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School readiness and pre-primary learning experiences of children of refugee backgrounds in Tanzania: the mediating role of family socio-economic status

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ABSTRACT


School readiness of children from refugee backgrounds is not well documented throughout the sub-Saharan region. While evidence has documented the role of home learning environments on learning, little is known about the role of family socioeconomic status. The study recruited 400 pre-primary children, 100 parents, 16 teachers and 8 school principals from in-settlement areas and self-settled naturalised citizens, urban and rural majority groups in Tanzania. Data were collected by interviews, parents' questionnaires and Bracken's Basic Concept Scale-Receptive. Parental education, family assets, parental occupation and involvement were strongly related to children's preparedness for school. However, while children of naturalised groups were from relatively poor families, their school preparedness was comparable to those from higher SES families. Parental beliefs and expectations played vital roles in influencing differences in children's school readiness across groups. These findings broaden understanding of various factors that influence children's learning in contexts with limited educational and family resources.

KEYWORDS

School readiness; naturalised citizens; Burundian refugees; family socioeconomic status; pre-primary education; Early learning experiences

Introduction

Empirical evidence from developed and developing countries have consistently showed that children from socially, emotionally and/or economically challenged backgrounds indicate unsatisfactory preparedness for formal schooling (Black et al. 2017; McCoy et al. 2017). They are more disadvantaged if they reside in rural areas in low- and middle-income countries (Ndijuye and Tandika 2022b). It is more challenging for girls from numerically and linguistically minority groups with poor family socioeconomic status in the sub-Saharan region (Matafwali and Chansa-Kabali 2019; Ndijuye and Tandika 2022b). While over the years school readiness has been conceptualised at three levels – the child's readiness, family and community readiness, and institutional

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readiness – there is no singular way to apply this definition across contexts, existing educational systems and cultures (Evans and Yuan 2022). Nevertheless, in the context of this study, school readiness entails the preparedness of children, families, schools and communities to equip and gain foundational socio-emotional and academic skills and attitudes necessary to excel in school and beyond.

For children to be prepared for school, such factors as the child, home environment, quality of interaction with peers and teachers, early social and self-regulatory abilities and cognitive and chronological maturity are said to be the determining factors (McCoy et al. 2017; Ren, Hu, and Zhang 2021). While the identified factors might be crucial, researchers in other contexts – especially those from the developing world – pinpoint family environments, the quality of teachers and the level of parental involvement as vital in readying children for school (McCoy et al. 2017; Ndiyuje and Tandika 2022a; Ren, Hu, and Zhang 2021). Nevertheless, regardless of race, background or civil status, there is a consensus among researchers, policymakers, practitioners and parents on the vital role of children to spend some time on preparing for formal schooling for immediate learning outcomes and future success in life and reportedly increased income during adulthood (Heckman 2011; McCoy et al. 2017; Ndiyuje and Tandika 2022b; Ren, Hu, and Zhang 2021).

Disparities in children’s school readiness

Recent empirical findings have documented existing developmental and school readiness disparities among disadvantaged children across regions (Bethell 2016; UIS 2020), countries (SACMEQ 2020; Uwezo 2020) and urbanities (Ndiyuje and Tandika 2022b). Even though school readiness is vital for all children, available strands of empirical evidence indicate that it is more critical for children from refugee and minority backgrounds (Murphy, Yoshikawa, and Wuermli 2018; Ndiyuje and Tandika 2022b). While recent educational reports from various developing countries, the sub-Saharan region in particular, indicate impressive improvements in access to pre-primary education (UIS 2020), there still is a huge divide in terms of school readiness across urbanities (Matafwali and Chansa-Kabali 2019; UIS 2020), gender (Ndiyuje and Tandika 2022b) and family SES (Uwezo 2020).

The effects of these disparities may exist in later learning outcomes (Iruka et al. 2020), and potentially have implications on adulthood income (Heckman 2011). In the East African region, disparities in school preparedness have been associated with religious beliefs (Ndiyuje 2020) and cultural practices and gender preferences (Matafwali and Chansa-Kabali 2019). To mitigate these inequalities, reduce children’s vulnerability to poverty, and foster their holistic development, access to quality pre-primary education has been proved to be an effective means – especially for children from refugee and other disadvantaged backgrounds (Black et al. 2017; Ndiyuje and Tandika 2022b).

The context of naturalised citizens in Tanzania

From the early 1960s, Tanzania has hosted over three million refugees from Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire), Mozambique, Somalia, and recently South Sudan (Ministry of Home Affairs, (MoHA) 2014; UNHCR 2020). Prior to its independence, the then British colony of Tanganyika received refugees

from Burundi and Rwanda in 1959. However, the first large-scale influx of Burundian refugees came in 1972 (Hovil and Lomo 2015). This group settled in ‘the settlement areas’ of Ulyankulu, Mishamo and Katumba in western Tanzania as ‘in-settlement refugees’. A small portion of them lived alongside rural local majority Tanzanians as ‘self-settled refugees’ (Hovil and Lomo 2015; UNHCR 2020).

In 2020, the population of the ‘in-settlement refugees’ had risen from 86,450 to 340,000, while that of self-settled refugees had grown from 12,700 to 125,000 (UNHCR 2020). Following relative attainment of peace and stability in Burundi, refugees had three options: going back to Burundi, resettlement in the third country, or naturalisation in Tanzania. In 2007, Tanzania started the process to naturalise those who wanted to stay (Hovil and Lomo 2015), and until 2015, about 300,000 of them had been formally granted Tanzanian citizenship. As naturalised citizens of Tanzania, their children have equal rights as other Tanzanian-born children to access social services such as free basic education and healthcare (URT 2014).

Theory underpinning this study

The study was guided by the bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2007) which assumes that children’s development and learning occur in a nested arrangement of structures/layers each contained in the other. And the development process occurs because of complex reciprocal interactions between ‘biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment’ (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2007). Understanding the multidimensional effects of the proximal processes on development, the foci should be on individual persons, quality of interactions, contexts and outcomes. Because there are variations in these processes, they affect people differently (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2007). Children’s development occurs when they are immersed and interacting in and with the interrelated nested structures which Bronfenbrenner termed ecological sub-systems (Bronfenbrenner 1979), and which ultimately shape their holistic development.

Reflecting Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory, children are individual entities that exist and live within families, communities and schools. Their developmental and learning environments are influenced by the existing culture, policies and laws (Macrosystem and Exosystem) and occur at school and home contexts (microsystem). In this study, we considered only the relationship between family socioeconomic status and children’s school readiness. This is because although there are many factors which impact children’s development and learning, in the context of the limited educational and school-related resources that exist in Tanzania, family SES remains as a single most important factor that potentially may influence learning outcomes (McCoy et al. 2017; Ndijuye and Tandika 2022b).

The role of family SES on children’s school readiness

Empirical evidence has consistently indicated that family socioeconomic status (SES) has implications on children’s holistic development (Cooper and Stewart 2020; McCoy et al. 2017), participation (Ferguson, Bovaird, and Mueller 2007) and school readiness

(Ndijuye and Tandika 2022b). Cooper and Stewart (2020) found a linear causal effect relationship between household income and children's developmental outcomes such as health, cognitive and social and emotional skills. This relationship is more nuanced particularly for children from low-income households (Ren, Hu, and Zhang 2021). Family poverty has implications on children's health, home life, schooling and neighbourhoods which ultimately affects their school preparedness (Ferguson, Bovaird, and Mueller 2007; Ndijuye and Tandika 2022b). In Tanzania, where most of the families solely depend on subsistence farming (Kafle, Jolliffe, and Winter-Nelson 2018), spatial location – which mostly correlates with family SES – has implications for children's preparedness for school (Kafle, Jolliffe, and Winter-Nelson 2018; Ndijuye 2020).

However, despite the fact that studies have consistently documented the association between family SES and children's various developmental outcomes (Ndijuye and Tandika 2022a; Zeraatkar et al. 2020), policy interventions to improve immediate and long-term outcomes have been proven to be practical decisions that may ensure that refugee children have access to a quality good start to schooling (Ereky-Stevens, Siraj, and Kong 2022). While various empirical studies from developed countries have consistently demonstrated the linear relationship between family SES and school readiness of children of immigrant and refugee backgrounds (Ereky-Stevens, Siraj, and Kong 2022; Lamb 2020), little is empirically known from the sub-Saharan region, which hosts about 40% of them. Even in the context of Tanzania, available evidence has documented the relationship between home learning environments and naturalised citizens' early reading and numeracy attainments (Ndijuye 2020). None has documented the role of family SES on the school readiness of children of naturalised citizens. This study aimed to fill this gap by answering the following questions:

1. What are the differences in family SES between naturalised citizens and the majority groups in Tanzania?
2. How are the differences in family SES of naturalised citizens and local majority groups related to and influence their children's school readiness?

Methods

Research design, research area, sample selection and sample size

Throughout the research process, the study used the concurrent mixed method design to gain the breadth and in-depth understanding of the contexts of school preparedness of children from naturalised citizens and local majorities. Specifically, it used concurrent embedded design in which qualitative data aided in clarifying findings of quantitative data (Creswell and Creswell 2017) which were concomitantly collected.

Katavi and Kigoma regions were purposively selected because they host the highest number of naturalised citizens. From these regions, two urban centres – Kasulu and Mpanda – which are geographically close to the population of naturalised citizens, were purposively selected. Tanganyika and Buhigwe districts were selected because they host the highest numbers of both naturalised citizens and rural local majority populations. From each district, four schools – a total of 16 schools – were randomly selected

and administered the Measuring Early Learning Environments (MELE). The MELE is a recently developed research instrument to measure the quality of pre-primary classrooms in low- and middle-income countries (UNICEF 2017).

From each population group, the highest scoring school – four in total – was selected. The selected schools had comparable MELE scores, possibly because all were public schools and were hence of relatively similar quality. This was purposely done to broadly control the influence of school quality on children's school preparedness. From each school, the study randomly recruited 100 children – 400 in total – of whom 197 were boys and 203 girls aged between 59 and 74 months. In a typical sub-Saharan country, children in urban areas begin school while much younger than or close to official school age, while in rural areas children are mostly over-aged. One of the current features of pre-primary education in Tanzania is bustling and overcrowded classrooms ranging between 150 and 200 children. As such, a sample of 100 children was not difficult to locate within a single public pre-primary school. We recruited 120 parents with children registered in a pre-primary class, eight pre-primary teachers (two from each participating school) and four school principals – one from each school selected by virtue of their position.

Instruments for data collection

Family socioeconomic status

The parents' questionnaire was used to collect information about various aspects of family socioeconomic status. We modified and contextualised the Rao and colleagues' (2013) parents' questionnaire to fit the context and needs of this study. The original questionnaire is divided into four main sections: (i) Preliminary demographic information; (ii) Information about pre-primary school learning experiences, (iii) Child development; and (iv) Home learning environments and family socioeconomic status. However, given the purpose of this study, we contextualised and used the sections related to family demographic information and family socioeconomic status. The questionnaire was modified by revising some questions to allow for asking follow-up questions, which provided very informative descriptive data. The collected data were related to children's first language, parental beliefs towards education and parental involvement in children's learning and development.

School-related interview

School principals and teachers were interviewed to understand the school and classroom contexts. Specifically, school principals were asked about how they organise and manage institutions with learners from diverse backgrounds and learning needs. Furthermore, they were asked about the criteria for admission of new pre-primary children. Teachers were asked about their strategies to manage large classrooms with learners with diverse needs. And they were asked about how they organised classroom activities and manage issues related to the language of instruction. It is important to note that while the official medium of instruction in Tanzania is Kiswahili, less than 20% of pre-primary children fluently speak this language (MoEST 2020). As such, it was important to explore issues related to children's mastery of Kiswahili.

Children's school readiness

The study used Bracken's Basic Concept Scale – Receptive to measure children's school preparedness. Given the purpose of the study – school readiness – we used the School Readiness Composite (SRC) subtests. Generally, this developmentally sensitive tool measures children's understanding of concepts in foundational and academic domains (Bracken 2007). While it was developed in a context of developed countries, this tool is popular and has been successfully used in developing countries (see Ndiujye 2020; Ndiujye and Rao 2018; Rao, et al. 2013).

To fit into a mental schema of a typical rural sub-Saharan child, various items were redrawn, deleted or added. Specifically, the yellow and brown blobs were replaced with drawings of a ripe yellow banana and a cup of brown coffee, respectively; and sounds C, X and Q were deleted because they do not exist in Kiswahili phonics. However, while the pre-primary curriculum requires that children be taught number concepts up to 10, we included number concepts up to 20 to identify mathematically talented and gifted children. Even though this tool has numbers up to 100, in this study, children were not tested on numbers beyond 20. While it is not uncommon for early childhood researchers from the sub-Saharan region to use tools developed elsewhere (see Ndiujye and Rao 2018; Ndiujye and Tandika 2022b), we admit that these practices have implications for reliability due to contextualisation of tools. Nevertheless, cross-cultural translation of concepts is necessary given the variations of meaning and interpretations attached to the concept of school readiness (Aboud and Hosain 2010; Ndiujye and Tandika 2022a).

The instructions for administration and scoring were translated into Kiswahili by the author, and back-translated by a professional English-Kiswahili linguist. After the two translations, there were minor discrepancies between the original and the two versions. When we calculated internal consistency of the final draft, the Cronbach's alpha (α) value was 0.92, which is reasonably acceptable. The scoring was encircling 1 for correct response, 0 for incorrect response, and NR for no response.

Procedures

The research team included two enumerators who were recruited, exposed to research context, and participated in designing and piloting of instruments. To calculate inter-rater reliabilities, children were individually tested by the author and/or either of the enumerators. Preliminary findings indicated inter-rater reliabilities of 0.90 for the author, and 0.92 for the first enumerator and 0.89 for the second enumerator. The order of assessment was counterbalanced and took place after class hours. Parents' questionnaires were completed during home visits. While it allowed establishment of rapport and mutual trust between the two sides, it also provided an opportunity for the researchers to do some unintended observations of the home environment, which greatly enriched these findings.

Ethical issues and considerations

To comply with the laws and guidelines for externally funded research projects, we applied and obtained ethical clearance by submitting the project proposal to the Tanzania National Bureau of Statistics, which approved it. A copy of the research permit was sent by the Ministry for Local Government Authorities to the four districts included in the study. Written parental consent to administer the SRC child tests was obtained at the individual school level. It was necessary to obtain parental consent because children

were under the age of 18, and hence still under parental custody. Parents' and teachers' oral voluntary participation consents were also obtained. Participants were informed of their freedom to withdraw from the study whenever they feel and decide to do so. As an important ethical practice in research, each participant was assigned and identified through a pseudonym throughout the research process. For participants' privacy, safety and confidentiality, the data collected were entered and stored in password-protected software. In a context where research culture is not solidly grounded as it is in Tanzania, it is always practically important to strictly observe ethical practices to achieve research purposes. For this case, the purpose was to expand knowledge and avoidance of errors, thereby ensuring a sense of fairness and mutual respect.

Methods of data analyses

In the preliminary tests, children's gender, family assets, age, parental education and parental occupation were used as independent variables, and SRC scores as a dependent variable. This was aimed at identifying variables that could be used in the final analyses to determine the differences and relationships among variables and school readiness of children from the tested groups. In the final analyses, ANCOVA was used to determine the differences. With the control of family SES variables – parental education, parental occupation, parental involvement and assets, children's age and gender – a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to determine which family SES factors were associated with children's school readiness. Interview data were reduced, coded and transcribed to develop relevant themes and sub-themes (Creswell and Creswell 2017).

Results

Differences in family SES between naturalised citizens and the majority groups

Parental education

Across groups, the average years of schooling was 5.6 years. However, parents from urban groups had 1.2 years more than the average years of schooling. Across groups, mothers had 1.4 years less of schooling than fathers, with mothers from urban areas being the most educated group of mothers (10.4 years of schooling), while those from the rural majority were the least educated group of mothers, with 4.4 years of schooling. On average, while fathers from urban areas were more educated than any other population group with 12.6 years of schooling, fathers from the rural majority group were the least educated group in the fathers' category. Note that primary education in Tanzania is 7 years, secondary school is 4 years, an ordinary diploma is 2–3 years and university is 3+ years. More findings are as indicated on [Table 1](#) below.

Table 1. Parental education across population groups.

	In-settlement		Rural majority		Urban majority		Self-settled	
	Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers
1. None	(09)	(04)	(36)	(17)	(03)	(00)	(08)	(05)
2. Primary	(63)	(45)	(61)	(45)	(35)	(28)	(54)	(42)
3. Secondary	(18)	(36)	(01)	(27)	(47)	(43)	(26)	(36)
4. Dip/grad	(10)	(15)	(02)	(11)	(15)	(29)	(12)	(17)

Source: Field data (2021). Note: The figures are in percentage.

Parental occupation

Regardless of specific social group, most of the parents from naturalised citizens – about 63% of them – were predominantly peasants and/or petty traders. Parents from the urban majority group were predominantly a group of professionals working in either public service or the private sector, which is understandable given their superior levels of education. One out of three of them was working in public service. In a context where government is the main employer, this means parents in this group were the most privileged. The majority of parents from the rural majority group – about 48% of them – were peasants. Very few of them (about 5%) were professionals: this could be because of their low educational levels. Detailed findings can be observed on [Table 2](#) below.

Family ownership of assets across social groups

Compared to other population groups, families of the urban majority group were relatively the richest. The whole group of naturalised citizens had fewer assets than the urban majority, but relatively more assets than the rural majority group. For instance, while only 1 in 10 families of naturalised citizens reported not owning a house, less than one person (5%) of the urban majority reported not owning one. Among the rural majority group, almost two families (16%) reported not owning a house. However, we did not observe the quality of these houses because it was not part of this study.

Some of the reported assets are linked to rural livelihood or socio-cultural practices, and could not be considered to entirely reflect how rich or poor a family is. For instance, owning a piece of land for farming is a means for survival in rural areas, while in urban areas it is an indicator of wealth. Similarly, most of the families in rural areas did not have a bank account or own a television. Specifically, findings indicated that more than 8 out of 10 families (83%) in the urban majority group reported having a bank account, compared to 38% of naturalised citizens, and 20% of rural majority families. In the sub-Saharan region, banking services and electricity are very rare and are regarded as luxuries saved for the few elites. More findings are presented in [Table 3](#) below.

Level of parental involvement across groups

On this measure, the assumption was that children from higher SES families would experience more supportive and constructive interactions with their parents or any other adult – mother, father or other family member not below 18 years of age. The learning activities included those developmentally relevant and socio-culturally appropriate in a context characterised by limited educational and home resources. This included storytelling, naming of common items, singing, playing age-appropriate games and

Table 2. Parents occupations across Social Groups.

	In-settlement		Rural majority		Urban majority		Self-settled	
	Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers
1. Peasants	34	18	57	40	11	06	30	23
2. Petty traders	48	30	28	10	22	20	42	26
3. Const. workers	05	31	07	34	14	30	04	24
4. Assoc. prof.	05	12	04	10	24	18	08	15
5. Professional	08	09	04	06	29	32	16	12

Note: The figures are in percentage.

Const. workers – Construction workers; Assoc. prof. – Associate professional.

Table 3. Family ownership of assets across social groups.

	In-settlement	Rural majority	Urban majority	Self-settled
Own house	89%	84%	95%	91%
Mobile phone	93%	88%	98%	94%
Own farm	100%	100%	72%	92%
Own bicycle	100%	97%	67%	100%
Own livestock	87%	71%	43%	82%
Electricity	41%	45%	90%	40%
Own TV	54%	42%	88%	37%
Bank account	36.6%	20%	83%	40%

Source: Field data, (2021).

academically related activities such as counting and drawing. Central measures – mean, standard deviation and median of the frequencies of adult–child interactions in the past seven days – were calculated.

As indicated on [Table 4](#), findings showed that compared to other social groups, parents from the group of naturalised citizens were the most involved in their children’s learning activities. For instance, the average involvement of mothers from self-settled naturalised citizens ($M = 7.32$, $SD = 1.24$) was higher than the in-settlement ($M = 6.14$, $SD = 1.22$), rural majority ($M = 4.42$; $SD = 1.03$) and urban majority groups ($M = 5.62$; $SD = 1.34$). One of the interesting findings was that among the rural majority group, children were mostly supported by ‘other family members’ such as older siblings, aunts and grandparents. However, such practices are not uncommon among collective communities in the sub-Saharan region (Matafwali and Chansa-Kabali 2019; Ndijuye 2020).

Differences and predictors of family SES and school readiness across groups

Given that the study had four social groups, it was necessary to conduct a blend of analysis of variance and regression (ANCOVA) with in-between variables of social group and gender. As shown on [Table 5](#) below, findings indicated a very significant main effect for gender ($F(1, 120) = 108.04$, $p = .003$, $d = 0.588$) and social group ($F(2, 137) = 120.04$, $p = .012$, $d = 0.516$). Findings from the follow-up test indicated that children of self-settled

Table 4. Parental involvement and support across social groups.

	In-settlement	R/majority	U/majority	Self-settled
Father				
Mean	5.44	3.27	5.72	5.14
SD	0.63	0.72	1.32	0.73
Median	2.00	2.00	2.00	3.00
Range	3.7-5.0	2.7-4.1	4.0-5.8	4.2-5.3
Mother				
Mean	6.14	4.42	5.62	7.32
SD	1.22	1.03	1.34	1.24
Median	4.00	3.00	3.00	3.00
Range	5.0-6.5	3.0-5.5	3.5-6.5	4.5-7.5
Other				
Mean	2.44	4.29	3.74	3.31
SD	0.62	1.22	1.28	0.67
Median	1.00	3.00	3.00	2.00
Range	1.5-2.5	2.7-4.2	2.53-3.5	1.9-3.0

Source: Field data (2021).

naturalised citizens ($M = 42.36$, $SD = 4.42$) had a higher mean score than those from the rural majority group ($M = 22.43$, $SD = 3.54$). Boys from the urban majority group ($M = 48.25$, $SD = 4.32$) indicated the highest school readiness than those from other social groups. And girls from the self-settled naturalised citizens group ($M = 38.05$, $SD = 4.32$) showed the highest school preparedness than those from other social groups. See [Table 5](#) for detailed findings.

To establish the existing relationship between family SES and children's school preparedness, findings from a three-block regression analysis were conducted. It used gender and age as control variables at block one and parental education, parental occupation, family assets and level of parental involvement at block two of the model. In the final block, we entered social group (*in-settlement naturalised citizen, self-settled naturalised citizen, rural majority, and urban majority*).

As indicated in [Table 6](#) below, results showed that in the first block, the contribution of age and gender ($F(1, 30) = 151.263$, $p = .000$) accounted for 32% of the variance. In the second block, variables related to family SES were very significant, explaining an additional 42.6% of the variance ($F(2, 40) = 154.415$, $p = .000$). In the final block, the addition of social group explained an insignificant additional 2.31% of the total variance ($F(1, 40) = 123.145$, $p = .168$); while the R^2 change was insignificant statistically. The significant predictors of children's school readiness were age ($\beta 0.041$, $p = .011$), gender ($\beta 0.082$, $p = .013$), parental education ($\beta 0.231$, $p = .011$), parental occupation ($\beta 0.217$, $p = .021$), parental involvement ($\beta 0.124$, $p = .011$) and family assets ($\beta 0.212$, $p = .021$). Interestingly, the social group of children was significantly related to their school preparedness. The summation of the seven predictors accounted for 90.7% of the total variance.

Influence of medium of instruction

Findings from interviews with school principals, teachers and parents pinpointed the significant role of mastery of the language of instruction. Teachers from both naturalised citizens and rural majority revealed that while Kiswahili is the official medium of instruction, most of their children came to school with extremely limited understanding of and fluency in the language. However, these findings are unsurprising given that in this study, only almost one child out of four (24%) was a native Kiswahili speaker. Interestingly, regardless of the social group to which they belonged, more than two-thirds of children (77%) who were either bilingual or multilingual spoke Kirundi, Kiha and/or Kifipa/Kipimpwe. Only 8% of bilinguals/multilinguals had Kiswahili as one of their spoken languages. Among the urban group, most of the children (86%) reported to be monolingual spoke Kiswahili as their mother

Table 5. Means of school readiness competence across social groups.

	Group (M & SD)	Boys (M & SD)	Girls (M & SD)
1. Self-settled naturalized citizens	42.36 (4.42)	47.67 (4.61)	38.05 (4.32)
2. In-settlement naturalized citizens	36.78 (4.35)	33.82 (4.55)	34.71 (3.51)
3. Rural majority	22.43 (3.54)	36.34 (3.64)	17.51 (3.24)
4. Urban majority	44.28 (4.37)	48.25 (4.32)	40.83 (4.51)

Source: Field data (2021).

Table 6. Relationships between children’s school readiness and family SES.

Predictor	Predicting data			Model data		
	<i>B</i>	β	R^2	ΔR^2	ΔF	<i>t</i>
Block 1: Demographic variables						
Age	5.718	0.411*	0.22	0.22	12.413	4.514
Gender	2.458	0.082*	0.108			
Block 2: Family SES						
Parental Edu	4.572	0.231**	0.724	0.784	25.012	3.213
Assets owned	2.115	0.424**	3.137			
Parents occu.	3.424	0.217**	3.471			
Parents invol.	3.681	0.212**	3.713			
Block 3: Final model						
Social group	0.467	0.002*	0.907	0.0121	0.217	0.434

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

tongue and only language. In urban Tanzania, Kiswahili is widely used especially among second- and third-generation urban families. See more findings on Figure 1 below.

Reported parental beliefs and expectations

Depending on the social group to which one belonged, parents held very different beliefs and expectations towards their children’s education. While parents from the more educated urban majority group considered education to be their children’s right and ‘preparation for a successful future’, parents from naturalised citizens considered education a pathway to upward social mobility, and a means to integrate their children in a host community. One of them revealed the following:

I closely collaborate with teachers because we (parents and teachers) are working to achieve the same goal. I really want my children to have a better tomorrow than mine, and the best

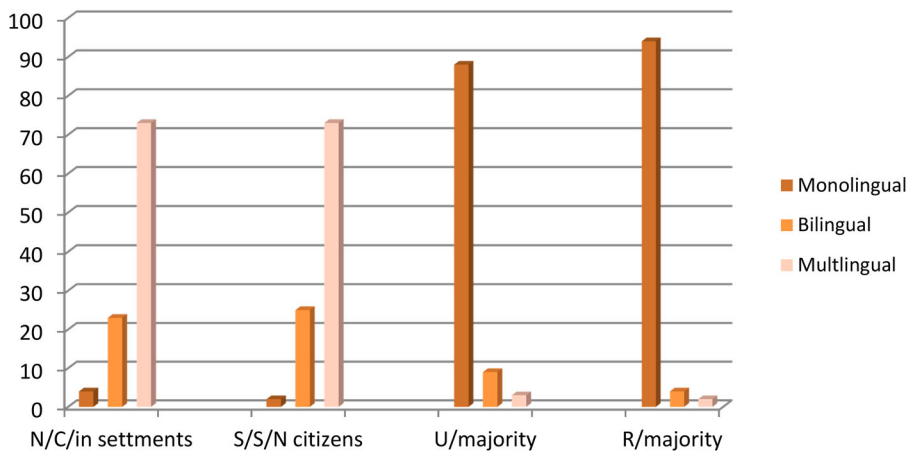


Figure 1. Reported language distributions spoken by children across Social Groups. Note: N/C/in settlement: Naturalized citizen living in settlement areas; S/S/N citizen: Self-settled naturalized citizens; U/majority: Urban majority group; R/majority: Rural majority group.

way to achieve that goal is to ensure that they are learning ... appropriate learning will surely lead to better job prospects and a bright future in Tanzania.

Discussion

Variations and differences in school readiness across social groups

The existing popular beliefs and our hypotheses were that families of naturalised citizens would be poorer; hence, their children would have demonstrated less school preparedness. However, children of self-settled naturalised citizens demonstrated comparable school readiness to that of more advantaged urban families. While urban schools are more funded than rural schools in Tanzania (MoEST 2020), and to a large extent, in the sub-Saharan region (UIS 2020), the findings of this study seem to emphasise the importance of family SES (Ren, Hu, and Zhang 2021); and supportive home learning environments (Wolf and McCoy 2019).

Across social groups, there were gender divides in school readiness with boys outperforming girls in their specific group, and boys from self-settled naturalised citizens demonstrating the highest SRC scores. We found a relatively large gender divide in school readiness between children from the group of self-settled naturalised citizens, in which we could not empirically establish the underlying reasons. In developing countries, gender divides in learning outcomes have been associated with socio-cultural reasons (Matafwali and Chansa-Kabali 2019; Tesema and Braeken 2018), religious beliefs and poverty (Kafle, Jolliffe, and Winter-Nelson 2018; McCoy et al. 2017). The popular belief in Tanzania is that girls should get married; hence, there is no need to waste time and resources on their education (Kafle, Jolliffe, and Winter-Nelson 2018)

Relationships between family SES and children's school readiness across social groups

The study used four variables (*parental education, parental occupation, parental involvement, and family assets*) to determine the association between family socioeconomic status and children's school readiness. All the four variables were very strongly associated with children's school readiness. However, children from the urban majority group with higher family SES demonstrated comparable school preparedness to that of naturalised citizens. These findings emphasise the role of parental beliefs and expectations in children's learning and development. These findings are in line with Ndijuye and Tandika (2022b) and Tobin (2020) who established that immigrant parents are more focused and pragmatic in handling and prioritising issues related to their children's education even though their voices are mostly not heard in ECEC settings.

The question of the medium of instruction in the socio-politically fragile sub-Saharan countries is one of the delicate and sensitive issues (Kjørholt, Matafwali, and Mofu 2019; Nikiema 2011). Most children from the majority groups were either monolingual or bilingual. However, almost all the children from the groups of naturalised citizens were either bilingual or multilingual. Children from the urban majority group whose first language is Kiswahili – the medium of instruction – demonstrated significantly higher school readiness than the rural majority, whose first language was not Kiswahili.

This finding supports the argument that children learn better in a language they understand (Busch, Buchmüller, and Leyendecker 2021; Nikiema 2011). However, children from the group of self-settled naturalised citizens whose first language was not Kiswahili and came comparatively from lower SES families, demonstrated comparable school readiness to that of more advantaged urban children. These findings may need more empirical explorations to establish substantial evidence.

Taken together, these findings could be clearly understood through the lenses of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory. The differences in children's school readiness across social groups and gender are deeply rooted in the existing socio-cultural contexts and failures of the education system to equally serve all children regardless of urbanicity, family SES, gender or skin colour. Furthermore, while the pre-primary level set the foundation by readying children for formal schooling and future success as adults, it is more confusing and problematic for children when the language of instruction is different from the language spoken at home, and by the surrounding communities (Busch, Buchmüller, and Leyendecker 2021).

Conclusion and recommendations

While the deliberate efforts to broaden access to education in the sub-Saharan region have paid off (UIS 2020), attention should apparently be directed towards the quality of educational services provided. Equity as an important part of quality education (Kjørholt, Matafwali, and Mofu 2019) involves inclusion of children from minorities and refugee backgrounds (Ndijuye and Rao 2018). This necessitates development of integrated, multi-sectoral and practical early childhood policies to ensure that all children regardless of backgrounds are holistically and developmentally ready to transit to formal schooling.

Given the findings of this study, we recommend that in a context with limited educational resources and the low quality of the teaching force, family involvement is vital. This demands establishment of solid parent-school partnerships for the wellbeing of children and communities. Forging strong parent-school partnership is more important for children from immigrant and refugee backgrounds. Given the importance of medium of instruction in children's early learning outcomes, we recommend that future research focuses more on exploring the question of language of instruction among children of recently naturalised citizens in the sub-Saharan region. There is also a need to conduct an in-depth study to explore the reasons for less advantaged children from naturalised groups demonstrating comparable school readiness to children from the more advantaged urban majority group.

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