

An Exploration into Factors Affecting Literacy Levels in Rural Schools: A Case Study of Selected Schools in Serenje District, Zambia

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Abstract

This study examined factors affecting literacy in rural primary schools in Serenje District, Zambia, where outcomes remain very low despite policy efforts. Using a mixed-methods approach with learners, teachers, and headteachers across 12 schools, the study found that 67% of Grade 5 learners read at frustration level, with low reading speed and comprehension. Contributing factors included limited home literacy support, poor attendance, low parental involvement, child labour, and lack of reading materials. School challenges involved overcrowded classrooms, insufficient resources, weak teacher preparation, and high staff turnover. Language barriers also hindered learning, as the official language of instruction differed from the community language. The study concludes that literacy challenges are multi-layered and require coordinated interventions, including improved teacher training, resource provision, language policy review, and stronger parental engagement.

Keywords: Literacy, Rural Education, Reading Skills, Language of Instruction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

Literacy is a fundamental human right and a key driver of personal, social, and economic development. It enables individuals to participate fully in society and supports lifelong learning. Globally, initiatives such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 emphasize the importance of ensuring that all learners acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Early grade literacy is especially critical, as the first years of schooling determine whether children successfully transition from learning to read to reading to learn. Failure to acquire these skills leads to long-term academic challenges and limits future opportunities. Despite global efforts, literacy levels remain low in many developing regions, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In Zambia, literacy outcomes are a major concern. National assessments show that only 12.7% of Grade 4 learners achieve expected literacy levels, highlighting a significant learning crisis. Rural areas are most affected due to limited resources, poor infrastructure, and socio-economic challenges. Serenje District reflects these issues, with additional complexities such as linguistic diversity and rural living conditions affecting literacy development.

Historical and Socio-Cultural Context of Serenje District

Serenje District is located in Zambia's Central Province and is predominantly rural, with most communities relying on subsistence farming. The district is mainly inhabited by the Lala people, whose primary language is Icilala.

Historically, education in Serenje was introduced through missionary activities, which played a major role in promoting literacy. However, economic factors such as migration for

employment disrupted family structures and reduced support systems for children's education.

The district faces several challenges, including poor infrastructure, limited access to electricity, inadequate health services, and high poverty levels. These conditions affect school attendance and learning. Additionally, many children engage in activities such as cattle herding, which interferes with schooling.

A key issue in Serenje is the language of instruction. While learners speak Icilala at home, schools use Ibibemba for teaching literacy. This mismatch creates difficulties in reading and comprehension, making it harder for learners to acquire literacy skills.

Statement of the Problem

Despite policy efforts and educational programmes aimed at improving literacy, levels remain critically low in rural Zambia. The national statistic showing that only 12.7% of Grade 4 learners can read at the expected level reflects a serious educational challenge.

In Serenje District, studies have shown that many learners struggle with reading. For example, a large proportion of Grade 5 learners read at frustration level, with low reading speed and comprehension. Language barriers, lack of resources, and poor learning conditions contribute to this situation.

Previous studies have focused on specific issues such as language or reading fluency but have not fully explored the combined influence of learner, home, school, and policy factors. This limited understanding makes it difficult to design effective interventions.

Therefore, there is a need for a comprehensive study that examines the multiple factors affecting literacy and how they interact within the rural Serenje context.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the factors affecting literacy levels in rural primary schools in Serenje District and to provide recommendations for improving literacy outcomes

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

General Objective

To investigate the factors affecting literacy levels in selected rural primary schools in Serenje District.

Specific Objectives

1. To assess literacy levels among Grade 5 learners.
2. To identify learner-related factors such as attendance, health, and motivation.
3. To examine home and community influences, including parental involvement and socio-economic status.
4. To investigate school-based factors such as teaching materials, teacher quality, and classroom conditions.
5. To analyse the impact of language of instruction on literacy.
6. To examine policy and systemic influences on literacy outcomes.
7. To propose strategies for improving literacy levels.

Research Questions

1. What are the literacy levels of Grade 5 learners in Serenje District?
2. What learner-related factors affect literacy acquisition?
3. How do home and community factors influence literacy?

4. What school-based factors impact literacy outcomes?
5. How does language of instruction affect literacy development?
6. What policy and systemic factors influence literacy levels?

Significance of the Study

This study is important for multiple stakeholders. For policymakers, it provides evidence to guide literacy improvement strategies. For education officials, it supports planning and resource allocation. Teachers and school administrators can use the findings to improve instructional practices.

The study also benefits parents and communities by highlighting their role in supporting literacy development. Additionally, it contributes to academic research by providing insights into literacy challenges in rural Zambia.

Delimitations of the Study

The study focuses on 12 selected primary schools in Serenje District and targets Grade 5 learners, their teachers, headteachers, and parents. This scope allows for an in-depth understanding of literacy challenges within a rural context.

Limitations of the Study

The study is limited by its cross-sectional design, which captures data at one point in time. It also relies partly on self-reported data, which may be biased. Additionally, findings may not be fully generalizable beyond the selected schools.

Operational Definition of Terms

- Literacy: Ability to read, write, and understand text.
- Reading Fluency: Ability to read accurately and quickly.
- Comprehension: Ability to understand written text.
- Medium of Instruction: Language used for teaching.
- Familiar Language: Language spoken at home.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews literature on factors affecting literacy in rural schools. It covers the concept and dimensions of literacy, theoretical frameworks, global and African perspectives, the Zambian literacy context, and previous studies in Serenje District. The review identifies gaps that justify this study.

Conceptual Framework

The Concept of Literacy: Literacy has evolved from simply the ability to read and write to a broader concept involving understanding, interpreting, and using written information effectively. It is now viewed as a continuous process that enables individuals to participate fully in society. In education, literacy is closely linked to foundational learning, especially in early grades, where basic reading and writing skills are developed.

Dimensions of Literacy

Literacy consists of several interrelated components:

- **Phonemic Awareness:** Ability to recognize and manipulate sounds.
- **Phonics and Decoding:** Understanding letter-sound relationships.
- **Fluency:** Reading accurately and quickly.
- **Vocabulary:** Understanding word meanings.

- **Comprehension:** Ability to interpret and understand text.

These dimensions are interconnected, and weaknesses in one area can affect overall reading ability.

Foundational Learning and Reading Fluency

Foundational learning emphasizes basic literacy and numeracy skills acquired in early education. Reading fluency is a key indicator of literacy, as it links decoding and comprehension. Learners who lack fluency often struggle to understand texts, which affects their performance across subjects.

Theoretical Framework

Socio-Cultural Theory: This theory explains that learning occurs through social interaction and cultural context. Language plays a central role in learning, and when learners are taught in an unfamiliar language, literacy development becomes difficult. Teacher support and interaction are essential for guiding learners.

Ecological Systems Theory: This theory highlights that a child's development is influenced by multiple environments, including home, school, community, and policy systems. Literacy is affected by interactions among these environments, meaning challenges cannot be addressed at one level alone.

Theory of Reading Development: This theory outlines stages of reading development, from early decoding to reading for learning. By Grade 5, learners are expected to read independently. Failure to reach this stage indicates delayed literacy development.

Global Perspectives on Literacy

Literacy and Sustainable Development: Literacy is central to global development goals, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to ensure quality education for all. Literacy improves economic opportunities, health outcomes, and social participation.

International Literacy Assessments: Global assessments show that many children, especially in developing countries, do not achieve basic literacy skills. Tools like Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) measure reading skills such as fluency and comprehension.

Effective Literacy Instruction: Research shows that effective literacy instruction includes teaching phonics, providing reading practice, and supporting comprehension. Approaches such as "teaching at the right level" help learners improve by matching instruction to their abilities.

Literacy in the African Context

Literacy Trends in Sub-Saharan Africa

Literacy levels in Sub-Saharan Africa remain low, with many children unable to read at expected levels. Rural learners are particularly disadvantaged due to limited resources and poor learning conditions

Language of Instruction
Language plays a critical role in literacy development. Research shows that learners perform better when taught in their home language. However, many African countries use regional or foreign languages, creating learning barriers.

Teacher Preparation and Quality: Teacher quality is a major factor in literacy outcomes. Many teachers lack adequate training in literacy instruction, especially in rural areas where resources and professional development opportunities are limited.

The Zambian Literacy Landscape

National Policies and Frameworks: Zambia has developed policies to improve literacy, including the use of local languages in early education. However, implementation challenges persist, especially in rural schools.

Primary Literacy Curriculum: The curriculum emphasizes learning in local languages in early grades and transitioning to English later. However, many learners fail to acquire strong literacy skills before this transition.

National Assessment Findings: National assessments reveal low literacy levels, with only a small percentage of learners achieving expected standards. Rural learners consistently perform worse than urban learners.

The Catch-Up Programme: The Catch-Up programme aims to improve literacy by teaching learners at their level. It has shown positive results but may not reach all rural schools effectively.

Literacy in Rural Zambia: Challenges

Infrastructure and Resources: Rural schools often lack classrooms, textbooks, and basic facilities. These shortages limit effective teaching and learning.

Teacher Deployment and Retention: Rural schools face shortages of qualified teachers, high turnover, and teacher absenteeism. Large class sizes further reduce the quality of instruction.

Socio-Economic Factors: Poverty affects education, as children may engage in labour instead of attending school. Limited parental literacy also reduces support for children's learning.

Language Barriers: The use of unfamiliar languages in schools makes it difficult for learners to understand and learn effectively, especially in early grades.

Previous Studies in Serenje District

Language Challenges: Studies have shown that learners perform poorly when taught in unfamiliar languages. Lack of teaching materials further worsens literacy outcomes.

Reading Fluency Studies: Research indicates that many learners in Serenje read below expected levels, with low fluency and comprehension.

Historical Context: Historical factors such as missionary education and economic migration have shaped current education systems and literacy patterns in the district.

4. METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research methods used to investigate factors affecting literacy levels in rural primary schools in Serenje District. It describes the research design, study area, population, sampling procedures, data collection instruments, validity and reliability, data collection procedures, ethical considerations, and data analysis methods.

Research Design

The study employed a concurrent mixed-methods design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data provided measurable evidence of literacy levels, while qualitative data offered in-depth insights into the factors influencing literacy.

This design was appropriate because it allowed for triangulation of findings, enhancing the validity and reliability of the results. The integration of both approaches enabled a comprehensive understanding of literacy challenges from multiple perspectives.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Serenje District, located in Central Province of Zambia. The district is predominantly rural, with communities mainly engaged in subsistence farming. Serenje was selected due to its low literacy levels, linguistic diversity, and rural characteristics, which make it suitable for examining factors affecting literacy. The district is divided into three educational zones: Ibolelo, Muchinda, and Chibale, all of which were represented in the study.

Target Population

The target population included:

- Grade 5 learners
- Teachers responsible for literacy-related subjects
- Headteachers
- Parents

These groups were selected because they play key roles in influencing literacy development at learner, school, and community levels.

Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

A total of 12 primary schools were purposively selected to represent different rural contexts across the three zones.

The sample included:

- **360 Grade 5 learners** (selected through random sampling)
- **48 teachers**
- **12 headteachers**

Purposive sampling was used to select schools and key informants, while random sampling ensured fair representation of learners.

This sampling approach ensured diversity and improved the generalizability of findings within the district.

Data Collection Instruments

Multiple instruments were used to collect data:

- **Literacy Assessments:** Measured reading fluency and comprehension among learners.
- **Questionnaires:** Administered to teachers and headteachers to gather quantitative data.
- **Interviews:** Conducted with headteachers and selected teachers to gain detailed insights.
- **Focus Group Discussions:** Held with learners to understand their experiences.
- **Classroom Observations:** Used to examine teaching practices and learning environments.

Using multiple tools enabled data triangulation and strengthened the credibility of the findings.

Validity and Reliability

Validity was ensured by designing instruments aligned with the study objectives and by consulting experts in education research. A pilot study was conducted to refine the instruments.

Reliability was enhanced through consistent data collection procedures and the use of standardized literacy assessment tools. Triangulation of data sources further improved the accuracy of the results.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted in a systematic manner:

1. Permission was obtained from relevant education authorities and school administrators.
2. Schools were visited, and participants were briefed on the purpose of the study.
3. Literacy assessments were administered to learners.
4. Questionnaires were distributed to teachers and headteachers.
5. Interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations were conducted.

Data collection was carried out over a specified period to ensure consistency.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study:

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants.
- Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time.
- Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained.
- Data was used strictly for academic purposes.

Special care was taken when working with learners to ensure their protection and comfort.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics such as percentages, means, and tables to summarize literacy levels.

Qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions was analyzed using thematic analysis, where responses were grouped into key themes.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings provided a comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting literacy.

5. CONCLUSION

The study found that literacy levels in rural Serenje District are critically low and influenced by multiple interconnected factors. These include learner challenges such as poor attendance and limited home support, socio-economic constraints, inadequate school resources, untrained teachers, and language barriers between home and school. The findings show that no single factor explains the problem; rather, literacy outcomes are shaped by a combination of home, school, and policy conditions. The study concludes that improving literacy requires coordinated efforts, including better teacher training, adequate learning materials, effective language policies, and stronger parental involvement.

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