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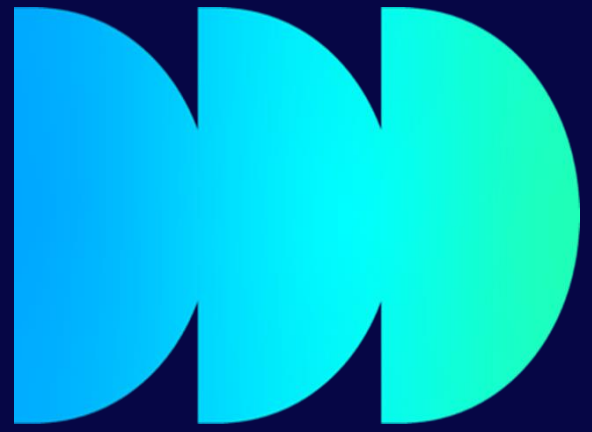
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**Power of Parents: Exploring the potential role of parents and caregivers in strengthening language development and literacy acquisition for children ages 3–12 in Sub-Saharan Africa**

**Multisite case-study in Nigeria and Ghana**

Margaret Ebubedike, Kwame Akyeampong, Eric Addae-Kyeremeh, Jane Doka, Felicia Boateng and Portia Dery.

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## Executive summary

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“I would start by teaching my children more stories. I will make sure they understand my language. I will use it to teach them the alphabets and numbers in my language, parts of the body. I am happy been here and I have learnt a lot.” (Parent 7, NGN)

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### Introduction

The Power of Parents (POP) research project examines how parents and caregivers can strengthen children’s literacy development, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where barriers like poverty and low parental literacy create significant challenges. Conducted in two phases, the study first reviewed existing research to understand how parents, caregivers, and communities contribute to children’s learning and identify effective practices. The second phase involved co-creative workshops with parents and caregivers in Ghana and Nigeria, exploring cultural activities such as storytelling and traditional games that can inspire children’s interest in reading. The research highlights the crucial role parents and community networks play in literacy development, the potential of local practices to enhance learning, and the challenges families face in engaging with schools, alongside ways to overcome them. It underscores the transformative power of parents and caregivers in fostering literacy when their knowledge, experiences and cultural practices are fully recognised and integrated.

### Community and context

The study engaged five communities—two in Ghana (Adumaso Aba and Garizegu) and three in Nigeria (Garam, Durumi 2 and Nyanya)—chosen for their diverse socio-economic, cultural and linguistic characteristics. Adumaso Aba, near Accra, offers insights into rural settings with access to urban resources, while Garizegu, in Northern Ghana, represents a more isolated, under-resourced community. In Nigeria, Garam reflects semi-urban challenges in literacy support, while Durumi 2 and Nyanya, both peri-urban areas in Abuja, highlight the impact of urbanisation and linguistic diversity on parental involvement in education. These communities provided a rich context for understanding how traditional practices, local knowledge systems, and socio-economic conditions influence literacy development among children aged 3-12, offering valuable insights into the opportunities and challenges faced by families in these regions.

### Research design

The research employed Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), rooted in Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) principles, to value community knowledge and foster collaboration. A diverse research team from the UK, Ghana and Nigeria engaged with local contexts, ensuring culturally relevant, ethical and responsive approaches. Participants were predominantly female, reflecting the cultural context where mothers are often regarded as the primary caregivers and key supporters of children’s early development. They were recruited through partnerships with schools, community leaders, and local organisations. Collaborations in each community, including with traditional rulers, school staff and NGOs, facilitated mobilisation and trust-building.

### Methods of data collection

Data collection involved participatory group activities, such as group work, open dialogue, feedback, role play, and collaborative storytelling. Follow-up interviews were conducted by research pairs from The Open University and local teams, combining qualitative expertise with cultural knowledge to improve communication, reduce biases and strengthen data credibility. Ethical protocols included obtaining informed consent in participants’ preferred languages and ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. The study acknowledged limitations, including the reliance on parental insights without direct evidence of impact on children and context-specific findings, which limit generalisability but remain relevant to similar settings.

## Data analysis

Two types of data were analysed: participatory group activities, where parents and caregivers explored traditional practices to support literacy, and follow-up interviews that provided deeper insights into home and family settings. This combined approach ensured a comprehensive analysis of both traditional practices and their practical applications for literacy development.

## Key findings

- **The role of parents and extended family in children's literacy development**

Mothers often take on the primary role in supporting children's literacy development, especially in households where fathers are focused on income generation. Educated mothers are more confident in assisting with homework and teaching foundational skills, while mothers with lower literacy levels rely on the support of literate extended family members. Even in cases of low literacy, mothers demonstrate a strong commitment to their children's learning. Fathers provide support when more complex subjects arise, contributing to their children's education when available.

- **Leveraging local practices and cultural activities to support learning**

Parents engage children in local cultural practices, such as games, storytelling, songs and participation in cultural events, which foster social skills and moral development. While initially unaware of how these practices enhance literacy, parents later recognise their value in improving vocabulary, comprehension and critical thinking. Activities like traditional games, stories and songs can boost language development and phonics, while cultural events immerse children in social and linguistic experiences that enhance literacy skills.

- **Multilingualism supports children's literacy development**

Children in multilingual environments develop strong literacy skills as exposure to multiple languages helps improve their ability to understand academic concepts and adapt to various linguistic contexts. Parents report that speaking indigenous languages at home supports literacy in both native languages and English, helping children make connections between the languages of instruction and their home languages. However, some parents express concern about their children's proficiency in indigenous languages due to the dominance of English.

- **Parents' lack of awareness and confidence in enhancing literacy**

Many parents lack confidence in their ability to support their children's literacy due to limited formal education. Despite possessing valuable cultural knowledge, they often fail to recognise how it can enhance literacy. Some parents see cultural activities like games as unrelated to literacy development, but after participating in workshops, they begin to see the educational benefits of these cultural practices and local activities. Socio-economic challenges further limit their confidence, with some parents believing that better financial resources and education would enable them to support their children's learning more effectively.

## Discussion and insight

- **Harnessing the power of parents, caregivers and community networks**

Through everyday interactions, such as household chores or cultural events, parents, caregivers and community networks play a vital role in supporting children's literacy development. However, these informal learning opportunities are often overlooked by formal education systems. Despite their significant potential, many parents feel insecure about their ability to contribute due to factors like limited education and resources. Therefore, it is essential to recognise and harness these contributions, especially those of mothers and the broader community, by valuing and utilising their cultural knowledge. This approach can unlock their potential to foster children's literacy in communities with low literacy rates.

- **Bridging informal and formal literacy development**

Local cultural practices such as games, music, storytelling and cultural events play an important role in sparking children's interest in literacy. Activities like the Ghanaian "ampe" game and traditional songs support language development by fostering vocabulary and phonological awareness. Educators and initiatives must find ways to integrate these informal practices into formal education systems to create a



holistic and contextually relevant approach to literacy. Additionally, recognising multilingualism as a strength in literacy development is crucial as many children are raised in linguistically diverse environments.

- **Reinforcing the power of parents and caregivers**

The study stresses the need to challenge deficit-based perceptions of parents, especially those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and recognise that their own lived experiences and cultural practices and the local knowledge they bring, can contribute to children's literacy development in ways formal school practices cannot. Parents possess valuable cultural and experiential knowledge, but many do not feel confident in their ability to engage with formal education. Initiatives that bridge the gap between home and school, such as parent-teacher workshops and literacy support programmes, can help reinforce parents' roles in children's learning. Practical solutions like literacy kits and mobile book services can also support parents in resource-constrained settings. These efforts create a collaborative environment where parents, educators, and children work together to enhance literacy outcomes.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Parents and caregivers, especially mothers, play an essential role in children's literacy development through everyday interactions, such as household chores and cultural events. These informal learning opportunities, though often overlooked by formal education systems, offer valuable resources to complement formal literacy practices. Recognising and utilising the cultural knowledge and lived experiences of parents can significantly enhance children's literacy outcomes, particularly in low-literacy communities.

### **Recommendations**

1. Raise awareness through workshops that highlight the role of parents in literacy development and provide practical strategies for integrating literacy into daily activities.
2. Map and engage key community stakeholders to align resources with literacy goals, advocating for policy support and expanding successful initiatives.
3. Strengthen school-community collaboration and encourage the formation of parent support groups to share literacy strategies.
4. Co-create culturally relevant literacy toolkits with parents and educators to provide accessible, meaningful literacy strategies tailored to local context

# 1. Introduction

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*“I believe involving parents in these activities and offering workshops to help the parents that did not go to school to mix with parents that went to school to learn how to support our children to read would be very helpful...” (Parent 2, NGN)*

---

Literacy is widely acknowledged as a foundational skill that influences not only academic achievement but also broader life outcomes. However, in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa barriers such as poverty, limited access to quality education and low parental literacy levels often impedes children's early language and literacy development. The **Power of Parents (POP)** research project explores the critical role that parents and caregivers can play in strengthening language development and literacy acquisition for children aged 3 to 12 in Sub-Saharan Africa, despite these barriers.

The research was conducted in two phases.

**Phase 1:** An extended literature review that involved desk-based research about parental and caregiver involvement on the literacy development of children aged 3-12 in Sub-Saharan Africa to provide evidence-based recommendations for improving literacy outcomes in Ghana and Nigeria. This extended literature review was guided by the following questions:

- a. What is the evidence on the extent to which parents' and caregivers' engagement programmes contribute to improvements in language and literacy acquisition in children aged 3-10 years old?
- b. How do government departments and other NGOs and development organisations design and implement parental and caregiver engagement programmes?
- c. What supportive role can parents, caregivers, and their community networks play in promoting the literacy and language development of children aged 3-10?
- d. What are the untapped household level activities and community events that parents and caregivers engage children in that can be used to strengthen language development and literacy acquisition for children aged 3-10?

**Phase 2:** involved participatory research with parents and caregivers across five diverse communities in Nigeria and Ghana. The process began with a week-long engagement in each country during which initial community interactions were established, networks were formed and groundwork for the workshop was laid. The core of the phase involved facilitated group activities where parents and caregivers collaborated with the research team to identify and explore traditional cultural practices that could foster children's interest in literacy. These activities focused on culturally significant practices, such as storytelling, oral traditions and community-based learning as potential tools to enhance literacy development in the home environment.

Following the group activities, follow-up interviews were conducted with selected participants to gain deeper insights and clarify how the knowledge gained during the group sessions was applied in daily life. These interviews also served to validate and expand upon the findings, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences and strategies for supporting their children's literacy development.

This report draws its data from the fieldwork conducted during this phase and integrates insights from phase 1 to explore five key areas:

- a. the role of parents, caregivers and their community networks in supporting activities that promote the literacy and language development of children aged 3-12,
- b. cultural and socio-economic factors that are important for creating interest in reading for children,
- c. local strategies and practices parents, caregivers and their community networks employ that are potential resources for nurturing children's interest in reading.
- d. evidence that these local strategies and practices work, and what we learn for the purposes of scalability and/or replicability,

- e. Challenges and barriers parents and caregivers face in engaging with schools to improve children's literacy and language development and what has been successful in navigating these challenges and overcoming these barriers.

Guided by our Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach (Israel et al., 1998), we invited participants to actively contribute to and shape the research, fostering a deeper sense of ownership and collaborative problem-solving. This process allowed us to consolidate the initial five broad research areas into three:

**The role of parents, caregivers, and community networks:** Exploring how these stakeholders support activities promoting children's literacy and language development.

**Evidence of perceived effectiveness of local strategies and practices:** Identifying local strategies and practices parents, caregivers and their community networks employ that are potential resources for nurturing children's interest in reading. Evidence that these local strategies and practices work, and what we learn for purposes of scalability and/or replicability,

**Challenges and Barriers:** Understanding the difficulties parents and caregivers face in engaging with schools and if applicable, how they have successfully navigated these challenges to improve children's literacy and language development.

Exploring these three areas ensured that the research was grounded in real-world contexts, leading to practical, community-led solutions for improving literacy and foundational learning. These insights can inform educators, policymakers and programme designers about the most effective ways to work with families and communities in promoting children's literacy development. Moreover, it highlights the importance of collaboration between families, schools, and local networks, leading to more inclusive and sustainable literacy initiatives.

Throughout the report, we also include interview excerpts and cameos of parents and caregivers. The excerpts are direct quotes from the participants and the material for the cameo inserts has been obtained directly from their narratives. Photographs used in this report are drawn from the field visit. These are for illustrative purposes (photographs were not analysed), and all photographs have been included with the participants' consent.

## 2. Community and context

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*"I am very happy being here today, I am one of the youngest women here and I really appreciate this opportunity to learn how to teach my child. I teach my child, but I don't take it too seriously. but, coming here has taught me to take it more seriously and I have learnt other tribes and even more on my own tribe. I really appreciate this opportunity, it has been an exciting journey in fact, I can't wait for your next coming. If I am invited again, I would definitely honour the invitation. We have had a fun-filled task. May the good God bless you and provide more so you can come again." (Parent 5, NGN)*

---

The study engaged a total of five communities, with two from Ghana and three from Nigeria. These communities were chosen based on a combination of criteria, including socio-economic characteristics, access to educational resources, ethnic composition, and cultural practices. The aim was to explore how local knowledge systems, traditional practices, and socio-economic conditions shape literacy development for children aged 3-12 within this context.

In **Ghana**, the communities of **Adumaso Aba** and **Garizegu** were selected for their contrasting rural settings. **Adumaso Aba**, located near the capital, Accra, represents a rural community with relatively greater proximity to urban resources, while **Garizegu**, situated in the northern part of the country, faces more significant isolation and limited educational opportunities. These two communities offer a comparative perspective on how rural dynamics influence literacy practices in different regions of Ghana.

In **Nigeria**, the communities of **Garam** (in Niger State), **Durumi 2**, and **Nyanya** (both in Abuja) were selected to represent a combination of semi-urban and peri-urban contexts. **Garam**, located in a rural setting in Niger State, offers insights into the challenges faced by communities with limited access to educational facilities. **Durumi 2** and **Nyanya**, both peri-urban areas in the capital city Abuja, provide examples of communities with mixed socio-economic backgrounds and high linguistic diversity, allowing exploration of how urbanisation influences parental involvement in literacy development.

These communities, though diverse in their characteristics and contexts, all share common challenges, particularly related to limited access to educational resources and low levels of formal education among parents and caregivers. The diversity of these settings offers an opportunity to present diverse case studies for understanding the impact of socio-economic status, cultural practices and access to education on literacy development.

## **2.1 Ghana**

### **2.1.1 Adumaso Aba**

Adumaso Aba is a rural community located on the outskirts of Accra, the capital city of Ghana. The community is characterised by a predominantly low-income population, with many residents engaged in subsistence farming and small-scale trading. Educational attainment in Adumaso Aba is generally low, with many parents and caregivers having completed only basic education, if at all. The community is relatively homogenous in terms of ethnicity, with most residents belonging to the Ga-Dangme ethnic group. The use of the local Ga language is prevalent, though some residents also speak Twi or Ewe. The rural setting and limited access to educational resources make it a relevant site for understanding how rural dynamics influence literacy practices and foundational learning.

### **2.1.2 Garizegu**

Garizegu is another community in Ghana selected for the study. It is a rural community located 35 km from Tamale in the Kumbugu district of the Northern Region. The average household size is five people. The housing in Garizegu typically consists of muddy buildings with thatched roofs. The primary occupation of the residents is farming, reflecting the agricultural nature of the community. It is in a more remote area and is less developed compared to Adumaso Aba. The community faces significant challenges including limited access to educational facilities and resources. The educational level of parents and caregivers in Garizegu is low, with many having little to no formal education. The community is predominantly composed of members of the Dagomba ethnic group, and the Dagbani language is widely spoken. Garizegu provides a critical context for examining how traditional practices and local knowledge systems contribute to children's literacy development in under-resourced settings.

## **2.2 Nigeria**

### **2.2.1 Garam, Niger State**

Garam is a community in the Tafa Local Government Area in Niger state. It is a semi-urban community predominantly made up of the Gbagi and Hausa ethnic groups, with a smaller presence of Igbo, Ighala and Yoruba residents. The population is largely composed of low-income earners, with many residents working in informal sectors such as petty trading and subsistence farming. The educational level in Garam is generally low, with a significant portion of the population having only primary or secondary education, and some having no formal education at all. The ethnic composition influences the linguistic diversity of the community, with Hausa being the most spoken language, followed by Gbagi and Pidgin English. Garam's mixed ethnic and linguistic landscape provides a unique setting for exploring how these factors impact literacy support among parents and caregivers.

### **2.2.2 Durumi 2, Abuja**

Durumi 2 is a densely populated peri-urban settlement in Abuja, Nigeria's capital. It is home to a diverse population from various ethnic backgrounds, including Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Nandu, and Akwa Ibom. The community also includes Gwari, Tiv, and Ighala ethnic groups. The socio-economic status of the community is mixed, but a significant portion of the population falls within the low-income bracket, engaged in informal employment and small businesses. Among the social amenities in the community are the open market, primary

schools, churches and a mosque. They are mostly farmers, petty traders and low-level civil servants living in the community. Educational attainment varies widely; some parents and caregivers have completed secondary education, while others have little to no formal education. The linguistic diversity in Durumi 2, with multiple languages spoken within the community, creates both challenges and opportunities for literacy development, particularly in how parents engage with their children's education in a multilingual environment.

### 2.2.3 Nyanya, Abuja

Nyanya is another peri-urban community in Abuja with an annual population growth rate of 9.2%. The population is diverse, with a mix of ethnic groups including Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba and others. The languages are predominantly Hausa and Ighala, and some of the languages of the Igbo, Tiv and Akwa Ibom ethnic groups. The population living in Nyanya comprises civil servants (middle income earners), farmers and petty traders who are described as low-income earners. Educational levels in Nyanya are varied with some parents having completed secondary education, while others have not attended school at all. The multilingual nature of the community, with residents speaking various Nigerian languages, plays a significant role in shaping the literacy practices and educational support provided to children. Nyanya's urban context offers insights into how urbanisation and diversity influence parental involvement in literacy and education.

The selected communities in Ghana and Nigeria provided a rich tapestry of socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic factors that are crucial for understanding the challenges and opportunities in promoting literacy and language development among children in rural and peri-urban communities. The diversity of these settings allows for a comprehensive exploration of how different contexts shape the practices and strategies used by parents and caregivers to support their children's literacy and language development.

## 3. Research design

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*"I am feeling privileged to be part of this engagement." (Parent 4, GH)*

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Our Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) which values and incorporates the knowledge and practices of the community as essential expertise (Chilisa, 2012), is framed by the principles of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1995). This approach emphasises recognising and utilising the unique assets and resources within each community.

CBPR (ibid) emphasises collaboration between researchers and community members, positioning the community as significant partners in the research process. This method seeks to co-create knowledge and ensure that the research reflects the community's needs, priorities, and context, fostering mutual respect and shared ownership of both the process and outcomes. This approach reinforces and advocates for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge systems and local practices, which are essential for developing culturally relevant and sustainable practices that can enhance literacy and language development for children.

### 3.1 The research team

The research team comprised a diverse group of scholars and practitioners in the field of international education and development. The core team included six UK-based researchers from The Open University, complemented by two researchers from the University of Cape Coast (Ghana) and two researchers from the University of Ibadan (Nigeria). The collaborative nature of the team was central to the research design and implementation. The team in Ghana and Nigeria worked closely with the UK-based academics who visited the research sites, ensuring that data gathering, and analysis were deeply informed by local contexts and knowledge. This partnership was not only a logistical necessity but also a methodological commitment to the principles of CBPR, which emphasise equitable participation and the value of local expertise.

The integration of local and international perspectives enriched the research process, enabling us to address the complexities of literacy development in Ghana and Nigeria in a culturally sensitive and contextually appropriate

manner. By leveraging the strengths and expertise of team members from both the UK and the local contexts, we were able to uphold our commitment to conducting research that is not only academically rigorous but also ethical and responsive to the needs and experiences of the communities involved.

### 3.2 Initial engagement with participants

Our initial engagement with the community was carefully designed to build rapport and establish open and clear lines of communication with the participants. We engaged with the community in their local dialects to ensure trust and openness from the outset. The aim was to create a collaborative environment where everyone felt empowered and invested in the success of the research project.

### 3.3 Parents and caregivers sampling and recruitment



The recruitment process began with pre-site visits, during which the research teams engaged with local schools, key informants and community leaders to identify potential participants. The involvement of community schools was important in reaching a broad spectrum of parents and caregivers, ensuring that the study captured a wide range of perspectives.

Figure 1: Participant recruitment in Ghana and Nigeria

#### Gender of participants by country

A total of 61 participants took part in the research, with 30 from Ghana and 31 from Nigeria as shown in figure 5. The majority were female, with 24 females from Ghana and 29 from Nigeria. Male participants were significantly fewer, with only 6 from Ghana and 2 from Nigeria. This gender imbalance reflects a higher participation rate among females, likely due to cultural dynamics, societal expectations and traditional gender roles, which position women as key supporters of children's early development.

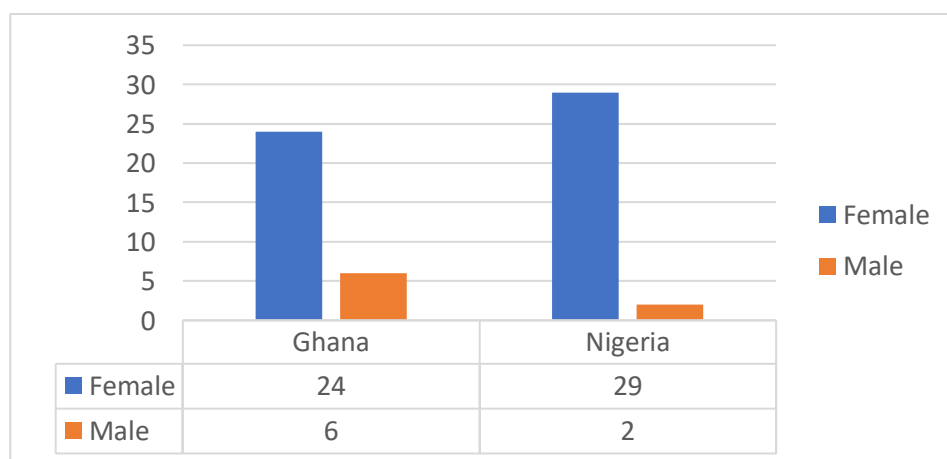


Figure 2: Participants by country and gender characteristics

Recognising and empowering mothers as central to children's foundational literacy can strengthen initiatives aimed at improving literacy and language skills in communities. Additionally, only one participant from each country, both of whom were female, identified as caregivers.

### Literacy Proficiency

The literacy levels of participants were notably skewed towards low proficiency as illustrated in figure 6. Out of the 61 participants, only 14 were identified as literate, while the majority, 47 participants, had low literacy skills

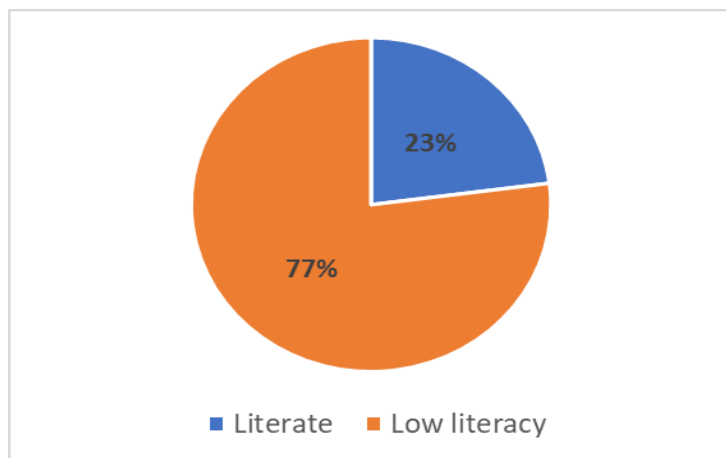


Figure 3: Participants' literacy proficiency

This data highlights the educational challenges faced by the population involved in the study, especially in rural or low-resource settings. The high proportion of participants with low literacy levels indicates the potential need for targeted literacy interventions as part of broader development initiatives.

### Occupational Distribution

The occupational backgrounds of the participants illustrate (figure 7) a predominantly agrarian community, with 33 individuals identifying as farmers. Additionally, 19 participants were petty traders, another common occupation in West African economies, particularly in rural areas. A smaller proportion of participants were involved in other occupations: four teachers, four housewives and only one driver.

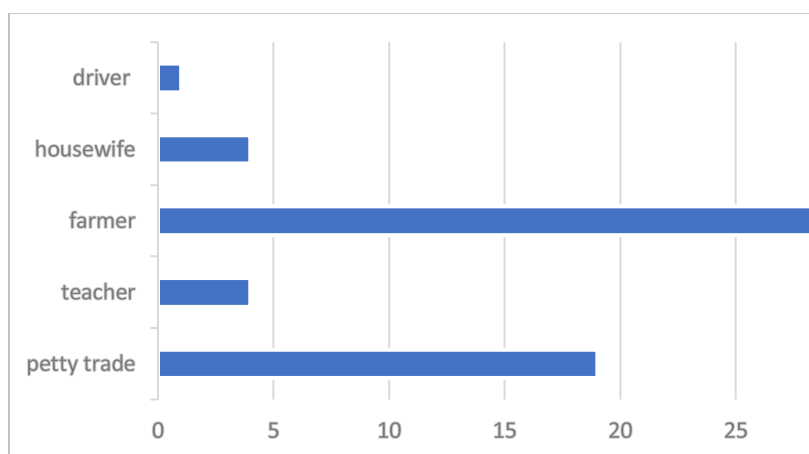


Figure 4: Participants' occupation

The dominance of farming and petty trading as key livelihoods suggests a rural or semi-rural context, where these activities are often central to economic survival.

### 3.4 Leveraging local partnerships for effective community based participatory research

Across the research sites, the local research team established strategic partnerships with various stakeholders to effectively reach parents and caregivers in each community. These partnerships were tailored to the unique structures and leadership roles in each location, ensuring meaningful engagement and alignment with local priorities. The partnerships included:

1. School Management Committee Members (SMCs) and headteachers
2. Education inspector and Parent Teacher Association (PTA) chairperson

3. Community centre coordinator
4. Community school
5. Traditional ruler

### 3.4.1 Garizegu in Kumbugu

In Garizegu, the local research team partnered with a school management committee member and the headteacher of the local primary school. These stakeholders who are also parents themselves, facilitated mobilisation efforts by leveraging their roles within school communities to ensure parental involvement.

### 3.4.2 Adumaso Aba in Ga South



Figure 5: Local research team

In Ga South, the local research team, with the assistance of the education inspector for the school area and the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) chairperson, successfully recruited caregivers and parents through these partnerships. The involvement of these key stakeholders not only facilitated the initial mobilisation but also ensured sustained engagement of participants throughout the research process. This initial visit to the community was instrumental in providing the research team with valuable insights into the community's dynamics, allowing them to assess whether the research objectives were in alignment with the activities and priorities of the parents and caregivers in the area. During the visit, we discovered that most caregivers and parents in the community had already participated in two training workshops organised by Right to Play International, an NGO dedicated to training teachers in the use of play-based pedagogies to enhance children's learning experiences. This prior exposure to educational initiatives provided a foundation of familiarity, enabling the research team to build on existing knowledge and align the study's objectives with the community's ongoing efforts to improve literacy.

### 3.4.3 Durumi-2



Figure 6: Local research team in Durumi 2 with participants

In Durumi-2, the research team partnered with the community centre coordinator to mobilise parents and align activities with local needs. This collaboration ensured cultural sensitivity, sustained engagement, and a successful participatory workshop.



### 3.4.4 Kabaya, Nyanya



Figure 7: Cross-section of participants in Kabaya

Participants were recruited through a strategic partnership with a community school in the Kabaya community in Nyanya. This school is privately owned and was established to fill the gap left by the lack of nearby public schools, offering early education for local children. The school played a key role in the project, serving as a venue for initial meetings and helping to mobilise parents and caregivers. The school's involvement was crucial for building trust with the community. By collaborating with the academy, the research team was able to establish rapport and gain the community's trust, which is vital for successful engagement.

### 3.4.5 Garam



Figure 8: Cross-section of participants with team and district head

In Garam, participants were mobilised by the district head, also known as the Royal Highness of Garam community, who is an active member of the school-based management committee (SBMC). The involvement of His Royal Highness was significant to the success of the project in Garam community. Through his influence in the community, the local team was able to recruit participants who remained committed to the project. His role in the SBMC also provided valuable insights into the existing educational support systems and the challenges faced in implementing literacy programmes within the community.

Furthermore, His Royal Highness's engagement ensured that the research activities were aligned with community priorities and that the findings could be effectively integrated into ongoing educational initiatives in Garam.

These partnerships within each community ensured that the recruitment process was both inclusive and reflective of the community's existing commitment to improving children's education. They enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the recruitment efforts, resulting in participants' commitment to continued engagement. These collaborations provided the research team with valuable insights into local customs, languages and communication preferences. This understanding was instrumental in shaping the design and scheduling of the workshops.

## 4. Methods of data collection

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*"I have added a lot to my wealth of knowledge. I am happy been here and I am going to make sure my children learn." (Parent, 5, NGN).*

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The participatory group activities were centred on in-person engagements, which included group work, breakout sessions, open dialogue through questions, feedback sessions, role play and collaborative stories. Participants were encouraged to share personal experiences, cultural practices, and traditional learning methods, such as

local songs, cultural events, games and storytelling. These activities allowed for the exploration of how the identified traditional methods could support children's literacy and language development. Additionally, the sessions included interactive demonstrations which included role play and dramatisation where participants illustrated how these practices were embedded in everyday life. Active participation from the parents was fostered through interactive, hands-on sessions that boosted their confidence and encouraged open expression of their thoughts and ideas. We identified that this approach was useful in raising awareness among parents about how their traditional practices could be further strengthened to support their children's literacy development.

Through the group activities some participants were identified to participate in follow up interviews. These interviews were carried out by research pairs in each country, with an OU team collaborating with a local team. This strategic pairing was intended to leverage the strengths of both teams. The OU team contributed their qualitative interviewing expertise, ensuring methodological consistency and adherence to academic standards, while the local team provided essential cultural and contextual knowledge. This collaboration facilitated more effective communication as the local team navigated language nuances and cultural sensitivities, ensuring that participants felt comfortable and understood.

It also helped to mitigate potential biases, enhancing the credibility and depth of the findings. Interviews were recorded, translated and transcribed by the local team in each country. After each engagement in each country, the research team dedicated a day to a reflection meeting to discuss the key themes emerging from both the activities and the interviews. This reflection meeting constituted the first layer of the iterative analysis process.

#### **4.1 Ethical Considerations**

The study protocol was approved by The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee. Consent was obtained from all participants in the language they were comfortable using. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, with data tags (e.g., Parent 1, NGN or Parent 1, GH) used throughout the report to preserve participant identity. Additionally, IDs (e.g., IS) are used in cameos to further protect anonymity. Images used in report have been used with participants' consent and approval.

#### **4.2 Limitations of the study**

One limitation of this study is that the perceived evidence of effectiveness was based solely on the insights shared by parents and caregivers. In this study, there has not been any observable causal relationship or association that would help establish a link between the insights provided by the parents and any outcomes for the children. In addition, the context-specific nature of the findings limits their generalisability to other settings. While the research offers valuable insights into the unique challenges and practices of selected parents and caregivers in specific communities in Ghana and Nigeria, the cultural, socio-economic, and educational contexts may not be representative of other regions. However, these findings may still be relatable to similar contexts.

## 5. Data analysis

Two primary types of data were analysed (see figure 9). The first data type came from participatory group activities where parents and caregivers collaborated with the research team to explore traditional and cultural practices that might spark children's interest in literacy. The second data type consisted of follow-up interviews conducted with participants to delve deeper practices at home and the family setting. These interviews aimed to provide further clarity and detail, helping to validate and expand upon the findings from the initial participatory sessions. This combined approach allowed for a robust analysis of both traditional practices and their practical applications in supporting literacy development.

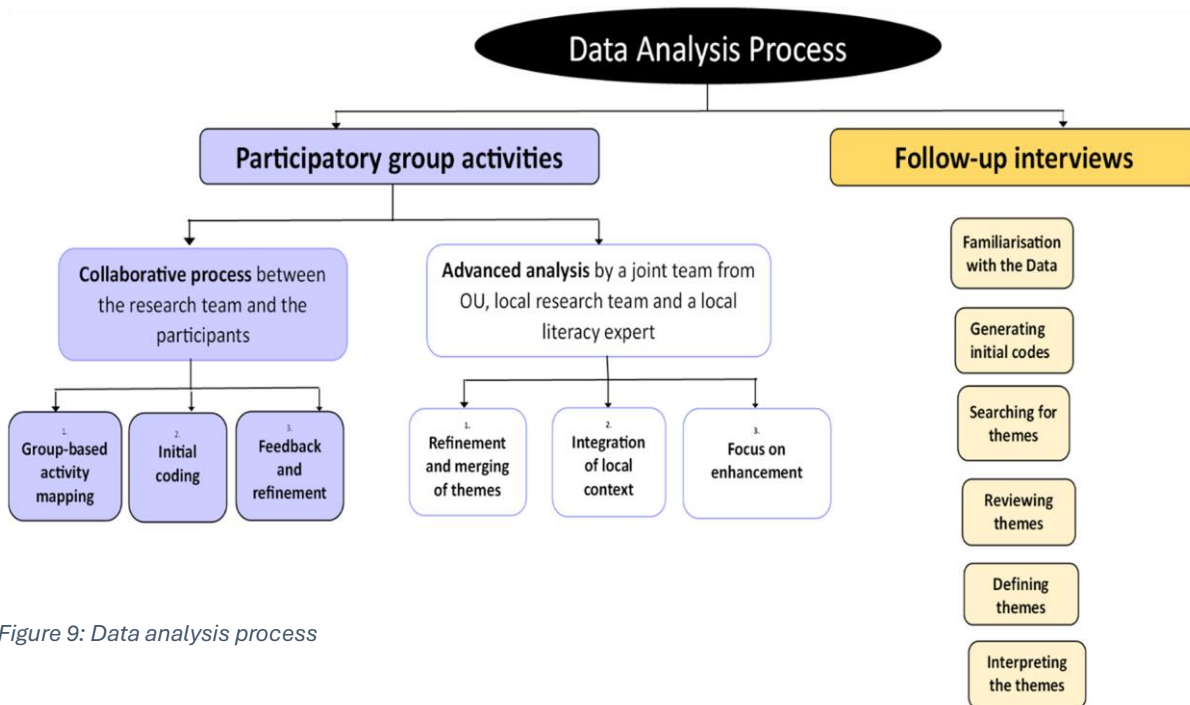


Figure 9: Data analysis process

### 5.1 Participatory group activities

These were analysed following a two-stage process: **Stage 1**: Collaborative process between the research team and the participants. **Stage 2**: Advanced analysis conducted by a joint team from OU and the local research team, which included a local literacy expert.

### 5.1.1 Collaborative analysis between the research team and participants

This phase followed a three-step analysis process represented in Figure 10. This was crucial to ensuring that the data accurately reflected the participants' perspectives and experiences.

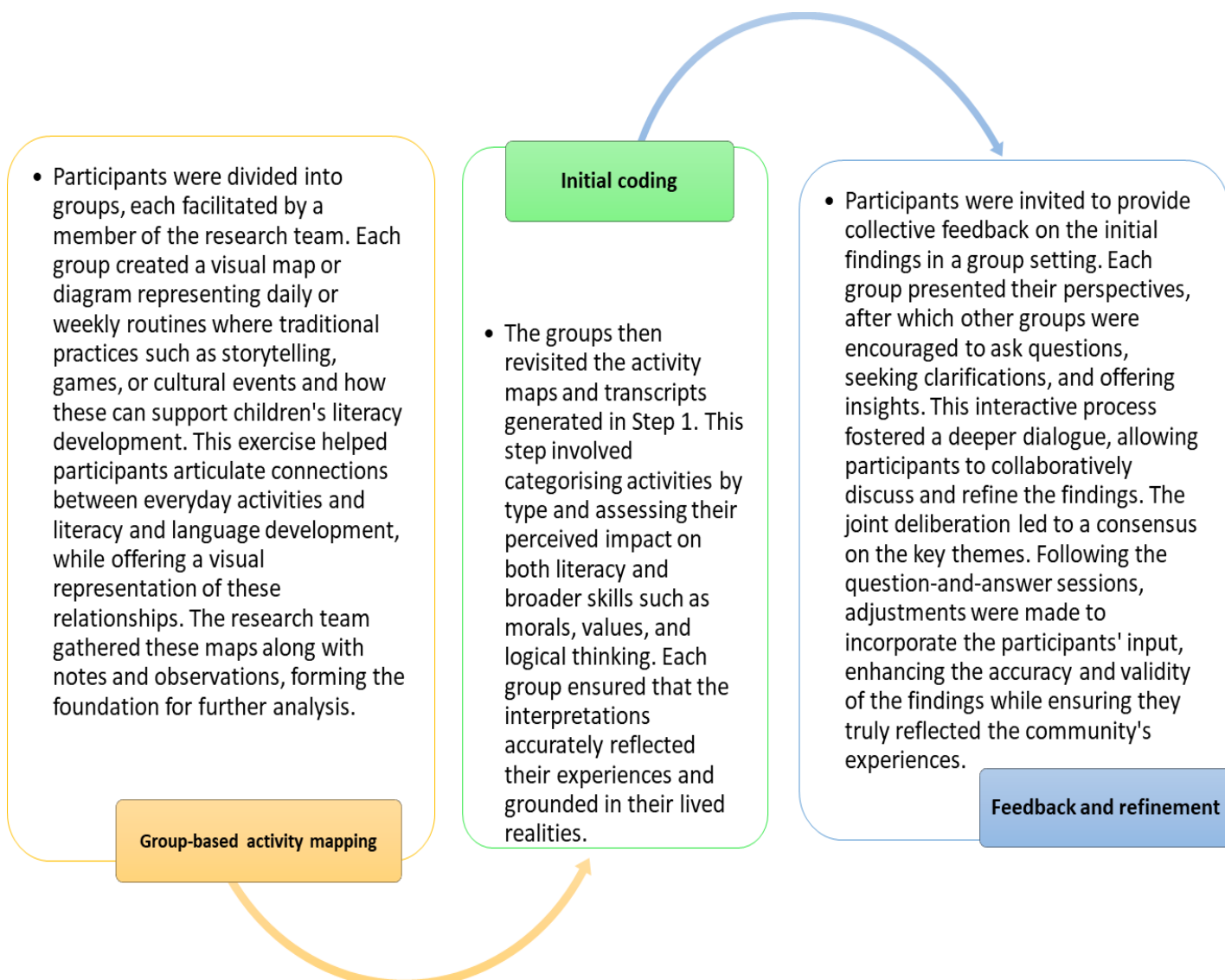


Figure 10: Three-step collaborative analysis process



Figure 11: Collaborative analysis with parents and caregivers

### 5.1.2 Advanced analysis

The second phase involved an advanced analysis conducted by a joint team from OU and the local research team, which included a local literacy expert. This three-step phase aimed to deepen the understanding of the data and analysis emerging from the collaborative analysis in phase 1. This was to ensure rigorous academic and practitioner scrutiny. The steps are represented in Figure 11:

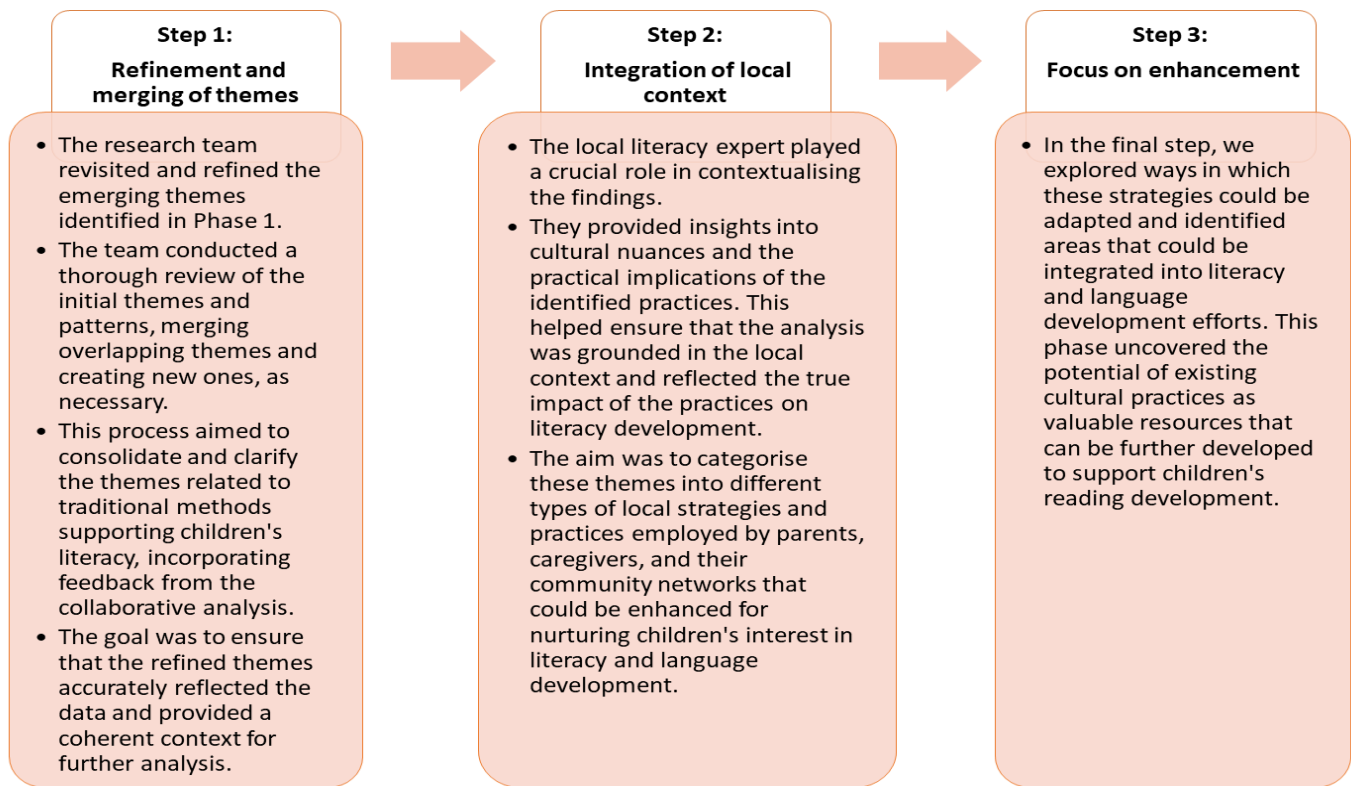


Figure 12: The three steps of advanced analysis

### 5.1.3 Follow-up interview

**The interview data** with a selected group of parents and caregivers was analysed following a structured six-phase thematic analysis process (See figure 12). These interviews included data presented through direct and indirect quotes, some of which were in local languages and translated by the bilingual members of the research team in each case country.



Figure 13: Six-phase thematic analysis process

## 6. Research findings

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*“I am taking home with me to encourage my wards to engage in a lot of play activities and sometimes involve myself in those activities to help the kids learn.” (Parent 3, GH).*

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Our key findings can be summarised as:

1. Parents, including extended family members, regardless of their educational backgrounds, play a significant role in supporting children's literacy development by bridging formal education and practical learning within the home and community.
2. Parents and caregivers, including extended family members, utilise local practices such as games, storytelling, songs and participation in cultural events to support learning, foster moral values, social skills and cognitive abilities, expanding vocabulary and improving comprehension.
3. The diverse languages spoken at home and in familial environments enhance children's literacy development by broadening their vocabulary and improving adaptability to various linguistic and social contexts, with home languages serving as a bridge to better grasp classroom learning.
4. Parents lack awareness and confidence of how their cultural practices and lived experiences can enhance literacy. However, targeted workshops with parents can help them see the educational benefits of their own cultural practices and local activities.

We further present the findings in a narrative form to provide a comprehensive understanding of the data, illustrating key themes that emerged from our analysis.

### 6.1 The role of parents and extended family in children's literacy development

Family members play diverse roles in supporting children's development within home and family environments. Mothers often take on the role of primary caregivers and educators in the household, especially when fathers are mainly focused on earning a daily income to support the family. Mothers play a dual role in caring for their children's physical needs and actively supporting their early learning. They assist with schoolwork and teach essential life skills, often bridging the gap between formal education and practical knowledge, providing guidance where it is most needed.

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*“I teach them because their father is always busy.” (Parent 1-NGN)*

*“My husband is not always at home, the nature of his job does not allow that, most times when he is back, they are already off to sleep.” (Parent 3-NGN)*

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In homes where the mothers have low literacy skills, the fathers support when the topics are more difficult.

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*“You know I do not understand but I help out when I understand. Though their father is educated, he helps them when he is home.” (Parent 2-NGN)*

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Educated mothers are more confident with supporting their children's learning. Their education provides them with a better understanding of teaching methods and learning strategies, enabling them to support their children's literacy at home.

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*“Yes, I am educated up to BSc level from National Open University Nigeria. When they come back from school I help them with their homework, we do it together. When they are on holiday, I ask them to collect their scheme of work from school before their vacation from their teachers then I will follow the scheme of work using the textbooks. So, in teaching her I have already understood her to teach her using strokes, curves, slash, dash and so on, that is how I taught her how to write, like if you say a stroke down, a stroke down and a dash she knows it’s a, if I say write B she knows it’s a stroke down, a curve and a curve. Then for sounds, they give them/a/, /b/ that is how she knows the sound.” (Parent 3, NGN)*

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Most of the mothers, even with their limited literacy levels, were seen to play the primary role in assisting their children’s learning at home, demonstrating commitment and involvement. In instances where they do not have understanding, they seek help from other, more literate extended family members.

**SV** is a mother in her early 30s with five children, aged 14, 12, 10, 8 and 6. She is a petty trader who buys and resells charcoal and stopped schooling after junior secondary school. She feels that not progressing beyond junior secondary education limits her ability to support her children, although she tries to help them when she understands the topic. SV says that this engagement in the project is the first time she is participating in a workshop that explores the power of parents in supporting their children’s literacy and language development. SV’s husband is more educated than she is and contributes to teaching the children when he is available, as he is mostly away working to support the family financially. SV also draws on her brother-in-law’s support, who has completed his secondary education, to teach the children and help with their homework. This creates a dynamic in which both parents and extended family members share the responsibility of guiding the children through their academic challenges.

## **6.2 Leveraging local practices and cultural activities to support learning**

Parents and caregivers engage their children in a variety of local practices and activities that promote learning generally. These include games, storytelling, songs, riddles and participation in cultural events. In most cases, the focus is on fostering children’s moral values and social skills. Parents do not often link these practices and strategies to literacy and language development. Nonetheless, these interactions expand a child’s vocabulary, improve listening and comprehension abilities and stimulate critical thinking, all of which are foundational to literacy development. We further explore the role of local cultural practices—such as traditional games, songs, storytelling and participation in cultural events—in supporting children’s learning. Rooted in community traditions, these activities provide valuable learning opportunities that go beyond entertainment and fostering social cohesion. Through our engagement with parents, they were able to describe and demonstrate these activities in detail. Initially, some parents were unaware of how these practices could directly support learning, especially in ways that might enhance children’s education in formal school settings. However, after our workshop, they recognised their significant contribution to fostering children’s literacy skills. This section examines how these local practices can enrich children’s learning experiences, particularly in relation to language development, moral education, social skills and cognitive growth.



## 6.2.1 Local games



Figure 14: Parents demonstrating the educational value of a traditional game

In Adumaso Aba, Ga South, parents and caregivers highlighted how traditional games contribute to children's overall learning and social skills development, but they were unaware of how these games could also support literacy development in ways that align with and enhance literacy teaching in schools.



Figure 15: Parents demonstrating how Ampe is played

Parents described and demonstrated how the traditional game of *Ampe* is played. Up to ten people can participate, but only two people play at a time while the others wait for their turn. In the game, one player belongs to the "Opaare" group, which wins when the players' legs do not match—this happens when one player raises their left leg and the other also raises their left, or when both raise their right legs.

The other player belongs to the "Oshiga" group, which wins when the players' legs match—this occurs when one player raises their left leg and the other raises their right, or when both raise their right legs. This is illustrated in figure 15.

Discussion with parents and caregivers during the workshop, supported by insights from a local literacy expert, revealed two key ways in which *Ampe* can help improve children's literacy and numeracy skills:

**Enhanced focus:** Being part of a specific group helps students concentrate better, as they are more engaged with their group's activities and objectives.

**Learning phonics:** The game includes songs that teach phonics. For example, when a student wins, they might say "one" as "odeliya" the first time, "two" as "tutuday" the second time, "three" as "tilee Augester" the third time, and "four" as "filomina" the fourth time.

This approach links number sounds to memorable phrases, supporting phonics development. Traditional games not only make learning enjoyable but also naturally enhance skills like numeracy, logic and reasoning.

Games encourage social interaction, teamwork, and cognitive development. As children play, they learn to follow rules, take turns and think strategically, laying the groundwork for structured academic learning. By creating a positive and familiar environment, games help children engage with literacy and language more effectively.

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*“Yes, I gave one name in this activity Wasa Girga, how to count Wasa Boya, hide and seek, this teaches them to security conscious. So, it is not to only entertain them but also add educational elements that can help them to learn.” (Parent 5, NGN)*

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Children's natural tendencies towards creative expression highlight the role of games and play in developing cognitive, social and motor skills, all of which contribute to literacy and language development.

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*“My little girl likes drumming anything she touches, and it makes a sound she enjoys, and the older daughter likes dancing and fashion, the younger one does not care about fashion, she would start using her legs to drum if she was here.” (Parent 4, NGN)*

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### 6.2.2 Use of stories, songs, and riddles

Sharing of moral stories, songs, and riddles can be used in developing children's literacy skills, including oral language, letter sounds and vocabulary. Stories that convey moral values can help children understand social norms and behaviours.

MJ, a 47-year-old trader, mother of four and literate parent with a BSc degree, believes in the power of storytelling to help her children develop their literacy and language skills. She said in her family, storytelling is a cherished practice she has passed down from her own mother. "I tell them a lot of stories," she says, particularly to her youngest, who is just 6 years old. MJ sees how storytelling sparks creativity and enhances language skills in her children. She shares that her youngest daughter not only repeats the stories but also creates her own, combining elements of what she has heard. "Stories help her think creatively." MJ explains that she has observed her daughter's growing ability to express herself and weave her own stories. As an educated mother, MJ said she also invests in her children's literacy by buying them novels.

The narrative above shows that storytelling helps children develop critical skills such as listening, creativity and imagination. Through storytelling, children also learn to structure their thoughts, expand their vocabulary, and improve their understanding of language.

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*“Yes, it does especially the little one, she holds on to any story she is been told and tells it to others and she would also form her own stories from the stories she is been told. I then discovered telling them stories makes them creative.” (Parent 3, NGN)*

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The narrative underscores the importance of combining traditional book reading with oral storytelling, emphasising that literacy development extends beyond formal reading skills. For parents with low literacy, oral storytelling offers an accessible means to engage in their children's language development. Even without strong reading abilities, such parents can contribute by sharing stories, songs or engaging in everyday conversations that build vocabulary and comprehension. These practices not only enhance children's linguistic skills but also foster creativity and critical thinking. Recognising the value of these contributions highlights the role of all parents, regardless of literacy level, in supporting children's literacy development.

For example, during our engagement with parents and caregivers, it was observed that the moment parents began singing, children instinctively left their classrooms to observe and participate. The songs sparked curiosity and interest, drawing the children in. This enthusiastic response showed how songs can fascinate children and encourage their engagement in learning (Abiyó and Oostendorp, 2022).



Figure 16: Parents singing and capturing children's attention

Parents' accounts also pointed out that early exposure to diverse forms of songs and stories can be foundational for children's literacy and language development.

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*"We sing in many different languages. Our songs are in English and different native languages and other country language too. She just sings in any language we use to practice. She knows all the songs in any language we sing in choir practice." (Parent 1, NGN)*

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Parents mentioned that children particularly enjoy songs. They like songs with repetitive phrases and simple rhymes. One parent, a schoolteacher, highlighted that, repetitive phrases in songs support memory retention and phonetic awareness. Singing in multiple languages, as described by one parent, helps her child make connections between words and sounds, building her phonemic awareness—a key skill in early literacy. These emerging narratives from parents highlight how traditions such as songs, storytelling and games can spark creativity in children. This is evident when children can creatively weave their own stories or sing in different languages—a demonstration of their growing understanding of language structure and communication.

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*"I don't know but when we come home after every choir practice, she will sing everything we sang in choir practice. She has cram[med] everything, sometimes she will be playing but I don't know that she is still listening, and she remembers all the songs we were singing in choir. So, she has learned a lot of songs from following me to choir practice." (Parent 1, NGN)*

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### 6.2.3 Cultural events – festivals

Participation in cultural events such as festivals, naming, funeral and wedding ceremonies is a significant aspect of education in the home, familial environment. Parents describe how engaging in traditional Ghanaian festivals, such as Homowo, celebrated by the Ga-Adangbe tribe, can teach children about social justice and community values. Additionally, naming ceremonies can instil a sense of identity and belonging. Through these cultural events and practices children learn about the importance of their cultural roots and how these values shape their interactions with the world around them (Nomlomo and Sosibo, 2016). Some mothers reflected that traditional festivals and events serve not only a social role but can also foster early literacy through storytelling, observation and memory skills.

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*"They learn how to love each other; they get to know their relatives. Attending these traditional events can greatly contribute to children's literacy development. For example, during a naming ceremony or wedding ceremony, children are exposed to a variety of cultural stories, songs, and speeches that enrich their vocabulary and comprehension skills. Events like the Sallah festival often involve reading and reciting, which helps improve their reading skills. Additionally, these events provide opportunities for children to engage in conversations with family members and elders, enhancing their speaking and listening abilities. The rich cultural and social interactions that occur during these celebrations make learning more engaging and meaningful for children." (Parent 5 NGN)*

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Parents in both Ghana and Nigeria agree that engaging children in these cultural events provides them with immersive linguistic experiences such as storytelling, singing traditional songs and participating in communal rituals like proverbs and riddles. Participation fosters retention, as children often recall details of these events and retell it to their peers. This supports vocabulary growth, comprehension and narrative skills.

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*“Yes, they like the event and they will be telling their friends how the event was like. They will even describe all the types of dress different people wear that day. The food and the music. They remember everything. Even who come for the naming ceremony party and who did not and what the person wear and how the person dance.” (Parent 2 NGN)*

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Furthermore, the social aspect of these events—such as interacting with elders and family members—provides children with opportunities to practice their speaking and listening skills. These moments also offer opportunities for children to engage in reflective conversations, reinforcing their understanding of language as a tool for communication and learning. This reinforces the idea that day-to-day activities in home and familial environments can serve as powerful platforms for literacy development (Millora, 2023).

### **6.3 Multilingualism supports children’s literacy development**

The different languages spoken at home and within familial environments plays a significant role in children's literacy development and learning. Parents in multilingual environments observed that exposure to multiple languages strengthens their children’s ability to understand and relate academic concepts, enhances foundational literacy skills and improves their capacity to adapt to different linguistic and social contexts. Parents highlighted how children’s exposure to various languages during social and cultural events, such as choir practice, significantly contributes to their cognitive flexibility. One parent shared:

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*“We sing in many different languages. Our songs are in English and different native languages and other country languages too. She just sings in any language we use to practice; she knows all the songs in any language we sing in choir practice.” (Parent 1, NGN)*

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Another parent noted that fluency in their home language, Dagbani, supports children’s ability to understand and express themselves better, making it easier for them to grasp academic concepts:

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*“It makes them learn faster since we, the parents, are able to freely speak to them in our mother language.” (Parent 2, GH)*

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This exposure not only broadened the child's musical abilities but also expanded her language skills, allowing her to acquire vocabulary from multiple linguistic backgrounds and switch between languages. Also, several parents reported that understanding their indigenous languages enabled their children to better grasp school concepts, as they could relate classroom learning to their native tongues. One parent explained:

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*“Understanding Dagbani helps them to freely communicate with their peers and elders, and in turn, they can understand and explain what they learned in school in English.” (Parent 3, GH)*

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This suggests that the home language can support children’s literacy development in English, allowing them to master concepts from school more effectively. In this way, indigenous languages serve as a bridge for children

to make connections between the language of instruction (English) and the language spoken at home, facilitating deeper comprehension of academic material.

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*“For example, when my children learned to read and write in our local language, they were able to understand the basic concepts of phonetics and sentence structure more easily. This foundation made it easier for them to grasp similar concepts in English.” (Parent, 3, GH)*

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Parents noted that speaking multiple languages at home, including Idoma, Igala, Gbagi, and Hausa, allowed their children to develop strong multilingual literacy skills, which, in turn, helped them adjust to various social and linguistic environments.

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*“To my children, I speak my language, Idoma, because I understand it. I speak Igala because my husband speaks Igala as well, and we live around Igala people. They also learn Gbagi and Hausa, the common languages around us.” (Parent 3, NGN)*

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This multilingual environment fosters adaptability, enabling children to communicate effectively in diverse contexts and contributing to their overall social resilience. While parents recognised the benefits of multilingualism, some expressed concerns about their children not fully mastering or using their indigenous languages due to the dominant presence of English and Pidgin English.

#### **6.4 Parents lack awareness and confidence of how their cultural practices can enhance literacy**

Parents in Ghana and Nigeria expressed their lack of confidence and self-doubt regarding their ability to support their children's literacy and language development. While they are eager to help, many expressed concerns about their own education levels. They feel their education is inadequate to meet the perceived standards for effective support.

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*“I do not know how to read and write and so nothing works with me except training them how to speak and relate well in Dagbani.” (MN, GH)*

*“Yes, I see it but, because before I will be thinking that most times, I feel my level of education does not match the requirement.” (Parent 1, GH)*

*“I cannot personally help her to read, write and speak since I don't know how to.” (AB GH)*

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In the communities we visited, parents hold valuable assets and cultural knowledge that could serve as powerful tools for literacy development. However, many underestimate their power in strengthening their children's literacy and language development. This hinders their ability to explore how these practices can be utilised.

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*“Not sure if it helps them since my understanding is very limited.” (Parent 3, GH)*

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Some of the parents perceived games primarily as forms of play, which could also teach certain life skills such as problem-solving and teamwork but did not see its connection to literacy development.

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*“These activities cannot help them read, write, and speak but can only help them speak appropriately in Dagbanli and related cultural activities.” (Parent 4, GH).*

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However, as the workshops progressed, we engaged in further discussions about the educational benefits of traditional games. Parents began to acknowledge how these activities can contribute to children’s learning in ways that are linked to learning that happens in formal school settings. For example, games like Ampe promote numeracy skills through counting, sequencing and pattern recognition, which are foundational elements in early childhood education.

When parents and caregivers lack awareness of how their cultural practices can enhance literacy, they miss key learning opportunities for their children. This leaves valuable opportunities untapped within their local contexts to enhance children's literacy e.g. utilising cultural activities and practices to strengthen children's literacy and language development.

It seems that parents’ socio-economic background impacts their confidence to support their children’s literacy and language development. For instance, parents in Nigeria appeared to make these connections saying,

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*“If I had money and I had gone to school I would have been able to teach them, it is because I don’t understand that is why I don’t teach them. This is the only challenge I have here.”  
(Parent 2, NGN)*

*It not like I am completely satisfied but, I have to do live according to my means, if I have opportunity to put them in a better school where they can take extra lessons I would do that but, for now that is what I can afford. One who is not wealthy is said to be senseless you just take everything that you can afford. So, I cannot complain that they were not taught well, I cannot even suggest to the teacher that she can learn faster through drumming. What I am saying will be seen as senseless because I do not have money.” (Parent 4, NGN)*

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This combination of a low socio-economic background and limited formal education often prevents parents from recognising how their cultural knowledge and resources can complement formal schooling. However, our engagement with parents and caregivers in this research shows that targeted workshops have the potential to address this gap. Post-workshop feedback revealed that participants' enthusiasm was sparked, resulting in a "now we know" moment, when parents not only began to see the value of their own knowledge base but also understood how this could be utilised to support their children's literacy development alongside formal education.

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*“Honestly, the programme is an eye opener to me, I have learnt a lot I could apply in teaching my children. I have learnt a lot from different people. I really appreciate this programme because I have learnt a lot.” (Parent 1, NGN)*

*“I have really enjoyed the programme and I wish you people will be coming frequently for such programme.” (Parent 1, GH)*

*“To the best of my knowledge, I have never had this experience since I was born and what I have learnt here is excellent. I would be taking home new ideas to my children. To add to the one, I already know.” (Parent 2, NGN)*

*“I am taking home the motivation to encourage my wards to engage in a lot of play activities and sometimes involve myself in those activities to help my kids learn.” (Parent 4, GH)*

*“I really appreciate this opportunity, it has been an exciting journey in fact, I can’t wait for your next coming. If I am invited again.” (Parent 4, NGN)*

*“I would definitely honour the invitation. We have had a fun-filled task. May the good God bless you and provide more so you can come again.” (Parent 5, NGN)*

*“The festivals that we discussed have made us recall the past and the things we used to learn when we were young.” (Parent 2, GH)*

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The feedback given by parents demonstrates the potential of targeted workshops and community-based educational programmes to empower parents, boost their confidence and equip them with effective strategies to support literacy development at home. Building on local knowledge and strengths, targeted workshops can support communities in leveraging their cultural practices to enrich children's literacy development. As parents become more aware of their impact and capabilities, they are better equipped to create enriching learning environments that complement formal education, contributing to overall improved literacy outcomes for their children.

## 7. Discussion and insights

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*“What we have learned here, I am going to allow my kids to have access to these festivals because there are a lot that kids can take home when they go to these events.” (Parent 5, GH)*

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### 7.1 Harnessing the power of parents, caregivers and community networks in supporting children’s literacy

Our first key area of exploration focused on the role of parents, caregivers and community networks in supporting children's literacy and language development. Parents, caregivers and community networks are invaluable, yet these funds of knowledge and asset bases are often underutilised in advancing children’s literacy and language development. Through their everyday interactions, both indoors and outdoors—such as participating in household chores, attending cultural events, or going on outings—parents, caregivers, and community networks unconsciously provide rich opportunities for children to acquire language and literacy skills. These informal learning experiences are often overlooked in traditional educational discourse, yet they can significantly shape children’s cognitive, linguistic and socio-emotional development. As Ndiujye (2020) observes, children can unconsciously develop basic language and literacy skills through everyday observations and interactive outdoor activities such as identifying rivers, birds, animals, mountains and plants (p. 366). These interactions create teachable moments that not only enhance literacy skills but also bolster children’s confidence in using language in meaningful ways.

Despite their potential, many parents continue to feel less confident in their ability to support their children’s literacy development by utilising their own cultural expertise and local knowledge. Factors such as limited educational backgrounds, socio-economic constraints or a lack of resources can undermine their self-efficacy. It is essential to recognise and validate the culturally embedded knowledge that parents and caregivers possess, even if they lack formal education.

Mothers, as primary caregivers, are often at the forefront of children’s informal learning, engaging in activities that naturally integrate literacy development. This unique position enables mothers to influence their children’s early literacy and language development. However, their potential often remains untapped due to systemic challenges, such as limited access to resources or support structures that would enable them to fulfil this role

more effectively. These findings align with initiatives like Lively Minds in Ghana, which highlight how structured training and experience-sharing can empower mothers with low literacy skills to support their children's literacy development (Amadu et al., 2018).

Additionally, community networks are equally significant in fostering children's literacy. Communities can provide a supportive ecosystem where parents and caregivers collaborate, share experiences and learn from one another. While formal education tends to focus on structured, standardised approaches to literacy, community networks tap into the rich, context-specific knowledge and practices that parents and caregivers use in everyday life. By validating and incorporating these informal learning activities—such as storytelling, cultural practices and local languages—community networks enable parents to connect their children's formal education to the realities of their lived experiences.

## **7.2 Bridging informal and formal literacy development through local cultural practices**

Our second key area of exploration focused on local strategies and practices parents, caregivers, and community networks utilise to nurture children's interest in reading. Findings suggest that:

In the ongoing discourse on literacy development, there is growing recognition of the potential of informal, culturally embedded practices to contribute to children's language and literacy acquisition. Local games, music, storytelling and cultural events can offer rich, context-specific resources that spark children's interest in literacy in ways that formal education systems often overlook. However, it is crucial to critically examine how these informal learning practices interact with formal education and how they can be effectively integrated to foster a holistic approach to literacy acquisition and development.

An example we saw in the field of informal learning comes from a local game known as "ampe" in Ghana. As children participate in these games, they are not only engaging in physical activity but also learning language through the rules, instructions and interactions that occur during play. These games provide opportunities for vocabulary development, comprehension and the ability to follow complex instructions, which are fundamental skills in literacy acquisition. By encouraging children to participate in dialogues during play, these activities naturally promote language use in context, providing a foundational support for early literacy development. Yet, the question arises whether such practices, while valuable, are sufficiently recognised and leveraged in formal educational settings. Are educators aware of the potential of such activities, and how can these cultural tools be integrated into classroom literacy practices?

Music and songs, similarly, play a pivotal role in nurturing phonological awareness and language development in children. According to Nomlomo and Sosibo (2016), folktales and children's songs are not merely entertainment but are integral pedagogical tools that enhance cognitive, linguistic and social skills. These forms of oral tradition aid in the development of phonological awareness, which is critical for reading and writing skills. Similarly, Mojapelo (2023) notes that the repetitive nature of songs aids in word mastery, making learning both engaging and effective (p. 540). The repetitive patterns and rhythm found in many traditional songs provide a natural framework for children to internalise sounds and words, enhancing their overall literacy skills. This informal learning method, however, must be understood as complementary to, rather than a replacement for, formal literacy instruction. While songs and rhymes promote enjoyment and mastery of language, they cannot alone equip children with the full range of reading and writing skills required in academic settings.

Storytelling and riddles are additional cultural practices that significantly enrich children's literacy experiences. The narrative forms inherent in storytelling encourage imaginative thinking, reflective conversations, and the development of narrative skills—all of which are essential to language development. Through storytelling, children learn how to structure their thoughts, organise information, and convey emotions effectively. Riddles, with their emphasis on wordplay and logic, further support children in developing critical thinking and language comprehension. These forms of informal learning stimulate creativity and reflective thinking, creating a foundation for more structured forms of literacy instruction. Yet, these cultural practices are often excluded from formal curricula, potentially limiting the scope of children's linguistic development in traditional educational contexts.



Cultural events, such as funerals, weddings, naming ceremonies, and religious gatherings, also present valuable opportunities for literacy development. As children observe and participate in these events, they are exposed to various forms of speech, including rituals, greetings and communal narratives. When children narrate their experiences of these events, they not only practise their language skills but also learn how to structure their narratives, express emotions and engage in complex conversations. These activities allow children to develop skills in oral communication, which are foundational to later reading and writing abilities. However, the challenge remains in how these practices can be formalised or linked to academic learning. While these cultural practices are vital for language development, they are often overlooked within formal education systems that prioritise standardised, structured literacy models.

Despite the significant contributions of music, games, stories and cultural events to literacy development, it is important to recognise that these activities should complement, rather than replace, formal literacy instruction. The integration of informal cultural practices with formal literacy education can create a more holistic approach to language development, one that bridges the gap between home, community and school. However, to fully harness the potential of these informal practices, collaboration between parents, caregivers, community networks and educators is essential. Educators must recognise and value the cultural knowledge that parents bring and find ways to incorporate these informal activities into the curriculum.

Furthermore, in many African contexts, children are raised in environments where multiple languages are spoken, which can enhance their cognitive flexibility and deepen their understanding of literacy concepts. This linguistic diversity should be embraced and seen as a strength in literacy development. However, it is often the case that formal education systems focus predominantly on one language, typically a national language, at the expense of local languages. This monolingual focus can undermine children's ability to fully engage with their learning environment. Educators need to acknowledge the value of multilingualism in literacy development and find ways to incorporate children's home languages into formal literacy instruction.

### **7.3 Reinforcing the power of parents and caregivers**

A third key area explored the challenges faced by parents and caregivers, particularly those with low English literacy skills, in engaging with schools. It also examined how parents and caregivers navigate these challenges to support their children's literacy and language development. The study revealed that:

Reinforcing the power of parents and caregivers in literacy development involves recognising, tapping into and amplifying their integral role in shaping children's foundational learning and literacy development. This requires a deliberate effort to challenge deficit-based perceptions, value cultural and experiential knowledge and provide practical support to parents.

Evidence suggests that despite the significant role they play in shaping children's literacy, parents, particularly those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, are often perceived as having little to contribute to this process. This perception, as highlighted by Ngwaru and Opoku-Amankwa (2010), arises from systemic biases that equate educational value solely with formal qualifications, disregarding the informal knowledge and cultural practices parents bring. Such assumptions undermine parental confidence and tend to exclude them from meaningfully engaging with school in their children's literacy journey.

Parents possess rich funds of knowledge derived from their lived experiences and cultural practices. Yet many parents still undervalue their contributions, believing that these experiences lack relevance within formal education contexts. Raising awareness about the educational significance of local practices such as games, songs and storytelling can be a critical approach to fostering parents' confidence and reinforcing their role as active collaborators in their children's literacy journey.

Educators and initiatives must find ways to recognise and incorporate parents' contributions into formal literacy development efforts. Research demonstrates that collaborative initiatives, such as teacher-parent workshops (Ngwaru and Opoku-Amankwa, 2010; Albrecht, 2020), play a pivotal role in reinforcing the contributions of parents and caregivers while fostering meaningful partnerships between parents, teachers and learners. These initiatives enable educators to better understand and integrate the contextual realities of their students' lives, helping parents recognise the educational value of their lived experiences and cultural practices. Learners, in turn, benefit from seeing their home environments and cultural identities acknowledged within formal

education, fostering a sense of belonging and engagement. This three-way collaboration not only reinforces the role of parents and caregivers in literacy development but also enhances the overall learning experience through mutual respect and shared responsibility.

Furthermore, in rural or resource-constrained settings, where parents do not have access to WIFI or printed materials practical solutions, such as providing parents with simple literacy kits – containing storybooks, flashcards and culturally relevant materials - can enable them to actively support their children’s learning at home. Libraries or mobile book services in rural communities can also provide access to resources for both parents and children, fostering a culture of reading. Moreover, schools can create parent literacy groups where parents learn strategies for supporting their children while building their own confidence and skills.

## **8. Conclusion and recommendations**

### **8.1 Conclusion**

The power of parents and caregivers in supporting children’s literacy development is often underestimated, yet their contributions are invaluable as evidence suggests. By recognising and harnessing the vast and rich cultural knowledge and lived experiences they possess, particularly those of mothers, we can unlock their potential to significantly enhance children’s literacy outcomes. Rather than viewing parents through a deficit lens, it is essential to recognise the informal learning opportunities they provide through everyday activities, such as household chores, storytelling, and cultural events. These practices, though often overlooked by formal education systems, offer rich, context-specific resources that can complement and reinforce formal literacy practices. Empowering parents and caregivers to fully utilise these assets will not only strengthen children’s literacy development but also foster a more inclusive and sustainable educational ecosystem. By challenging existing perceptions and valuing the knowledge that parents bring, we can create a more equitable and effective approach to literacy development, particularly in communities with low literacy rates.

### **8.2 Recommendations**

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance parental and caregiver engagement in children’s literacy and language development:

#### **i. Awareness and capacity building**

Raise awareness of the power of parents/caregivers in literacy development through the development and implementation of targeted workshops that highlight the critical role parents/caregivers play in their children’s literacy development. These workshops should provide clear, actionable strategies for integrating literacy into everyday activities, empowering parents to recognise their value as literacy facilitators. To support these workshops, develop programmes that emphasise the importance of indigenous languages in foundational literacy development. Encourage parents to integrate their native languages into daily learning activities, supporting children’s cognitive flexibility and their ability to grasp academic concepts in multiple languages.

To ensure practices are continuously enhanced and sustained, establish peer support networks where more literate parents or community volunteers can mentor those with lower literacy skills. This mentorship will provide a collaborative platform for parents to share knowledge and support each other in fostering children’s literacy.

#### **ii. Advocacy and policy engagement**

To foster meaningful advocacy and policy engagement, we recommend undertaking a comprehensive mapping exercise that identifies the key stakeholders integral to driving change with these low-resource communities. The mapping should focus on identifying influential community figures such as leaders, educators and champions of social initiatives, including religious leaders, women’s group organisers, and youth advocates. Additionally, the exercise could highlight existing community groups whose activities and networks are pivotal to grassroots development. Following this, active engagement with identified stakeholders is essential. For example, through purposeful dialogue, these interactions would uncover the strengths, ongoing initiatives and challenges faced by community actors. The insights gained would enable a deeper understanding of how these existing resources and relationships can be harnessed to promote children’s literacy development. By aligning community strengths with literacy goals, this engagement can lay the foundation for sustainable collaboration.

Building on the foundation of community insights, the next step would involve targeted advocacy to influence policymakers. Equipped with practical knowledge from the field, advocacy efforts should be designed to resonate with policymakers' priorities. For example, invite them to knowledge-sharing events that spotlight tested and scalable solutions. These engagements can create opportunities for policymakers to witness impactful strategies firsthand, fostering their support for expanding successful initiatives across multiple regions in Ghana and Nigeria. Through this collaborative approach, advocacy transforms into a catalyst for scalable and sustainable policy-driven change.

### **iii. Deepen community engagement**

Supporting literacy development in the home and family environment requires community-based approaches and strategies are rooted in existing practices and family norms. Facilitating the formation of parent support groups could provide a platform for parents to share experiences, strategies, and challenges in supporting their children's literacy. For instance, parents in one community who have developed a programme to support their children may seek feedback or share with other communities.

Extend the notion of community to the school by strengthening school-community collaboration. Schools should engage parents and caregivers through regular meetings, open communication, and collaborative learning initiatives that bridge the gap between formal education and home-based learning.

Additionally, parents and caregivers could volunteer as Local Literacy Champions (LLCs) who will participate in school events, such as International Literacy Day and World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development, engaging children in community-based activities that promote literacy and language development. This involvement enables teachers to observe these interactions and integrate culturally relevant strategies into their lessons, thereby enhancing the overall literacy experience for children in the community.

### **iv. Co-create culturally appropriate, easy-to-use literacy toolkits**

A collaboratively co-developed literacy toolkit for and with parents and caregivers, in partnership with educators and the children themselves. These toolkits should provide guidance on storytelling, reading strategies, phonetic exercises, the use of wordless books and the integration of traditional games and cultural activities. By incorporating these elements, parents can engage their children in literacy development in ways that are both meaningful and accessible, regardless of their own literacy levels. The toolkits should be tailored to accommodate varying levels of literacy within each community, ensuring they are inclusive, relevant and sensitive to local cultural contexts. This collaborative approach not only empowers parents but also creates a shared responsibility for fostering literacy skills between parents, children and educators.

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