

Is Fathers' Involvement in Young Children's Development and Learning in the Early Years Important? Experiences from the Caregivers in Tanzania

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Abstract

There has been an increased interest among researchers and policy makers on fathers' involvement and its implications for children's wellbeing and learning. Existing empirical evidences from developed countries have documented fathers' essential role that it successfully improves children's development and learning. However, there is dearth of evidence from developing countries especially from Sub-Saharan African contexts. This study was designed to establish Tanzanian experiences particularly Kimamba village in Kilosa District-on fathers' involvement in children's development and schooling dimensions. Descriptive exploratory study design guided collection and analysis of data of the rural context. A total of 23 fathers were recruited for focus group interviews. The analysis of data revealed that fathers had good understanding of their roles and involvement in child-rearing and learning for mastering social and economic welfare of their children, families and the larger population. Fathers indicate that their involvement has significant contribution to children's development across schooling periods and later in life. Their responses range from preparing home environment and crafting home-based timetable for the child to adhere to when at home and during after-school hours. The study concludes that, in a context with limited educational resources, parenting education is important for both fathers and mothers. This may ultimately lead to closer parental involvement and collaboration in child-rearing and caring. It therefore recommended that Social Welfare Officers in collaboration with District Education Officers and teachers should organise and run sensitization programmes to improve fathers' involvement in children's development and learning.

Keywords

Fathers, early years, child development, caregivers, Tanzania

1. Introduction

Fathers' involvement in terms of engagement, accessibility and responsibility (McMunn, Martin, Kelly & Sacker, 2017) has been of interest to researchers and policy decision makers. Differentiating the three components of fathers' involvement, Pleck (2010) argued on

caretaking and play or leisure; while accessibility of the specific component, fathers' involvement impacts the child's socio-emotional development

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and responsibly providing resources. Regardless (Cabrera & Tamis-LeMonda, 2013), and by being responsible in terms of material contributions, which results in the child's enhanced educational attainment and predicted social success (Shwalb, Shwalb & Lamb, 2013). Gray and Anderson (2015) revealed that fathers' effects on the child's development and learning are more visible in nuclear families with low-fertility rates and high social capital contexts than they are in extended families with higher fertility and more substitutable forms of childcare.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, most of the reported findings about involvement of men or fathers focus more on family-based HIV prevention and reproductive, maternal, and child health interventions and policy (Richter et al., 2009) than on child development and schooling. As a result, Posel and Devey (2006) reported on the importance of and availability of data and its interpretation aspects as essential contributions to family life.

In Tanzania, there is a policy related to the development and learning of young children. The Child Development Policy (United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 1996) notes among many other issues, that fathers are responsible for caring for their children, including those born outside the marriage, this as a strategy is intended to promote and balance child rights. Researchers have also worked to uncover the situation of children's rights, specifically focusing on parental engagement in children's learning. For example, Chahe & Mwaikokesya, (2015), and Sobayi (2018) reported on the UWEZO's 2010-2014 initiative [UWEZO is a Swahili word implying *Capability* in English] and found that parental involvement in children's learning in pre-primary and early primary education is important. Mligo (2017) also focused on parents' engagement in early childhood education and care services for children aged between four to six years of age in primary schools in Tanzania. In the well-known

studies conducted in Tanzania and elsewhere, researchers focused on parents in general, not specifically on fathers (c.f; Kihumbe, 2015; Kambugu, 2014; UWEZO, 2016; UWEZO Tanzania, 2011). As a result, fathers' engagement efforts in Tanzania are unequally reported, and underrepresented in research and in parenting and parenting support programmes (Gadsden, Ford & Breiner, 2016).

Though researchers in Tanzania have inadequately focused on fathers, the government of the URT is committed to ensuring that the rights of children (e.g., development rights, participation, etc.) are respected. The government's commitments are visible through a number of initiatives, for example, the National Strategy for Growth and Poverty Reduction (NSGPR) for 2010-2015 (Tanzania Child Rights Forum, 2013). The NSGPR is commonly known in Kiswahili, the national language, as *Mkakati wa Kukuza Uchumi na Kupunguza Umaskini Tanzania* (MKUKUTA). Other reported initiatives by the author are the Education and Training Policy of 1995 for issues of right to education basically enrolment, and the National Policy on HIV and AIDS of 2001 that provides for orphans in sibling headed households to receive support from the central government, local councils, and community to minimize the impact of HIV and AIDS on their lives. In ensuring that these and other rights are observed and offered by adults and every citizen in the country, the Child Development Policy of 1996 issued by the Government of URT requires both parents to be accountable for providing basic services and taking care of their children. It further requires parents to be responsible for taking care of children born outside marriage,

Therefore, the study was designed to explore and document Tanzanian experiences of the fathers' involvement in children's development and schooling dimensions. It specifically intended to:

- i. Explore fathers' understanding of the main responsibilities of parents in child's positive development and learning,
- ii. Investigate the fathers' key responsibilities in children's learning at home,
- iii. Suggest the essential responsibilities that parents and community should implement to better facilitate a child's development and learning.

2. Methods and Procedures

2.1 Research Design

This study employed mainly qualitative research methodology, informed by descriptive exploratory study design. The design fitted the current study as it was appropriate for research questions that focused on discovering the events or experiences, and gaining insights from informants regarding a poorly understood phenomenon of fathers' involvement in child care and development. The design was supplemented by descriptive quantitative data that aimed at describing the study sample (Kim, Sefcik & Bradway, 2017) as presented in Table 1.

2.2 Selection of the Study Area

This research was carried out in Kilosa district in Kimamba ward and it involved fathers with young children in pre-primary education, and in grades one and two. Kilosa district includes the following original ethnic groups: Sagara, Kaguru, Kwiva and Vidunda, who are mainly farmers; and immigrant ethnic groups such as Maasai, Barbaig, Parakuyo, Sukuma and Hehe, who earn their living through farming, business and pastoralism (Pacific, 2011). The district was selected from among six districts of the Morogoro Region of Tanzania as it ranked the first in the conflicts caused by farmers and pastoralists (Benjaminsen et al., 2009). The district was also highly impacted by flash floods in 2009, which displaced up to 23,980 households (International Federation of Red

Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2010) and 1,865 households in 2014 (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2014). The flash floods resulted in possible family separation, physical harm and psychosocial distress. When separated, families and especially fathers have trouble settling their families, resulting in poor child care and development. The ensure children do not lose quality parental care and basic needs, Help Children Organization intervened to support children affected by conflicts and natural disasters regionally as the children's most basic needs turn into emergencies.

2.3 Sample and Sampling Procedures

The study purposively included male parents (fathers) because they are customarily the heads of the households and have not been focused by researchers in Tanzania in this aspect. Having children enrolled in pre-primary and in early primary education classes was also a criterion for the inclusion or exclusion in the methodological rigour. The study involved a total of 23 fathers who volunteered to participate. This number of participants allowed researchers to collect and analyse data, and then write the report.

2.4 Data Collection

Focus group interviews were used to collect data. Respondents were comfortable being part of a group and conversations were carried on with sufficient depth, We followed the principles that Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1956) outlined for conducting focus group interviews: 1) We informally assembled each group and requested their points of view on a specific; 2) groups of fathers consisted of 6-12 members; 3) moderators were trained and used prepared questions and probes to elicit fathers' responses, and 4) researchers elicited the perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and ideas of the fathers regarding their involvement in child development and learning. Researchers

documented the discussions in field notebooks and recorded them for later analysis and report writing. The documented or recorded discussions were transcribed from the native language (Kiswahili) into English for analysis and report writing. The Focus group interview focused its discussion on the following questions: Who is more responsible for child care- the father or the mother? Why should one parent be more responsible than the other? What are key issues in child care? And what is good child preparation for formal learning? What are your major responsibilities as the child's father in providing favourable home-contexts for the child's learning?

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Prior to, during the study and report writing, researchers observed the essential ethical issue in conducting research. Researchers attended to ethical issues throughout this investigation. The University of Dodoma provided research clearance and District Authorities provided an introductory letter. Further, informed consent of informants' participation was ensured by explaining to them the purpose of the study and giving them a consent form as an indicator of agreement of voluntary participation in the study. During report writing, confidentiality was observed in a way that unauthorized people had limited opportunities and time to access the collected data. Additionally, pseudonyms (use of numbers or letters) were used to prevent identification of study participants.

2.6 Data Analysis

After data were collected, interpretational analysis was used to systematically code and classify qualitative data. The raw data obtained from focus group discussion or interviews were coded to obtain relevant texts, repeating ideas, themes, theoretical constructs, research concerns and theoretical narratives. From repeating ideas, sub-themes developed naturally. Later, abstract ideas or theoretical constructs and narratives were developed and were useful in bridging the concerns of the researchers and the subjective experiences that the participants shared. .

To maximize objectivity and authenticity, the study deployed the techniques of communicability, transparency, and coherence through proper coding as well as taking notes using notebooks and audio recording device (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). It is important to note that in analysing oral data, the researchers bracketed all their previous understandings, beliefs and assumptions (Onwuegbuzie, Leech & Collins, 2012) regarding the importance of fathers' involvement in child's development and learning.

3. Results

Data presentation begins with the presentation of the demographic characteristics of the study participants involved in the data collection process.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Children's Biological Fathers

	Level attained	Freq		Age range	Freq
Fathers' educational level	Not attended	3	Fathers' age	25-30	1
	Primary education	6		31-36	8
	Secondary education	3		37-42	8
	Tertiary education	12		43+	6
	Total	23		Total	23

A total of 23 fathers were involved in three FGDs lasting an average of one hour and twenty minutes each. Regarding their education attainment, 52.1% of them had tertiary education, mostly bachelor's degrees in different disciplines.

3.1 Fathers' Understanding of the Responsible Parent in Child's Positive Development and Learning

To respond to this objective, the researchers asked the fathers about their understanding of positive child care between the father, mother and the community. The data analysis revealed that fathers were aware of child care, which they described as consisting of broad four aspects: provision of nutritious food, attending the child's health care needs, provision of clothing, and provision of a safe and attractive home environment. Fathers described and insisted that provision of a balanced diet (protein, starch, vitamins and minerals etc.) is important for the development of the child's brain and body. Provision of good and balanced diet prevents children from being attacked by diseases that would impact their positive development and learning. Fathers mentioned diseases like kwashiorkor or malnutrition as being common to children who were not fed a balanced diet.

Fathers mentioned health services (attending clinic and medical attention) as among the crucial services that constituted positive child care. They said that a child deserves care in various forms including clinic and medical care services to monitoring his/her growth and development, and to provide appropriate health care intervention when needed. Health care intervention included medication and vaccination to prevent external and internal infectious of diseases and support stronger health.

Clothing was also identified by fathers as one of their responsibilities. They mentioned clothing that is clean and in good condition because it makes the child look smart and free of infectious diseases that are caused by being dirty. Importantly, when the child wears good and clean clothes, s/he feels proud to be cared and valued by his/her father. In line with clothing, the home environment should have rooms that are well ventilated, clean and supplied with facilities especially mosquito nets to prevent mosquito bites that may cause malaria, one of the leading killer diseases of young children.

Availability of some play facilities at home was mentioned by fathers in Kimamba Ward as important for fathers to provide for the child to develop well. Such facilities should be those that could not easily harm the child during play and provide enjoyable engagement and stimulation that will lead the child to consistently engage in various play activities. Fathers' mention of the availability of play facilities at home indicates their concern with their children's development and formal learning preparation. To make children joyful at home, fathers urged parents and other caregivers to be friendly to children as this allows them to feel secure and not be scared.

Further, researchers inquired about fathers' understanding of parent most responsible in child development and learning. Analysis of data collected from the fathers who participated through FGDs, revealed that 15 (65.2%) of the fathers involved in the study said that both parents (father and the mother) are equally responsible; whereas 6 (26.0%) responded that the child's rearing and caring is a collective responsibility of the parents and community members, including teachers. In addition, two (8.6%) of the fathers said that child rearing and care is the mother's responsibility.

Fathers gave different reasons for their responses regarding parents' responsibility for the child's development and learning. Those who viewed that child rearing as the responsibility of both parents (father and mother) gave three main factors to support their views. These factors would ensure that children are raised in standards that are culturally acceptable (good behaviours); they would ensure that the child's social and personal needs (love, feeding, clothing and school materials) are met; and they would ensure close follow-up of the young child's learning progress and development.

On the other hand, fathers who viewed child rearing as a responsibility of the parents and community argued that parents are principal caregivers and first teachers of their children at home. When children are out of their home, for example in school, teachers and the community in general should participate in ensuring that they are in safe and comfortable social environment. Regarding this, one parent elaborated that:

When the child is not yet enrolled for schooling, parents mainly a father should strive to ensure that his child eats nutritious food, has decent clothes, and gets other essential needs. As the child starts schooling, the father should be close to teachers to ensure that he/she attends at school and learns both academic matters and acceptable behaviours.

Contrary to other study participants, some fathers opined that caring for the child's development and learning is the responsibility of the mothers. They argued that mothers are close to children all the time (day and night). Therefore, they insisted that closeness existing between mothers and children made it easier for them to raise and monitor their children's

development and learning. They further emphasised that mothers are more responsible for the child care for positive development and learning because fathers are usually occupied with income generating activities. One of the respondents elaborated that:

Imagine, I wake-up very early in the morning at 05:30 AM to prepare myself for work as I am required to have arrived at the work place at or before 8:00 AM and return home around 09:00 PM. As I wake-up or return home, I find them (children) sleeping. This makes it difficult for me to have time to talk to them as their mothers do.

One crucial lesson from the study participants is that they were aware that children need to grow, develop and learn when in the hands of both parents (mother and father). However, economic activities occupied 56.5% of the involved fathers, therefore, separating them from their partners (mothers) as well as their children, making it difficult for fathers to participate in positive child care while being responsible for improving family, social and economic well-being for the progress of their families. This suggests that fathers in Kilosa district especially at Kimamba village are aware that positive child development and learning is a collective responsibility between parents and neighbouring community. In this study 91.3% of fathers reported that successful child development and learning is facilitated by the involvement of all parents (fathers and mothers) and the general community. Therefore, child rearing should not be taken as a responsibility of one of the two biological parents.

3.2 Fathers' Key Responsibility for Child's Learning at Home

In this objective, the researchers asked fathers about their responsibilities for the child's learning at home. The analysis of data revealed that fathers' contribution for the child's learning at home involved preparing the home environment with some sports and games and learning resources, such as school uniforms, exercise books, writing materials, clothes and shoes. Additionally, fathers believed that they should assist in crafting a timetable for the child to follow as s/he returns from school.

School uniforms

Fathers involved in this study were of the view that it was their principal role to provide school uniforms to their children. The uniforms, which include clothes, shoes and socks, make the child look smart and valued. Uniforms allow children to go to school happier, prepared, and feeling just as valued as children from families with good socio-economic backgrounds.

Learning materials

Fathers involved in this study believed that several learning materials should be provided at home; these included exercise books, pencil/pens, text or supplementary books, slates, counting devices, cards for letters and numbers, and some crayons. These resources are important to assist learning, especially reading, and to develop interests in school while at home. Some materials for drawings (pencils/pen, exercise books or slates) help the child prepare herself/himself well for school activities [emergent and conventional literacy as well as numeracy] and other planned learning activities in school. In addition to academic related facilities, fathers also argued that sports and games facilities are essential for the child when the child is interacting in play with peers. These activities increase development of their fine and

gross motor skills, sociability and hence make children feel part of the larger community.

Crafting child's timetable

Fathers argued that parents at home should prepare a timetable for their children to adhere to and attend properly once they return home after school hours. The timetable should indicate specific activities that children should perform before they go to bed. It should include enough time for children to perform extra school and home work. Engaging in extra school and home work requires time. Therefore, fathers should monitor children's activity to ensure that children are exempted from some duties, and instruct them to utilize the time they have to accomplish school work at home. It was explained by one of the fathers that:

Children need time to get enough sleep to allow their brain and the body to rest and allow other internal body processes to continue. Sleeping for children is important as it relieves them and when they wake up, they generally have enough energy to play for stimulating their brain and muscles.

The fathers urged their fellows and parents in general to engage their children in activities that develop a sense of time management. Therefore, parents should go through children's exercise books to be informed about their progress in school activities and be able to intervene where necessary to improve their child's learning as well as their socialization in society. The other crucial intervention mentioned was to regularly check on the type and quality of food or nutrition that children receive at home before going to school. A close and positive relationship with school teachers was cherished by parents and

emphasised for learning and being informed of the child's progress in school.

3.3 Advice Given by Fathers

Based on the fathers' advice regarding improved fatherhood and child rearing for positive development, two sub-themes of responses emerged. These sub-themes emerged as the respondents of this study reported that most of the fathers had detached themselves from their children, hence they mostly depended on their wives (female parents) to inform them of the progress of their children. These sub-themes are described below.

3.3.1 Advice to Fathers

To improve the future of the young children and the nation as a whole, fathers advised their fellow parents to be close to their children in order to determine and understand the challenges impacting their development and learning. In addition, positive attachment between fathers and their children would enhance and nurture children's potential and their overall behaviour. Secondly, provision of all the necessary requirements for life and school (e.g. nutrition/food, clothing, good sleeping place, and enrolling their children to good schools) should be a priority for all family members as part a child's basic human rights (right to be nurtured, listened and valued).

3.3.2 Advice to the Government Authorities

Fathers involved in this study advised the government to ensure that schools have learning environments that are attractive and supportive to the child's development and learning. Attractive and supportive learning environments make young children more interested and persistent with the school activities. School feeding programmes are among crucial strategies to be implemented. Such programmes

would enable children take meals in schools for strengthening their health and sustaining school activities rather than letting them walk for a long distance back home searching for food. Again, it was advised that:

The government should recruit well trained teachers in early education to cope with the actual demand (increasing number of children and need for quality services) for quality classroom organization and teaching. Employing qualified teachers in early education should be a priority rather than using teachers with limited qualifications in teaching young children.

It was noted that improving health care services for young children is important as some children come from poor families that can hardly afford the high costs needed to obtain good medical service. The financial impact experienced in rural areas when parents send their children to hospitals/health care centres dwindle the economic status of the poor families that normally toil to earn their daily meal. Furthermore, children's deaths have been reported because of the failure of the parents to meet medical costs required for treatment of their children.

Fathers also urged the government at different levels to take action against parents who neglect or delegate their parental roles to unknown people who fail to provide intended support to children. As a result, such Children in such circumstances run away from home and join other street children, and consequently lose focus of their life. Neglecting parental obligations to children is to deny them of their right to be cared for. The government was also urged to take action against those who employ

and harass children in a way that makes them drop out of school.

4. Discussion of the findings

Given that young children rely on parents and other primary caregivers in their development and learning, they need to be cared for to promote their abilities and talents early at home and as they proceed with schooling (Department of Child and Adolescent Health and Development, 2004). It is because of the importance of early years that Gadsden et al. (2016) see parents as the most proximal and most important manipulators of child's development; therefore they urge them to work interactively. Fathers' presence (co residence) in the children's households (Lamb, 2010) is crucial for cognitive, social and moral development, and infant attachment to fathers (Lamb, 1981).

It is because of the benefits that fathers have on their sons/daughters that fathers at Kimamba Village reported that child care needed for development and learning is a collective responsibility. The views held by fathers at Kimamba Village regarding child care being a collective responsibility are similar to those of Gadsden et al. (2016) that nurturing relationships with both fathers and mothers essentially enable optimal developmental outcomes to a child. Gadsden et al. (2016) also indicated that there are more benefits to the child when parents living in the same household support each other and are generally consistent in their expectations for the child and in their parenting behaviours. Biller (1993) argued that when husband and wife have a cooperative partnership, the family atmosphere becomes conducive to the positive development of each member of the household, and in particular, the father's commitment in equitably rendering shared parenting responsibilities contributes to the successful family relationship. It was

reported by fathers' in Kimamba village that economic activities [done by employed or self-employed fathers] influence the quality of fatherhood just as it does in other countries such as the United States. Kramer and Kramer (2014) for instance, argued that changes in economic landscapes like increased family responsibilities, retrenchment and economic recessions result in members seeking new employment opportunities. These economic fluctuations cause other heads of households to stay at home or leave their homes/families. Practically, in the 19th century, fathers in the United States left their small farms and businesses to seek employment in an emerging industrial economy away from home, leaving the responsibility for rearing children largely to mothers (LaRossa, 1997). Economic impact on the quality of fathers' involvement in child care and development as seen from participants at Kimamba village and in other countries like the United States is an implicit indicator that fathers make a significant contribution to their families and children's access to resources (Government of Western Australia, 2007).

In the view of the study participants (fathers), parents and other caregivers are essential resources for children's thriving. Parents including fathers are essential in managing the emotional states of children (e.g.; fearfulness, hopelessness, depression and withdrawal) and managing behaviour especially the unacceptable ones (Gadsden et al., 2016). Provision of support, for example, provision of school uniforms and play facilities at home by parents as noted by the study participants in Kimamba village helps children at risk of developing unacceptable behaviours, such as anxiety and depression, that impair children's regulation and ability to function well at home, at school and in the community (Osofsky & Fitzgerald, 2000). Support by parents especially on the preparation of the home environment for

the child's development and learning make them stimulated and challenged in such a way that they develop various skills such as healthy self-regulatory practices which are useful for academic success (Gottfried, 2013).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that the involved fathers at Kimamba village were aware that positive child development and learning is a collective responsibility that needs to be provided by both parents. There are indications that some fathers still devote minimal time in following up their children's development and learning. These fathers think that their wives (female parents) have the traditional role of child caring while fathers are responsible for working in income generating activities to provide for the family. Secondly, economic contexts [growth or recession] among study participants had impact regarding the responsibility of parents in the child's development and learning. Generally, the findings of this study are closely related to the explanations given by Pleck (2010) that the role of the father ranges from arranging for the child's supporters or caregivers, also known as babysitters, looking for medical specialists for attending to the child when medical problems arise, determining when the child needs new clothes, etc. This implies that the fathers' responsibility is both a process (making sure the child is cared for) and an indirect care (arranging for resources to be available).

Therefore, this study recommends that parental engagement should be a policy-based intervention in parental education programmes for improving the quality of parental care and interaction among themselves and with their children. Through parenting programmes, participants would learn and sharpen their understanding for inducing changes in their families and to an individual child.

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