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## **Empowering parents and caregivers as literacy champions to support foundational learning in low-resourced contexts**

This policy brief advocates for the central role of parental and caregiver engagement in literacy interventions and empowering them with the necessary tools and resources to support children's reading development at home. Current literacy programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) predominantly focus on school-based interventions without giving much attention to the home environment as a domain for early language acquisition and development. The cultural wealth embedded in storytelling, traditional games, and local languages remains underutilised. Furthermore, economic and systemic barriers hinder parental involvement, perpetuating low literacy levels. Prioritising parent/caregiver-focused strategies can bridge these gaps and foster an inclusive approach to literacy development.

### **Background**

Parental involvement is widely recognised as essential for early childhood education. Studies highlight how storytelling and indigenous games foster cognitive and linguistic development (Ngwaru & Opoku-Amankwa, 2010) and integrating home languages into literacy programmes improve comprehension and adaptability (Nomlomo & Sosibo, 2016). However, systemic barriers persist. Low parental literacy levels (Chansa-Kabali, 2017) and economic constraints (Ong'ayi et al., 2020) limit parental participation. Community-led initiatives, such as the Kitengesa Community Library in Uganda (see Parry et al., 2014), illustrate the transformative potential of local approaches but remain underfunded.

### **Typology of school-home collaborations**

Based on in-depth literature review (see Ebubedike et al., 2024a) and community-based participatory research with parents and caregivers across five rural communities in Nigeria and Ghana (see Ebubedike et al., 2024b), we examined and categorised diverse types of school-home collaborations and/or engagements and categorised them, summarised in Table 1. Each type features different levels of involvement for parents and caregivers and varies in terms of how much families engage with schools, NGOs and other stakeholders working to improve children's literacy.



**Table 1: Typology of activities in supporting children's literacy development**

|                         | Typology One  | Typology Two  | Typology Three  |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|
| Key feature             | <b>One-directional support</b>                            | <b>Interactive engagement and collaboration</b>   | <b>Equitable partnership/ participatory co-creation</b>   |
| Nature of support       | Pre-designed, standardised resources provided to parents. | Tailored guidance informed by preliminary insights drawn from parents on parental challenges and needs. | Parents are invited to co-design and implement literacy support strategies  |
| Parent involvement      | Passive recipients of resources                           | Active participants in discussions on their children's literacy   | Equal partners in decision-making and content co-creation   |
| Delivery method         | Schools/NGOs decide what parents need and provide it      | Schools/NGOs consult parents before offering guidance   | Schools/NGOs and parents jointly identify challenges and co-create learning relatable solutions   |
| Adaptability            | Fixed programmes applied uniformly across all learners    | Adjusts to needs based on two-way communication   | Fully flexible and responsive to local family and contextual realities and can change as needs changes  |
| Role of schools/NGOs    | Sole providers of literacy materials                      | Facilitators who work in close contact with parents and caregivers to refine literacy support           | Equal partners who work closely with parents to create and sustain literacy strategies  |
| Instructional approach  | One-way workshops with generic materials                  | Interactive sessions where parents discuss, practise, and receive feedback                              | Parents and educators co-develop approaches and test them together. Feedback is further refined and re-tested for effectiveness and clarity by both parties.  |
| Decision-making         | Schools/NGOs make all decisions                           | Schools/NGOs adjust support based on parental input   | Parents, educators, and NGOs share decision-making responsibilities   |
| Empowerment & ownership | Parents rely on external support                          | Parents gain knowledge and confidence through engagement  | Parents are empowered as co-creators and champions in literacy development. Their expertise is leveraged to enhance the learning experience and foster a supportive environment for their children. |

The first type is top-down, where parents are passive recipients of information and resources provided to help them support their children learning at home. Very minimal or no input from parents is seen at this level. The second type introduces some level of dialogue, where schools integrate parents' insights and experiences into the literacy development process, fostering a



collaborative relationship. There is some minimal level of parental involvement, but no demonstration of agency and ownership of the process of shaping educational practices and outcomes, which are crucial for fostering genuine partnership and commitment to children's literacy development. The third type is deeply participatory, where parents' funds of knowledge and skills are leveraged in an equitable partnership to co-create and implement literacy support strategies that reflect the needs and contexts of their children. There is evidence of ownership, agency, and empowerment crucial for effective and sustained collaboration.

## Emerging issues

Findings from the participatory research highlight the transformative potential of parental involvement when supported by culturally relevant tools and training. Parents, especially mothers, emerged as literacy champions, integrating traditional practices into everyday routines and bridging the gap between home and school. There is great value in positioning parents as active agents of change in supporting their children's literacy development. This can be done through:

### **Capitalising on the power of parents, caregivers and community networks to support children's literacy acquisition**

Changing the narrative around parental and caregiver involvement is crucial. Often, parents in parts of SSA are viewed as passive participants in their children's education, especially in low-resourced contexts. Our participatory approach to community learning and development challenges this perception by empowering parents through co-design workshops that equip them with skills to actively support literacy development.

Moreover, our study highlights the crucial role mothers play in supporting children's literacy development, particularly in households where fathers are primarily focused on income generation. Educated mothers tend to be more confident in assisting with homework and teaching foundational skills. In contrast, mothers with lower literacy levels often rely on the support of literate extended family members. Despite low literacy levels, these mothers show a strong commitment to their children's learning. Also, fathers contribute to their children's education, especially when more complex subjects arise, providing support when they are available.



## **Recognising the importance of multilingualism in literacy development**

Multilingualism is common in SSA, yet formal education systems often prioritise national or colonial languages, sidelining indigenous tongues. This alienation inhibits learning. We found that 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 expressed concern about their children's proficiency in indigenous languages due to the dominance of English.

## **Focused training and development for parents to enhance confidence in their ability to support their children's literacy**

Many parents feel uncertain about their ability to support their children's literacy due to their limited formal education. Although they possess valuable cultural knowledge, they often do not realise how it can enhance literacy. Some parents view cultural activities like games as unrelated to literacy development. However, after participating in workshops, they begin to recognise the educational benefits of these cultural practices and local activities. Socio-economic challenges further diminish their confidence, with some parents believing that having better financial resources and education would enable them to support their children's learning more effectively.

## **Bridging informal and formal learning**

Traditional games, storytelling, and songs hold significant educational value. Teachers can integrate these into curricula to create engaging learning environments. For instance, we observed that activities like the Ghanaian "ampe" game and traditional songs support language development by fostering vocabulary and phonological awareness. Therefore, 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.

## **Addressing economic barriers**

Economic constraints often prevent parental engagement in education. However, community-led solutions offer promising pathways. Simple interventions, such as low-cost materials and book-sharing programmes, can make literacy activities more accessible, as demonstrated in Garam - Nigeria, where access to storybooks sparked children's interest in reading.



## Recommendations

### 1. Encourage parental involvement

Implement workshops to raise awareness of the role of parents in literacy development while emphasising the importance of indigenous languages. Encourage parents to volunteer as Local Literacy Champions (LLC) and participate in school events, promoting literacy and language development. This remains a gap in the field and could be a critical success factor.

### 2. Co-create culturally appropriate literacy toolkits

Develop literacy toolkits with parents, caregivers, educators, and children. These should include guidance on storytelling, reading strategies, phonetic exercises, and integrating traditional games and cultural activities.

### 3. Create peer support networks

Facilitate parent support groups and strengthen school-community collaboration. In addition, establish peer support networks for parents with lower literacy skills.

### 4. Undertake mapping exercises

A call to education development partners to conduct a mapping exercise to identify key stakeholders and engage them in dialogue to align community strengths with literacy goals. Advocate for scalable and sustainable policy-driven change by showcasing successful initiatives to policymakers.

By implementing these strategies, we can unlock the transformative potential of parents as literacy champions, creating a generation of empowered learners and fostering equitable educational outcomes across SSA.

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## Further reading

Ebubedike, Margaret; Akyeampong, Albert; Addae-Kyeremeh, Eric; Dery, Portia; Boateng, Felicia and Doka, Jane (2024a). Power of Parents: Exploring the potential role of parents and caregivers in strengthening language development and literacy acquisition for children aged 3–12 in Sub-Saharan Africa - Extended Literature Review. The Open University, Milton Keynes. <https://oro.open.ac.uk/101403/>

Ebubedike, Margaret; Akyeampong, Albert; Addae-Kyeremeh, Eric; Dery, Portia; Boateng, Felicia and Doka, Jane (2024b). Power of Parents: Exploring the potential role of parents and caregivers in strengthening language development and literacy acquisition for children aged 3–12 in Sub-Saharan Africa - Multisite case-study in Nigeria and Ghana. The Open University, Milton Keynes. <https://oro.open.ac.uk/102606/>

## Credits

This policy and advocacy brief was written by Eric Addae-Kyeremeh, Margaret Ebubedike, Kwame Akyeampong, Jane Doka, Felicia Boateng and Portia Dery. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the Centre for the Study of Global Development or The Open University.

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