

# A Study into the Involvement of Parents in Literacy Development Programmes for Deaf Learners

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**Abstract:** This paper is part of a broad study that looked at the impact of hearing loss on literacy skills development. This paper explores the involvement of parents as a literacy development strategy among learners with hearing impairments. The study employed mixed methods where both qualitative and quantitative techniques were used. However, the case study design largely underpinned the study. The representative sample was composed of five educators (two teachers and three administrators) and 10 parents who were conveniently selected. Questionnaires, interviews and observation were the data gathering tools used. The results showed that most parents had a culture of taking their children with hearing impairment to social gatherings. There were misconceptions that hindered parental involvement in the education of their children with hearing impairment. All the respondents strongly agreed to the assumption that the parents had a misconception that educating the student with hearing impairment was the responsibility of the specialist teacher alone. Parental involvement was also limited due to poor relations between educators and parents. Parents did not get the requisite support to be part of their children's education. The study recommended that teachers should create a feeling of belonging by learning sign language and teaching it to their classes. Teachers should not be afraid to ask students and parents for assistance with signing. It was also recommended that all professionals working with students who are deaf need to develop programmes that increase parental knowledge and participation.

**Keywords:** literacy development, hearing impairment, sign language, deaf, educators.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Literacy provides students with hearing impairment with opportunities to enter the world of literature and enjoy videos, television with captioning and other forms of entertainment with their hearing peers. It allows them to access information through all types of media. Opportunities to read and enjoy books alone, with friends or with teachers are important learning experiences for all students. Exploring the written word through drawing and writing also benefits all students (Briggle, 2005). Children who are hearing impaired, like their hearing peers, participate in literacy events and use written language in many typical ways. The current situation in which, learners with hearing loss experience difficulties in achieving normative standards of literacy in spoken and written language, is not new. However, as already stated, the consequences of low literacy skills for people with hearing impairment this digital era are far graver than at any other era. High levels of literacy achievement are now more important than ever before. Literacy skills have become central to the daily communication and information requirements of students with hearing impairment. Leigh (2000) noted that, for most individuals with hearing impairment, access to telephone communication is via a text message in a cellular-phone. In these situations, communication is totally dependent upon their literacy skills and those of their communication partners who, in a large percentage of cases are deaf themselves.

Similarly, in regards to news and information on public affairs, a strong dependence on literacy skills is again evident. In a society where so much information is conveyed through the electronic media, this represents a very high degree or reliance upon print-based media. Strong literacy skills are also needed to allow students with hearing impairment to complete in the job market. Students with hearing impairment, who use sign language to communicate, live and interact in an English speaking world. They are expected to read and produce English in assignments at school. Students with hearing impairment are required to be functionally bilingual to effectively participate in their community. However, literacy development in students who are impaired is a multifaceted issue. Literacy achievement in a spoken and written language is a challenge for students with hearing impairment (Rottenberg and Scarfoss, 1992).

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

Students who are deaf experience poor reading and writing performance in schools (Padden and Ramsey, 1993). There are reported significant lower levels of attainment in literacy in students with hearing impairment when compared with their hearing age peers. Most students with hearing impairment in Zimbabwe today (roughly 80 percent) are placed in a mainstream school environment, that is, in integration units hearing peers and teachers (Salend, 2001). As students with hearing impairment are increasingly being educated in mainstream public school programs and are required to be functionally bilingual to effectively participate in their community, there is a need to critically analyse the factors affecting literacy development as these factors affect the student's educational success.

### **1.2 The Research Question**

What is the level of parental involvement in literacy development of learners with hearing impairments?

### **1.3 Delimitation of the Study/ Scope**

The study focused on factors affecting literacy development in students with learning impairments who are in an integration unit at primary school level. Out of the two primary schools with integration units of students with hearing impairment in Epworth- Mabvuku/Tafara District in Harare, the research was carried out at Epworth Primary School in Epworth, a township located North-East of the capital city, Harare. The community that makes up the township is of different cultural groups, the Shona, Ndebele and Deaf. Furthermore, these students with hearing impairment that are enrolled in this school are neither of English nor part of the Deaf cultural group.

### **1.4 Theoretical Framework**

Theoretical framework which informed this study emerged from the socio-cultural model of literacy development relating to students who are hearing impaired and with limited English proficiency. According to Rodda and Eleweke (2000), in socio-cultural model, it is considered that people who are deaf have a culture and language different from hearing people and are linguistic minorities for whom the learning of English literacy skills must be considered a second language learning.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Success in education requires systematic support but is also influenced by many other factors. Family involvement and support, a good self image, high expectations and the support of friends are also vital to the educational success of students with hearing impairment (Toscano, McKee and Lepoutre, 2002).

Calderon (2000) carried out a research on the impact of school-based, teacher –related parental involvement in language development and early reading skills. According to the study by Calderon (2000), parental involvement in children's school-based education program is a significant positive predictor to early reading skills but shares considerable variance with maternal communication skill for this outcome. In the study, maternal communication skills and the child's hearing loss were the strongest predictors for language development and early reading skills. The study's findings indicated that although parental involvement in their deaf child's school- based education program can positively contribute to academic performance, parental communication skill is a more significant predictor for positive language and academic development (Calderon, 2000). Mothers who demonstrated better communication skill with their children had children

with higher language and reading scores. A parent would have to be quite involved with his or her child with hearing loss to develop good mutual communication. For the young children with hearing impairment, developing a common language base requires a fair amount of work on the parents' part, especially if that common language is a new language to the parent, such as sign language. Even sharing spoken English with children who are deaf requires a significant amount of practice and sensitivity to make the spoken message meaningful and accessible. Even mothers with higher levels of education may not be able to influence their child if they do not share a communication mode (Calderon, 2000).

Results from the study carried out by Calderon (2000), provide evidence that parental involvement may depend on the development of other parent skills first, as demonstrated by the moderate correlation and shared variance between direct parental involvement and maternal communication skill in explaining early reading skills. The study by Calderon (2000) suggests that mothers who can communicate better with their child with hearing impairment may also feel more at ease to interact with their child in settings other than the home, feeling more comfortable participating in their child's school environment.

Research on parental involvement with high-risk and special needs children (e.g. children of poverty, children with impairments, immigrant children, and children with emotional problems) has also shown that parents are instrumental in the teaching of academic, language and social skills (Innocenti and Taylor, 1998). Children with hearing impairment are considered a high-risk population because of their well- documented delays in language and communication skills, academic achievement, and social –emotional adjustment (Green berg and Kusche, 1989).

Despite this understanding that parents are instrumental in the teaching of academic, language and social skills, several potentially troublesome issues may contribute to limited parental involvement in special education program planning. For example, conflicts may arise between home and school as a result of differences in philosophy, values, goals, and expectations. The parent-professional relationship is often marked with distrust and disillusionment. Parents and professionals may view each other as hostile, indifferent, and unable to help the child (Leyser, 1985). Studies with hearing families and children with hearing impairment (focusing on family values toward education, parent's attitudes/ expectations toward the child's achievements, parental coping skills and child's academic and social –emotional outcomes, and direct parent instruction) have demonstrated mixed results on the link between family-based influences and the child's academic, language, and psychological adjustment (Calderon and Greenberg, 1993; Calderon, Greenberg and Kusche, 1991)

However, parents influence all three domains of a child's academics, language, and social- emotional development, and each domain affects the others. It is well established that children with hearing impairment who have better language and communication skills perform better academically (Marschark, 1993), and there is strong evidence for a connection between children's socio-emotional development or social competence and academic outcomes (Greenberg and Kusche, 1993). Increase in children's reading scores, more construction use of classroom teaching time, and better social and academic problem solving resulted when children with hearing impairment reached higher levels of social –emotional competence and language and communication skills.

Researchers (Calderon and Greenberg, 1993; Calderon, Greenberg and Kusche, 1991) established empirical evidence that children with hearing impairment benefit from direct parental involvement in their child's school-based program. This relationship is important due to the differences between hearing and children who are deaf. For example, studies of hearing children have emphasized the importance of parents teaching the "mother tongue" to the child to increase and reinforce language skills being taught in the school (Marschark, 1993). What does that mean for children with hearing impairment? Historically, parent have depend on professionals to assume the responsibility of educating children with hearing impairment and conflict between parents and professionals has often resulted. Parents of children with hearing loss have often been made to feel inadequate or at odds with professionals (Calderon & Greenberg, 2000), parents then find it difficult to be directly and actively involved in their children's education programs.

Given the preliminary results of the study by Calderon (2000), it is suggested that educator's counselors, school administrators, and other related professionals should more systematically and actively invite parental involvement with the goal to enhance parental communication skills with their child. The following recommendations are offered in an effort to create and support improved parent professional teamwork for deaf children's educational and life success. First, designate the role of a parent educator in school programs to facilitate parent- school involvement and parent- child communication. Second, systematically incorporate parent volunteer opportunities in the child's educational setting.

Parents can then readily observe teachers model communication strategies with their child. And, last, do not undervalue the importance of school-sponsored sign classes, family retreats, open door policies, or other efforts that can help families increase their communication skills with their child. These activities indicate to families that they are vitally important to the education of their child and that schools value the home- school connection.

Webster (2003) carried out a research which focused on the environment of parents in the reading development of their children with hearing impairment and gathered evidence on parental experiences of reading with their child at home. Of particular interest was the relationship between teachers and parents working as partners in establishing a literacy environment for children with hearing impairment. It was concluded that uncertainty in professional practice about methods of developing literacy in children with hearing impairment could have been one of the reasons why confident support was not always offered to parents. Questionnaire data suggested that only a minority of parents in the study received advice from teachers on reading interaction strategies or on appropriate materials for home reading with their children. Although most of the parents in the study enjoyed reading with their children at home, there remained a large group of parents who expressed concern over obstacles encountered in the reading process and who were unclear about the most effective way to enable their child with hearing impairment to become literate.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The study employed mixed methods where both qualitative and quantitative techniques were used. However, the case study design largely underpinned the study. In this case the single unit of study was an institution, Epworth Primary School Integration Unit. As stated by Merriam and Simpson (1984), a case study tends to be concerned with investigating many, if not all, variables in a single unit. In this case study of Epworth Primary School Integration Unit, both the two teachers of students with hearing impairment in the Integration Unit, together with their three supervisors, the school head, deputy and teacher in-charge were part of the population. All the sixteen parents and caregivers of the students in the integration unit also constituted the population. Of the two integration units of students with hearing impairment at primary level in Epworth – Mabvuku/Tafara District, the Epworth Primary School Integration Unit was purposively selected for the study because it exhibited characteristics of interest to the researcher. It was the integration unit of students with total hearing loss that was so severe that they could not process linguistic information through hearing, with or without amplification. All the five educators (two teachers and three administrators) were made part of the sample due to small numbers. Convenient sampling was used to select 10 parents from the 16 parents. Questionnaires, interviews and lesson observation were the data gathering tools used. A pilot study was carried out at one of the primary schools with an integration unit in Hatfield. The five respondent educators who participated in the pilot study were selected by convenience and were not included in the main research. The researcher also pilot-tested the interview research questions scheduled for parents of student who are deaf on four parents of children with hearing impairment who had come to fetch their children home after school. These parents were also not included in the main research.

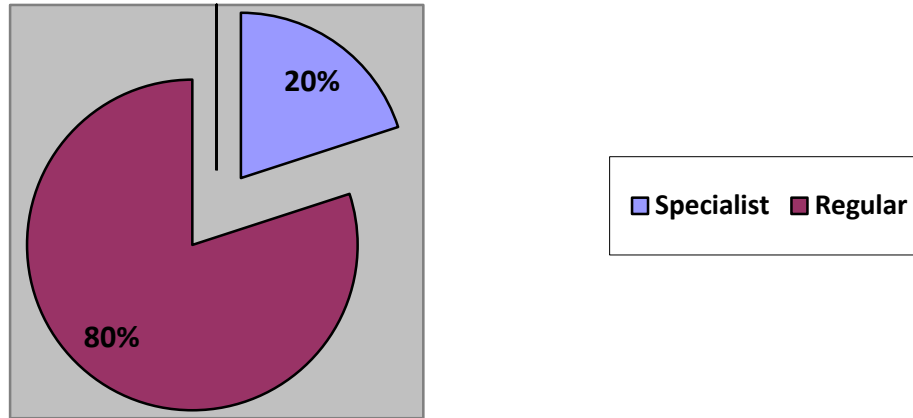
### IV. RESULTS

#### 4.1 Demographic Data

**Table 4.1: Characteristics of the two classes**

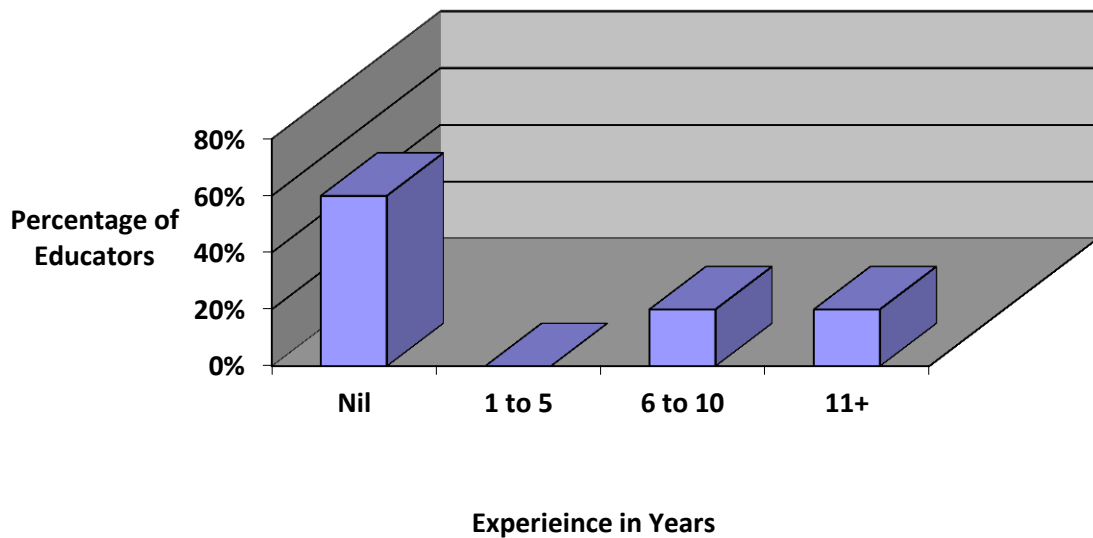
<b>Class Code</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>%</b>
No of Boys	6	5	11	58
No. of Girls	5	3	8	42
<b>Total Enrolment</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>100</b>
Male Teachers	0	0	0	0
Female Teachers	1	1	2	100
<b>Total No. of Teachers</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Teacher: Pupil Ratio</b>	<b>1:11</b>	<b>1:8</b>	<b>1:10</b>	

The striking feature of table 4.1 is the high teacher: pupil ratio of Class A.



**Figure 4.1: Distribution of Educators by Professional Qualification**

Figure 4.1 indicate that all educators were qualified teaching professionals. However only one teacher was a specialist educator and the rest were regular educators



**Figure 4.2 Experiences in Teaching Students with Hearing Impairment**

The striking feature of figure 4.2 is the vast experience of educators in teaching students with hearing impairment but without training in Special Needs Education

**4.2 Parents Involvement in literacy development of their children with hearing impairment**

The key research question of this study sought to establish the impact of parental involvement on the literacy development of their children who are deaf. Data collected during the case study on parental involvement are shown below:

**Table .4.2: Parents' views on their involvement in literacy development of their children who are deaf.**  
(N=5)

Parental Involvement	Responses				Modal Response
	Yes		No		
	No.	%	No.	%	
a) Do you assist your child do his or her homework?	3	30	7	70	No
b) Do you get support from school on reading interaction strategies or on appropriate reading material for your child who is deaf?	0	0	10	100	No
c) Do you take your child to any social gathering (e.g. weddings, church, parties and funeral)?	6	60	4	40	Yes
Aggregate					No

Table 4.2 indicates that parents do not get support from educators on how to assist their children. Most off them do not assist their children in school work.

**Table .4.3: Educators' views on parental involvement in literacy development of their children with hearing impairment.**  
(N=5)

Home and School literacy environments	Responses										Modal Response
	SD		A		N		D		SD		
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	
a) The hearing status of parents of students who are deaf has a bearing on the level of parental support for their children's education	1	20	3	60	0	0	1	20	0	0	Agree
b) Parents of students with hearing impairment feel that educating the student who is deaf is the responsibility of the specialist teacher alone.	3	60	2	40	0	0	0	0	0	0	Strongly Agree
c) Parental involvement enhances literacy development in students with hearing impairment.	1	20	4	80	0	0	0	0	0	0	Agree
Aggregate											Agree

Most educators agreed that parental involvement in children's education was limited due to hearing status, attitudinal problems as well as due to some misconceptions parents have. They however agreed to the need for parental involvement to enhance literacy development.



## V. DISCUSSION

Results of the case study showed that 60% of the respondent parents had a culture of taking their children with hearing impairment to social gatherings. Many researchers agree that literacy learning occurs primarily within social contexts for students who are deaf, and that some degree of learning occurs naturally for these students as a result of trying to connect and communicate with others (e.g. Rottenberg and Searfoss, 1992; Truax, 1992). Rottenberg and Searfoss (1992), for example, found that, through literacy deaf children find ways to learn about the hearing world and use literacy for entry into that world. The children in the study used literacy as a primary form of communication, as a tool for interaction, and to make sense of the world around them. The findings lend support to the hypothesis that literacy learning occurs within social contexts and that children gain knowledge about literacy as they engage in social events (Truax, 1992).

There were misconceptions that hindered parental involvement in the education of their children with hearing impairment. All the respondents strongly agreed to the assumption that the parents had a misconception that educating the student with hearing impairment was the responsibility of the specialist teacher alone. Parental involvement was also limited due to poor relations between educators and parents. Parents did not get the requisite support to be part of their children's education. The situation was similar to what Leyser (1985) asserted when he said that parent- professional relationship was often marked with distrust and disillusionment. Parents and professionals may view each other as hostile, indifferent and unable to help the child. This tends to impact negatively on the literacy performance of the child.

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