for formal schooling as motivations for enrolling their children in pre-primary institutions (Malovic & Malovic, 2017; Muhammed et al., 2022; Legede et al. 2024).

Research underscores the importance of parental involvement in enhancing children's academic outcomes. Jaiswal (2017) highlights that active parental participation influences children's academic performance, while Myoungsoon and Heekyoung (2002), Uwezo (2012), and Mligo (2017) identify its positive effects on literacy and numeracy development. Furthermore, parents' engagement fosters collaboration with teachers, contributing to improved teaching quality and resources. a study by Malingumu et al. (2023) compared in-service and pre-service teachers' perceptions of parental involvement in Tanzania. The findings suggest that pre-service teachers held stronger beliefs about the general importance of parental involvement, while in-service teachers emphasized specific involvement practices. The study recommends incorporating parental involvement strategies into teacher education curricula to foster effective parent-teacher partnerships. Kovács et al. (2022) highlighted the diversity of parental involvement methods, ranging from home-based activities to participation in school programs. The study emphasized that the variability in these methods makes it challenging to measure their overall effectiveness, underscoring the need for tailored approaches to parental engagement.

Despite its recognized importance, parental involvement in Zanzibar's PPE faces challenges. Studies reveal limited awareness and negative attitudes among parents toward their roles in education, often exacerbated by cultural and socio-economic barriers (Ujudi, 2018). Epstein (2002) and Griffith (1996) link parental engagement with higher reading, writing, and mathematics achievement. In the Zanzibar context, enhancing parental involvement requires tailored strategies such as teacher training, school-community collaboration, flexible engagement policies, and parent workshops (Jaiswal, 2017; Mafa & Makuba, 2013).

While prior research has identified general barriers to parental involvement, this study seeks to assess the nature of parental involvement in PPE in Zanzibar. By leveraging Epstein's framework, the study aims to provide insights into the roles parents play and propose actionable strategies for improving their participation in this crucial stage of education. The study was guided by the following specific objectives: To identify the forms of parental involvement in pre-primary education in Zanzibar; To assess reasons for parental involvement in pre-primary education; and to identify challenges to effective parental involvement in pre-primary education; and to suggest ways to improve parental involvement in pre-primary education.

## 2. METHODS

This study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional design, utilizing a mixed-methods approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of parental involvement in pre-primary education. The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods allowed for triangulation, ensuring a more robust analysis of the data.

The study was conducted in Zanzibar's South District, involving ten randomly selected pre-primary schools. From each school, nine parents were randomly chosen, resulting in a total of 90 participants. Among the parents, 73 (81%) were female, and 17 (19%) were male. Notably, all the pre-primary teachers in the selected schools were female (100%).

Quantitative data were collected from 70 parents using a structured questionnaire designed to capture their involvement in various aspects of their children's pre-primary education, as outlined in Epstein's framework. The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions to gather information on parenting, communication, volunteering, home learning, and collaboration with schools.

Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with the 20 parents. These interviews explored teachers' perceptions of parental involvement and the challenges faced in engaging parents. The questionnaires were administered in person by the researchers, ensuring clarity and consistency in responses. Semi-structured interviews (for qualitative data) were conducted face-to-face in a quiet and private setting within the schools. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's consent and later transcribed for thematic analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of parental involvement in pre-primary education. Quantitative data were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 22), where descriptive statistics, including mean scores, standard deviations (SD), frequencies, and percentages, summarized patterns of parental involvement across categories such as parenting, communication, volunteering, home learning, and collaboration with schools. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically following six-step framework, using an inductive approach to identify key themes emerging from participants' experiences. Findings from both analyses were integrated during interpretation to triangulate results, with quantitative data revealing overall trends and qualitative data providing contextual depth and understanding.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutions, including the State University of Zanzibar (SUZA), the First Vice President's Office, the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, and the respective schools. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study, assured of their anonymity and confidentiality, and informed that their participation was entirely voluntary. Written consents were obtained from all participants before their involvement in the study.

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Forms of Parental Involvement in Pre-primary Education**

The analysis of parental involvement across the six categories reveals significant variations in engagement levels. While the data shows that all the forms of involvement were practiced by the parents, each was practiced to different extents. Parenting activities showed the highest level of involvement ( $M = 3.6$ ,  $SD = 0.5$ ), suggesting that parents were highly engaged in providing a supportive environment for their children's learning at home. Similarly, home-learning activities ( $M = 3.5$ ,  $SD = 0.6$ ) indicate strong parental efforts in supporting children's learning outside the classroom. Communication ( $M = 3.2$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ) scored moderately, suggesting that while interactions between parents and schools are present, there is room for improvement. Volunteering had the lowest mean score ( $M = 2.0$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ ), underscoring minimal participation in school activities and programs. Decision-making activities ( $M = 2.9$ ,  $SD = 0.6$ ) reflect moderate parental involvement in school governance and decision-making processes. These findings highlight strengths in home-based support but point to challenges in engaging parents in school-based activities, particularly volunteering and decision-making. Participation of parents in a specific type is described in the next sub-sections.

### **Parenting Activities**

The analysis of parenting activities reveals high levels of parental engagement in ensuring children's health and readiness for school. Among the specific activities, ensuring the child's good health for learning had the highest mean score ( $M = 3.8$ ,  $SD = 0.4$ ), followed closely by ensuring the child's safety during learning ( $M = 3.7$ ,  $SD = 0.5$ ). Preparing the child for school daily showed slightly lower engagement ( $M = 3.4$ ,  $SD = 0.6$ ), while preparing school food for the child had the lowest mean score within this category ( $M = 3.2$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ). These findings suggest that parents prioritize health and safety more strongly, while logistical tasks like food preparation receive relatively less emphasis.

### **Communication Activities**

The analysis of communication activities indicates moderate parental engagement, particularly in activities related to their children's progress. Following up on the child's educational progress had the highest mean score ( $M = 3.6$ ,  $SD = 0.5$ ), reflecting strong parental interest in academic outcomes. Sharing the child's health information also showed considerable involvement ( $M = 3.5$ ,  $SD = 0.6$ ). However, meeting classroom teachers regularly ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ) and subject teachers ( $M = 2.8$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ ) had lower engagement levels, suggesting that direct, school-based interactions are less frequent. These findings highlight strengths in progress monitoring but reveal gaps in regular teacher-parent interactions.

### **Volunteering Activities**

The analysis of volunteering activities reveals the lowest levels of parental engagement among all categories. Participating in school fundraising had the highest mean score within this group ( $M = 2.1$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ), indicating limited involvement. Helping in classroom activities ( $M = 1.9$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ ) and promoting the school in the community ( $M = 2.0$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ) showed similarly low engagement levels. These findings suggest significant challenges in encouraging parents to actively participate in school-based activities, highlighting an area for targeted interventions to strengthen parental involvement.

### **Home-Learning Activities**

The analysis of home-learning activities highlights strong parental involvement in supporting children's education outside the classroom. Buying learning materials had the highest mean score ( $M = 3.8$ ,  $SD = 0.4$ ), indicating that parents prioritize providing resources for their children's learning. Helping with homework and revision also showed high engagement ( $M = 3.7$ ,  $SD = 0.5$ ), reflecting active support for academic tasks at home. However, taking the child to libraries or museums had a lower mean score ( $M = 3.0$ ,  $SD = 0.6$ ), suggesting less frequent engagement in enrichment activities. Overall, parents are heavily involved in direct academic support but less so in broader experiential learning opportunities.

### **Decision-Making Activities**

The analysis of decision-making activities indicates moderate parental engagement. Attending school meetings had the highest mean score ( $M = 3.2$ ,  $SD = 0.5$ ), suggesting that parents are relatively active in formal discussions about school matters. Participation in school events followed closely ( $M = 3.0$ ,  $SD = 0.6$ ), reflecting a fair level of involvement in communal activities. However, joining school committees showed the lowest engagement ( $M = 2.6$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ), indicating limited parental participation in governance and decision-making roles. These findings highlight a need for strategies to encourage more active parental involvement in school leadership structures.

The findings reveal that parents engaged in all four types of parental involvement, albeit to varying degrees. High engagement in parenting, communication, and home-learning activities reflects that parents are largely fulfilling their fundamental responsibilities in ensuring children's well-being,

fostering communication with schools, and supporting learning at home. Parenting activities, such as providing food, shelter, health, and safety, are foundational for a child's survival and capacity to learn. Good communication between parents and schools facilitates the timely sharing of information regarding a child's progress, enabling swift actions to address challenges. Furthermore, parents' involvement in home-learning activities strengthens children's understanding and builds their confidence, aligning with findings from other studies (Epstein, 2011).

Conversely, volunteering activities were the least practiced form of involvement. Many parents limit their support to what they perceived as obligatory, such as paying fees and preparing their children for school. However, they showed minimal participation in activities like promoting the school, assisting teachers in the classroom, or contributing to the development of teaching and learning materials. This gap highlights a need for schools to cultivate a culture where parents feel encouraged and valued in extending their involvement beyond basic obligations.

### Reasons for Parents' Involvement in Pre-primary Education in Zanzibar

The study also explored parents' reasons for involving themselves in their children's pre-primary education. Table 1 summarizes the responses, which reflect a variety of motivations.

Table 1. Reasons for Parents' involvement (n = 90)	
Reason (multiple answers)	Frequency
Develop child's progress and better learning	75
Parent's responsibility	28
Teaching is my profession	23
Follow up for the child's encouragement	21
Building relationship	13

The most frequently cited reason for parental involvement was to develop the child's progress and enhance learning outcomes (75 out of 90, 82.4%). Parents expressed a strong belief in their role in fostering academic growth, as one parent noted: "I know that my involvement helps my child learn better and perform well in school. It's my duty to support this progress."

Another significant motivation was the sense of parental responsibility (28 out of 90, 30.8%). Parents viewed involvement as an inherent obligation. As one parent explained: "*Participation is important for us parents. It's my responsibility to ensure my child gets the best education. If I don't do it, who will?*"

Some parents linked their professional experience as teachers to their involvement (23 out of 90, 25.3%). They used their expertise to assist their children. A parent who was also a teacher shared: "*Since I am a teacher, it's easy for me to guide my child as I know many issues regarding the education of my child. Therefore, I feel it's my responsibility to use my skills to help them succeed.*"

Other parents (21 out of 90, 23.1%) mentioned their involvement was aimed at encouraging their children to stay motivated in school. For example, one parent stated: "*I always participate in my child's education. I visit her school to find out how she develops. When I follow up on my child's education, they feel encouraged and put more effort into learning.*"

A smaller group of parents (13 out of 90, 14.3%) emphasized that involvement helped build stronger relationships with their children and schools. One parent remarked: "*Parents need to be always near their children. I see that being part of my child's education creates a bond between us, and I also feel more connected to the school. Now I know much of what happens in the school where my child learns.*"

The reasons for parental involvement were diverse, with the majority emphasizing the desire to enhance their children's progress and learning. This rationale underscores the ultimate goal of parental involvement, which is improving children's educational outcomes. Research by Mafa and Makuba



(2013) supports this finding, emphasizing that collaboration between school and home often leads to better academic performance and positive behavior in children.

### Challenges Facing Parents Toward Effective Involvement in Pre-Primary Education in Zanzibar

The study identified several challenges parents face in effectively engaging with their children's pre-primary education. Table 2 summarizes the key challenges reported by the parents.

Table 2. Challenges to effective parental involvement (n = 90)

Challenges (multiple answers)	Frequency
Lack of enough time for involvement	54
Lack of support and cooperation from teachers/school management	24
Low support from other parents	23
Don't know how to involve myself	22
Children's feelings that teachers are always right	18

The most frequently cited challenge was the lack of time for involvement (54 out of 90,  $M = 3.5$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ). Many parents highlighted the competing demands of work and family responsibilities, with one parent stating: *"I know that I have to be involved in my child's education. I want to be more involved, but my job takes up so much of my time. By the time I get home, all the children have already slept."*

Lack of support and cooperation from teachers and school management was another significant barrier (24 out of 90,  $M = 3.2$ ,  $SD = 0.6$ ). Parents felt that schools did not always create an environment conducive to collaboration. A parent expressed frustration: *"We want to involve ourselves, but sometimes the school does not involve us or ask for our input. It feels like they don't value our role as parents."*

Low support from other parents (23 out of 90,  $M = 3.0$ ,  $SD = 0.6$ ) and uncertainty about how to be involved (22 out of 90,  $M = 2.9$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ) were also reported as challenges. For example, one parent noted: *"I often feel unsure about what I can do to help my child succeed. The school doesn't give much guidance on how parents can get involved."*

Finally, 18 parents ( $M = 2.7$ ,  $SD = 0.5$ ) highlighted that their children's perception of teachers as the ultimate authority discouraged parental involvement. One parent explained: *"My child always insists that the teacher knows everything, so they don't see why I should get involved in their schoolwork."*

Interviews with teachers confirmed many of these challenges. Teachers noted that parents' busy schedules often limited their availability. One teacher observed: *"We rarely see some parents because they are busy with work. It's hard for them to attend meetings or follow up on their children's progress."*

Another teacher highlighted the lack of communication between schools and parents: *"Some parents want to be involved, but we don't have effective communication channels to keep them updated or involve them in school activities."*

Teachers also expressed concern about parents' hesitation to engage due to a lack of confidence. One teacher stated: *"Many parents don't know how to help their children academically, especially when it comes to subjects, they feel less familiar with."*

The findings reveal that time constraints are the most significant barrier to effective parental involvement, consistent with other studies on parental engagement in education (Jaiswal, 2017). This challenge is particularly acute for parents with demanding work and professions, such as business and teaching, who struggle to balance work commitments with involvement in their children's education. The lack of school support and cooperation also emerged as a critical issue. This underscores the need for schools to establish better communication and collaboration mechanisms, as suggested by Epstein's framework, which emphasizes the importance of school-parent partnerships in fostering student success.

Parents' uncertainty about their roles indicates a gap in parental education programs. Schools could address this by offering workshops or informational sessions to guide parents on how to support their children effectively. Lastly, children's perception of teachers as infallible authorities may reduce their receptiveness to parental involvement. Schools and teachers could work to foster a more collaborative relationship between parents, students, and educators to mitigate this issue. These findings align with studies such as Menon (2013), which identified time, poverty, and resistance from schools as major obstacles. Majzub and Salim (2011) also highlighted instances where school staff either resisted parental involvement or lacked the knowledge to implement effective parental engagement programs. Shukia and Marobo (2023) found that parental involvement in children's acquisition of Kiswahili pre-reading skills was limited, primarily due to parents' lack of knowledge about pre-primary education and unstimulating home environments.

### Effective Ways to Improve Parents' Participation in Pre-Primary Schools

The study sought to identify effective strategies to enhance parental involvement in pre-primary education. Table 3 summarizes the key suggestions provided by parents.

Table 3: Effective ways to improve parental involvement (n = 90)

Proposed Strategies	Frequency
Raising awareness to encourage parents to participate in learning	35
Developing effective relationships and communication with parents	32
Motivating parents to engage in children's learning activities	18
Strengthening cooperation between parents and teachers	27
Preparing mandatory and ongoing meetings	30

Raising parental awareness and encouraging involvement was the most frequently proposed solution (35 out of 90,  $M = 3.8$ ,  $SD = 0.4$ ). Parents believed that education campaigns or workshops could help them understand their role better. One parent stated: "We need more workshops to learn how to assist our children. Many parents don't realize how important their involvement is."

Developing effective relationships and communication between parents and teachers (32 out of 90,  $M = 3.6$ ,  $SD = 0.5$ ) was another prominent suggestion. Parents emphasized the need for open and regular communication. As one parent explained: *"Better communication with teachers would make it easier for us to know how we can help at home."*

Preparing mandatory and ongoing meetings (30 out of 90,  $M = 3.5$ ,  $SD = 0.6$ ) and strengthening cooperation between parents and teachers (27 out of 90,  $M = 3.4$ ,  $SD = 0.5$ ) were also highlighted. Parents felt that consistent engagement through scheduled meetings could bridge the gap between schools and homes. Motivating parents to engage in children's learning activities was suggested less frequently (18 out of 90,  $M = 3.0$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ) but remains a vital recommendation.

Interviews with teachers corroborated these suggestions. Teachers emphasized the need to raise awareness about the importance of parental involvement. One teacher shared: *"Some parents think their role ends when they send their children to school. We need to educate them that learning continues at home."*

Teachers also stressed the importance of communication, with one stating: *"We need platforms for regular updates, like newsletters or digital tools, to keep parents informed about their children's progress."*

Mandatory meetings were another key recommendation from teachers. One noted: *"When meetings are scheduled and mandatory, more parents attend, and they engage better with the school's activities."*

Participants proposed various strategies to enhance parental involvement, including raising awareness, fostering effective relationships and communication between parents and teachers, and encouraging parents through workshops or motivational activities. Jaiswal (2017) concurs, emphasizing the importance of training teachers on parental involvement, creating a welcoming school environment, and organizing workshops to educate parents about their role in their children's education.

Overall, the findings highlight the need for a multifaceted approach to improving parental involvement in pre-primary education. This includes addressing barriers, raising awareness, and fostering collaboration between schools and parents. By implementing these strategies, schools can create a supportive environment that encourages meaningful parental participation, ultimately enhancing children's learning and development outcomes.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study underscores the critical role of parental involvement in pre-primary education and its impact on children's learning and development. Parents demonstrated strong engagement in parenting, communication, and home-learning activities, which are vital for fostering children's academic success and overall well-being. However, minimal participation in volunteering activities highlights an area that requires targeted interventions to encourage parents to extend their support beyond basic responsibilities.

The findings also reveal that parents' involvement is driven by a shared aspiration to enhance their children's progress, although barriers such as time constraints, lack of cooperation from school management, and insufficient support hinder their full engagement. Addressing these challenges necessitates a collaborative effort between schools and parents, including raising awareness, improving communication, and creating opportunities for active participation. By fostering a positive relationship between schools and families and implementing structured parental involvement programs, stakeholders can enhance the quality of pre-primary education in Zanzibar. Ultimately, empowering parents to participate meaningfully in their children's education lays a strong foundation for lifelong learning and success.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance parental involvement in pre-primary education in Zanzibar. *Firstly*, to conduct community sensitization campaigns and workshops for educating parents about the importance of their involvement in their children's education. *Secondly*, schools should establish regular and open communication channels with parents, to share updates on children's progress and encourage collaboration. Additionally, schools should offer diverse and flexible ways for parents to participate, such as volunteering for specific events, supporting classroom activities, assisting in developing teaching materials, and accommodating parents with busy schedules. *Lastly*, training programs should be provided for teachers to enhance their skills in engaging with parents, fostering mutual trust, and building effective partnerships to support children's learning.

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