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PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND ORDINARY LEVEL COMPLETION IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY FROM MASASI TOWN COUNCIL, TANZANIA

Rehema Seleman and Maua Mpiza (PhD)
Jordan University College, A Constituent College of St. Augustine University of Tanzania
P. O. Box 1878, Morogoro, Tanzania – East Africa.

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ABSTRACT

Parental involvement has been identified to be one of the major factors in the retention and completion of secondary education, but there is very little evidence on the types of parental involvement and its impact on the completion of secondary education in the rural and semi-urban parts of Tanzania. The current study therefore aimed at assessing the types of parental involvement and its contribution to the completion of the Ordinary Level of education in public secondary schools in Masasi Town Council, Tanzania. Ecological Systems Theory and Contingency Theory informed the research and interpretivism research philosophy was used together with qualitative case study research design. Interviews and focus group discussions with 64 participants who included 4 head teachers, 8 academic deans, 16 parents, and 36 students from four public secondary schools in Masasi were employed for data collection. The thematic analysis revealed seven types of parental involvement: monitoring and academic support, involvement in school-related activities, encouragement and motivation, working with teachers, provision of materials and financial support, future orientation and guidance, and different forms of communication. This involvement increases students' sense of responsibility, discipline, motivation, and attendance, thereby enhancing their retention and completion of Ordinary Level education. The provision of materials and financial support was the most direct factor associated with school attendance; however, it is the type that was most affected by the poor economic situation at home. It is concluded from this study that parental involvement is determined by family, school, and community factors and that parental involvement needs to be encouraged through collective effort. Thus, some suggestions include providing financial assistance or scholarship schemes for poor families, organizing meetings on flexible dates, sensitization of the community, providing communication channels, and capacity building programs for parents.

Keywords: Parental involvement; Ordinary Level education; school completion; public secondary schools; Masasi Town Council; Tanzania.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the problem

Parental engagement is known to be an important determinant of student success, retention, and completion of high school education (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Tan et al., 2019). Besides financial contribution, it includes participating in educational institution's activities, helping children with their homework assignments, maintaining communication with teachers, as well as fostering a

ISSN: 2582-0745
Vol. 9, No. 05; 2026

positive attitude towards studying (Epstein, 2011). The synergy of all these actions motivates pupils, contributes to the development of skills and helps prevent dropout (Pomerantz et al., 2007). The involvement of parents is multidimensional in developing countries. According to meta-analyses conducted in the United States, the influence of both home-centered involvement (homework support, monitoring of child's academic progress) and school-based one (participation in school events, involvement in management) positively impacts performance and persistence of children (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Wilder, 2014). Parental expectations and learning environment at home are the key determinants of pupil's motivation and academic success (Jeynes, 2012). Similar results were revealed by researchers who studied this problem in Europe (Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005; Van Voorhis et al., 2013). Engagement can help mitigate negative aspects associated with poverty, but depends on the social and cultural environment (Castro et al., 2015).

Parental engagement in Africa has been increasingly understood as one of the key factors in predicting educational success, especially at the secondary level of education, where the rate of students dropping out is extremely high (Akyeampong, 2020; Nwokah et al., 2020). Nonetheless, it takes various forms and levels in each particular country or region, and it is influenced by a number of socioeconomic, cultural, and structural factors. In Nigeria and Ghana, poor parental supervision of their children's academic progress, ineffective communication with teachers, and lack of involvement in school management processes correlate with low academic performance and high rates of school dropout (Fareo & Musa, 2018; Krampah, 2019). Fareo and Musa (2018) found attending Parent-Teacher Association meetings, monitoring students' friendships, and giving students learning resources to be significant for student success.

In East Africa, there is evidence of similar trends. In Kenya, Katumbi (2023) established positive correlations between effective parent-teacher communication, regular school fee payments by parents, provision of school materials by parents, and students' academic performance in public secondary schools. Nevertheless, continuing socioeconomic disparities hindered many parents from providing this kind of help. Similarly, studies from Uganda indicate that parental supervision at home and schooling positively influence discipline, attendance, and learning achievements; however, time and resource barriers continue to be the major hurdles for many parents (Alfred et al., 2023; Ayikoru, 2024). Consequently, parental participation is useful, but such participation will be determined by the availability of resources that can be harnessed within households. The observation aligns with Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler's (1997) assertion that the nature of parents' involvement is determined by what parents know about their role, their efficacy and the school opportunities available.

Parental participation in secondary schools in Tanzania has been of interest to both researchers and policy makers due to various problems associated with secondary school retention and attainment of Ordinary Levels. Despite attempts to increase accessibility to education by abolishing tuition fees and constructing better school infrastructure, secondary school completion rates have been below expectation in rural and semi-urban areas (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], 2023; UNESCO, 2024). The national data indicates continued differences between urban and rural districts, which implies the existence of household and community factors affecting retention. The findings of local studies underscore the criticality of the parents but point to significant differences in the extent and nature of their involvement. According to Kayombo (2017), in Dar es Salaam, parents who supervised their children during the homework and were involved in school meetings had pupils that performed well. Anthony (2019) found in Dodoma that the financial contribution of parents and their informal academic support

ISSN: 2582-0745
Vol. 9, No. 05; 2026

influenced positive behavior and performance of students, yet it was limited due to their poverty. Other studies have identified barriers that include a lack of understanding of parents' educational role, inadequate school and family communication, and cultural norms that discourage learning in the household (Abdalla, 2021; Lema, 2022; Sheha, 2018). Low levels of parental involvement in the mentioned activities were found by Mwinyi (2024) in Kwimba District and Kidenya (2024) in Mpanda Municipality due to the influence of socioeconomic status, parents' educational background, and gender roles.

In the Masasi Town Council in the Mtwara Region, public secondary schools accommodate diverse socioeconomic groups where many families are engaged in farming and trading. From previous studies, it is evident that the rate at which the Ordinary Level is completed in the region is below the national average due to high dropout and repetition rates caused by unreliable parental participation (Nnunduma & Kopoka, 2022). The qualitative studies indicate that most of the parents are concerned about the education of their children; however, their involvement is hindered by financial constraints, illiteracy levels, poor communication between the parents and teachers, and cultural practices (Omary et al., 2022).

The review of the international and African literature suggests that the level of parental participation has a great impact on the achievement of the students as well as their retention in education; however, the effectiveness of this participation may vary according to specific contexts. Empirical evidence on the specific ways in which the parents are involved and how such involvement affects the completion of the Ordinary Level education at rural and peri-urban public secondary schools in the region, especially in Masasi Town Council, is scant. This research seeks to fill this gap through exploring the effects of parental involvement in the completion of the Ordinary Level education in public secondary schools of Masasi Town Council.

Statement of the Problem

The role of parents in improving academic performance, attendance, and retention of students has been well-documented (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2012). In spite of this evidence, Masasi Town Council public secondary schools have continued experiencing high rates of dropout and repetition coupled with low attainment of Ordinary Level education (Nnunduma & Kopoka, 2022). This affects negatively the academic success of learners and the opportunities for pursuing further studies.

Parental engagement is sporadic and weak in Masasi especially concerning monitoring of homework, parent teacher meetings, school governance and provision of learning resources. The challenges faced by parents include poverty, lack of time due to farming and other productive activities, ignorance on their educational responsibility, illiteracy, language issues, culture and gender practices, and mistrust of school administration (Omary et al., 2022; Sheha, 2018). Available Tanzanian literature generalizes its findings to various regions and is inclined towards urban and primary schools (Mwinyi, 2024). Thus, there is no localized information regarding the influence of the above challenges to parental engagement and Ordinary Level attainment in Masasi. This study fills the above gap through the identification of the different types of parental involvement in relation to retention and completion of students at the ordinary level education in Masasi Town Council's public secondary schools.

ISSN: 2582-0745
Vol. 9, No. 05; 2026

Specific Objective

- To establish the different types of parental involvement in the completion of ordinary level education in public secondary schools in Masasi Town Council.

Research Question

- What kinds of parental involvement exist in students' completion of Ordinary Level education in public secondary schools in Masasi Town Council?

Significance of the study

This study will contribute local evidence about the relationship between parental involvement and completion of Ordinary Level education in Tanzania. This study will also serve as a guideline for teachers, administrators, and parents in improving involvement, motivation, and retention. The policy makers and local authorities in education will also benefit from the recommendations of this study in designing policies and interventions to reduce the obstacles.

2. THEORETICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

This research is underpinned by Ecological Systems Theory and Contingency Theory. According to the Ecological Systems Theory, the development of a child is influenced by a series of environments that interact with one another in terms of nested environments such as microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The Contingency Theory postulates that there exist situational conditions that determine the interaction of an organization with stakeholders hence there is no universal approach for all situations (Pang et al., 2023).

Empirical Literature Review

In the study conducted by Lemessa et al. (2023), the role played by parents in the educational activities of their children was assessed among 292 pupils in four schools. It was found that 19% of the parents did not guide or counsel their children in their home environment, 67% were moderately engaged, while 14% were highly engaged. For school activities, 53% were not involved at all. Gender of the household head, education level of the father and income source of the parents significantly predicted engagement. In their study of 400 junior secondary school pupils in Hong Local Government Area of Nigeria, Fareo and Musa (2018) found out that poor performance could be attributed to parents failing to inspect the school notebooks, monitor daily school activities and assist with homework of the pupils. In Morogoro Municipality, Kayombo and Amos (2025) applied a mixed methods research approach with 56 participants and found that parental monitoring of subject-based homework improved the learning process of students.

Kayombo (2017) investigated 120 teachers, head teachers, parents, and pupils in Ilala Municipality, Dar es Salaam. There were different ways through which parents promoted learning, and their involvement had an impact on the performance of the pupils. This study was conducted in primary schools only. In Rwanda, Karangwa and Ndagijimana (2022) revealed a significant positive relationship between parental involvement and performance, where encouragement, discipline, and face-to-face parent-teacher communication were among the main determinants. Almost 73.3% of respondents considered communication through notebooks to be effective, while 57.1% of the participants agreed that parental involvement in school activities decreased absenteeism. Donkor et al. (2024) collected data from 363 parents in Sekyere South District, Ghana. These parents attended school programs, provided learning materials, and organized extra

ISSN: 2582-0745
Vol. 9, No. 05; 2026

classes; however, most of them failed to provide school administrators with critical information, learn at home, and communicate about academic progress with teachers. Similarly, Fareo and Musa (2018) highlighted attendance at PTA meetings, school functions, and parent-teacher communication as some of the school-related actions. Overall, communication and being present at school are important, but none of these studies investigated whether these practices help students complete the educational process.

It was established by Fareo and Musa (2018) that purchasing books, timely payment of fees, and financing of school projects positively affected students' performance. Alfred et al. (2023) conducted a survey of 357 participants in Ugandan public secondary schools. Parental involvement was identified as a significant factor which predicted academic improvement (contributed 50.2% of it), and providing of writing materials had a positive impact. At the same time, behavioural issues diminished the impact of parents' responsibility regarding education. According to Hussein and Samantar (2020), community involvement in financing, teacher motivation, and infrastructure maintenance positively affected academic achievement in Garowe, Somalia, even though communities hardly ever became involved in the management of schools. The above studies can be useful in terms of the topic of the research as they are about the role of financial and material resources in improving performance but not the issue of completion and parents' involvement.

Msacky et al. (2024) employed a mixed-method research approach to investigate the phenomenon of parental involvement in managing students' discipline in community secondary schools in Dodoma City. Strategies like parent committees, information exchange, and good school atmosphere were recommended. This indicates that involvement is determined by cooperation and trust, which is related to the research findings on cooperation with teachers and diverse forms of communication. However, its restrictive topic on discipline prevents its generalization for completion.

Research gap

As can be seen from the analyzed papers, parents contribute to education through homework supervision, participation in various school events, communication with teachers, provision of materials and money, encouragement, and cooperation with educational institutions (Alfred et al., 2023; Donkor et al., 2024; Fareo & Musa, 2018; Karangwa & Ndagijimana, 2022). However, their limitations are common. The main one is that most of the studies are concentrated on academic achievement rather than completion. In addition, many studies were done in primary schools (Kayombo, 2017; Lemessa et al., 2023), outside Tanzania, or were limited to a single dimension (Kayombo & Amos, 2025; Msacky et al., 2024). None of the previous literature reviewed looked at the various forms of parental participation in O-Level achievement in a rural or semi-urban context like Masasi Town Council. The current study aims to fill the gap by carrying out a qualitative case study of public secondary schools involving the head teachers, academic deans, parents and students.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study applied an interpretivist research paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013) and a qualitative case study approach in Masasi Town Council, Mtwara region, Tanzania. The sample comprised 64 participants in four public secondary schools consisting of 4 head teachers and 8 academic deans (purposive sampling), 36 students (quota sampling) and 16 parents (convenience sampling). Non-probability sampling techniques fit qualitative research design (Kothari, 2021). Data

ISSN: 2582-0745
Vol. 9, No. 05; 2026

collection used interview and focus group discussion. The instruments underwent review by two experts in content validity. The four aspects of trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability were established in the study along with data triangulation (Nowell et al., 2017).

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings on how parental involvement influences the completion of Ordinary Level education in public secondary schools within Masasi Town Council of Tanzania. These findings are based on interviews and focus group discussion conducted among 64 respondents including head teachers, academic deans, parents, and students from four public secondary schools. These findings are arranged according to the objectives of the study. Initially, this section identifies the types of parental involvement and how such types help in motivating and academically empowering the students. Seven themes related to the different types of parental involvement within Masasi Town Council have been identified through this analysis. These themes represent the complex nature of parental involvement within Masasi Town Council, and include: parental supervision and support in school; parental involvement in school activities; encouragement and motivation; teacher-parent cooperation; parental financial/material support; future orientation and guidance; and communication practices and channels. In total, these themes demonstrate how parents get involved in their children's education within the school and home environments. Each of these themes is described below in the context of quotes verbatim and relevant literature.

Parental monitoring and academic support

Most parents tend to question their children on homework and performance despite their lack of knowledge and time constraints. This occurs mostly during family activities such as dining. This helps in creating the sense of responsibility among the learners and also enables parents to identify any learning problems among the learners early enough. According to one head teacher:

> *"This may happen even when parents cannot do this, but parents keep checking their children's work. They keep on asking about school events when they are having a mealtime" (HoS_D, personal communication, March 2025).*

An academic dean noted that although some parents may not have the knowledge to teach, the questions and concern help keep students focused (AM_A). The participants in FGD D noted that monitoring helps the students to become disciplined and responsible. The parents also noted that even the little effort of checking the homework book and speaking to the teachers enhances home-school partnership. The findings above are consistent with the work by Kayombo and Amos (2025), which states that the parental monitoring of homework positively impacts the learning of the learners. Despite issues such as lack of concentration and sporadic attendance, participants argued that active supervision, even without any academic background, increases student engagement and persistence. With regard to monitoring, for completion, it helps in making sure that the student does not fall into habits which can make him/her dropout.

Participation in school activities

Parental participation in school activities symbolically demonstrates their commitment to education. Parents' involvement in PTA meetings, school activities like prize-giving day and sports day, and serving on school committees were mentioned by the participants. This creates an

ISSN: 2582-0745
Vol. 9, No. 05; 2026

encouraging environment for the students. One head teacher noted: *"The active participation of parents in school activities creates a conducive environment for the students and also builds the school-families partnership." (HoS_D).*

This is similar to findings from previous research studies. Donkor et al. (2024) noted that most parents in Ghana attended school programs, supplied learning materials, and participated in book selection in the absence of discussion on academic achievement among parents and school administrators. Parental participation in school activities that positively influenced the academic achievement of pupils in Tanzania was identified by Kayombo (2017), although his research was limited to primary schools. Similarly, Fareo and Musa (2018) noted that participation in PTA meetings and school functions was important for success of the students in Nigeria. In this research, active involvement creates a conducive environment through collaboration whereby students feel encouraged and the school belongs to the larger community.

Parental encouragement and motivation

Encouragement and motivation were some of the factors identified by participants as influential on the attitude of the students towards education. Some parents motivate their children with stories of how education transformed their lives, while others offer behavioral counseling as well as warning them about distractive peers. One of the deans of academics explained the two types of motivations:

> *"Other parents can inspire by sharing stories regarding how education has helped them change their lives for good. Other parents just advise them to keep off bad company and focus on their goals in life" (AM_Personal communication, 20 March 2025).*

According to another head teacher,

> *"Parental motivation also helps set the right mindset among the learners that can help them overcome difficulties and maintain commitment" (HoS_A, personal communication, 6 March 2025).*

The following are some comments made by the learners in FGD B regarding the above form of motivation.

Such inspiration instilled confidence, direction, and visualization skills among them regarding success in future. Short discussions were also very motivating because in addition to modelling desired behaviour, parents encouraged their children through affirming their beliefs in their abilities. Research corroborates this point of view. According to Karangwa and Ndagijimana (2022), parental involvement is highly correlated with the academic performance of their children, especially through encouraging them, disciplining them and communicating with teachers. Lemessa et al. (2023) noted that most parents offered advice and guidance to their children at home, which motivated learners.

Collaboration with teachers

Parent-teacher collaboration was regarded as another vital type of participation because it enabled early identification and solving of any problems. Proactive parents participate in the meeting and also engage teachers when there are issues with their children's behaviour or academics. The head teacher mentioned that:

> *"There are those parents who are very proactive; they will attend the meeting and even engage the teachers when they have issues with their children. Such collaboration will*

ISSN: 2582-0745
Vol. 9, No. 05; 2026

assist in solving the issues much earlier" (HoS_C Personal Communication 20 March 2025).

The significance of the collaboration between parents and teachers cannot be overemphasized. According to Karangwa and Ndagijimana (2022), the communication between the two groups improves students' discipline and lowers absenteeism, which enhances their academic performance. Moreover, as Msacky et al. (2024) reported, poor communication and lack of trust between parents and schools' administration reduced the involvement of parents in addressing students' discipline in Dodoma City. Collaboration makes it possible to act quickly in order to ensure that the responsibility is shared. Otherwise, some minor issues become a reason for leaving schools.

Material and financial support

The respondents indicated that material and financial assistance from the parents is an important element that assists the students in attending school on a consistent basis. Most parents try to provide the stationery, uniforms, and school fees for their children, which in turn assists in minimizing absenteeism and dropout due to inadequate basic needs. It is one way of involvement of the parents and their dedication impacts directly on how the students attend school and focus on education. One of the heads of schools reported:

"The moment we realized that the parents always provide materials like stationery or uniforms, this has minimized absenteeism as a result of the shortage of materials. It shows their dedication in their practical ways" (HoS_B).

This theme aligns with the available research on the issue. According to Karangwa and Ndagijimana (2022), provision of learning facilities to students is an important factor in performance. Fareo and Musa (2018) found out that lack of provision of necessary materials and assistance in completing homework by parents led to poor performance of students in core subjects. Kayombo (2017) has also indicated that parental encouragement at home and at school will positively impact pupils' academic progress. Among all seven types of parental involvement, this type has a direct link to a pupil's ability to stay in school to its completion. Furthermore, this type explains why the limitations in terms of finances in a farming and small trading community like Masasi could be problematic even for motivated parents.

5. FUTURE ORIENTATION AND GUIDANCE

It was stated by the participants that the parents often speak about their aspirations regarding future careers of their children, which is a great motivating factor. Despite having a tight schedule, parents make an effort to give some advice to their children concerning their further career or education in order to keep them concentrated and goal-oriented. This guidance helps students realize the importance of completing their studies. One academic dean said

"Parents who lead very busy lives will make it their time to converse with the child regarding his/her future and this will enable them to work hard towards the goal of achieving their studies" (AM_B, personal communication, 13 March 2025).

A head teacher commented in the same manner that:

"When parents discuss about the importance of being educated as a means of acquiring future life chances, the students are motivated to take advantage of the situation and pass all the exams until they reach the stage of Ordinary Level" (HoS_B, personal communication, 13 March 2025).

ISSN: 2582-0745
Vol. 9, No. 05; 2026

This was confirmed in FGD_A since parents and students were in agreement that these conversations motivate the learners and develop parent-child relationship that will ensure academic success. According to Lemessa et al. (2023), home-based guidance and counseling impacted the academic activities and academic achievement of students, whereas Karangwa and Ndagijimana (2022) highlighted the role played by parental motivation in developing discipline and ambition in students.

6. COMMUNICATION CHANNELS AND PRACTICES

Various forms of communication were established between parents and schools. Parents can decide to physically attend school and communicate with teachers directly, or they can opt to do it through telephone calls, text messages, and the children's notebooks. This ensures that the issues are identified and solved. As one head teacher said,

> *"The communication may take various forms; there are those parents who are keen to have face-to-face communication when they come to the school, while others can have a telephone call or a message to communicate their concern about the performance of the child" (HoS B, personal communication, 13 March 2025).*

These findings are in line with existing literature on the importance of communication. Karangwa and Ndagijimana (2022) indicated that 73.3% of the respondents found communication through notebooks and telephones important for problem solving. Msacky et al. (2024) similarly stated that involvement is hindered by lack of cooperation and communication. Schools that offer various means have greater chances of reaching parents who have varying working hours, distances, and levels of literacy, and are also able to form positive relations with them. In a society where many parents are limited by farming and traveling, this will be a practical way to ensure that parents remain informed about their children's performance until completion.

7. SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS.

The findings reveal seven forms of parental involvement in Masasi Town Council: monitoring and academic assistance, involvement in school activities, motivation and encouragement, cooperation with teachers, material and financial assistance, future orientation and advice, and communication. All these forms of parental involvement are instrumental to the students' discipline, motivation, attendance, or orientation. Overall, parental involvement can be viewed as an activity that is conducted both in home and in school settings, and is related to the retention and completion of O-Level education.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the findings, there are seven types of involvement, namely, monitoring and academic support, involvement in school activities, encouragement and motivation, working with teachers, material and financial support, future orientation and guidance, and communication. Overall, these involvement practices help to develop responsibility, discipline, motivation, and attendance, thus improving retention and completion of schooling. In conclusion, involvement practices do not have to include just financial contributions or visits to schools. The least involved parents can still be actively involved through such practices as asking their children about their homework during mealtime or discussion of their future life goals despite the lack of time and/or literacy and other financial constraints. Material and financial support is the closest to retention, but at the same time, it is the least available practice among the poor farmers and small traders, thus, supporting the

ISSN: 2582-0745
Vol. 9, No. 05; 2026

idea, compatible with Ecological Systems and Contingency Theory, that involvement depends on family, school, and community context and schools should vary their strategies according to parents' capabilities.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made: The school should identify and facilitate the participation in cheap ways of participating like homework verification, encouragement, and discussion of the future so as to prevent exclusion of parents with lower levels of education and time. Head teachers should organize meetings during farming and trading time and use various methods such as face to face interaction, telephone calls, texting and school books for reaching all families. The Masasi Town Council education department and Ministry of Education, Science and Technology should establish scholarship programs for poor families covering cost of uniforms, reading materials, and other expenses. The schools should improve the trust by including parents in case of any problem in schools and enhancing activities of Parent Teacher Association. In future studies, mixed methodology should be used together with bigger sample size and comparison between urban and rural schools to establish impact on the completion rates of the different ways of participation.

Consent

As per international standards or university standards, Participants' written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

Disclaimer (Artificial Intelligence)

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc) and text-to-image generators have been used during writing or editing of this manuscript.

Competing Interests

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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Vol. 9, No. 05; 2026

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