
Exploring the Roles of Parental Involvement in a Child's Development of Literacy Skills during First Cycle Primary level

Almaz Debru¹ and Daniel Tirunh²

Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to explore the roles played by parents in the development of a child's literacy skills. Twelve parents were randomly selected from the parents of the respondent students attending in the selected two schools. All the English teachers in both schools teaching from grade one to four are taken for the study. Forty students, twenty from each school, are randomly selected for the study. Descriptive survey is used as the research design and mixed method approach is used to analyze the collected data. Focus group interview (to gather data from parents) and questionnaire (to collect data from teachers and students) were used as data gathering tools. The findings of the study indicate that the majority of the parents did not give their support to their children that could have helped them to improve their literacy skills. Financial issues, illiteracy and lack of awareness about their roles were found to be some of the challenges parents faced as they strived to support their children. Virtually all the teachers said that they would not consult with parents on ways of improving the children's early reading skills, and parents got hardly involved in their children's education. As a result, the parents were not aware of the necessary support they could give to their children. As they did not have strong connection with teachers, they were not informed about the kinds of support they need to provide their children with. Parents did not go to the schools-except only when they were called on by the teachers and/or the school administration- to discuss their children's academic activities with the teachers and/or the school administration. The students' response also shows that they cannot get the necessary support from their parents, basically because most of them were illiterate, not aware of what materials to provide their children with.

¹ Assistant Professor of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), Kotebe Metropolitan University email address: almazde@gmail.com

² Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics and Communications, Kotebe Metropolitan University danieltirunh@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

In the history of Ethiopian education, learning literacy skills is traced back to thousands of years which is known as traditional church education. According to Pankhurst (1969), the Ethiopian church schools, mainly based on religion, were characterized by several phases of learning where the first basic lesson of learners was reading. Similarly, the Qoranic schools have also had vital contributions to the enhancement of literacy skills of Ethiopian children.

The introduction of modern education during the first decade of the 20th century had a curriculum focused on literacy as one of the skills. Following the expulsion of fascist Italy from Ethiopia in 1941, students of the period were expected to have linguistic skills in English language. As a result, English was given as a subject and medium of instruction from the elementary level onwards (Tesfaye and Taylor, 1976).

Early grade literacy is critically important in the curriculum of primary education. Since it is a prerequisite and a foundation for further education, children need to acquire the literacy skills during childhood. Teaching and learning literacy skills as a collaborative activity requires the participation of all stakeholders, one of whom is parents.

The syllabus of grade four (2008) states that children who have completed grade four should be able to read in English. On the contrary, the findings of research works of recent times have indicated that students of grade four are not able to achieve the competencies given in the syllabuses. The abilities of literacy which enable children to easily acquire the other language skills such as listening, speaking and writing have to be developed during the early years of the first cycle primary level.

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One of the crucial points that contribute to the successful achievement of the literacy skills of children is parental involvement. According to UNESCO (2005), the literacy skills of children require the participation of all stakeholders including parents.

Despite expectations, studies conducted at the national level revealed that students who have completed first cycle primary level are not able to read or comprehend simple sentences and short paragraphs. For instance, the National Learning Assessment (2004) elaborated that the English language results of grade four students were very low. Recent studies conducted by the USAID (2010 & 2012) also confirmed that the reading proficiency of students at different regions of Ethiopia at the first cycle primary level was so poor.

Parents, as one of the important stakeholders, play pertinent roles in enhancing the literacy skills of their children. To what extent have these roles been fulfilled within the context of study sites? For the purpose of the study, two government first cycle primary schools in Addis Ababa were selected. Besides, the study was confined to the role of parents in developing their children's literacy skills at the end of the first cycle primary level.

2. Objectives

This study mainly targets to explore parents' role or involvement in improving their children's English literacy and reading skills. Specifically, the study sets out to:

- Assess how far parents are involved in helping develop their children's literacy at home;
- Scrutinize the extent to which parents are aware of the necessity of their support to their children
- Assess the extent to which teachers meet with parents to discuss the students' progress in their literacy skills proficiency, and

- Evaluate the challenges parents face while helping their children.

The results of the study might be important for a variety of reasons. First, it is believed to serve as a launching pad for those who might be interested to do research on the subject, as the issue has been barely researched. Teachers who teach at the first cycle primary level may also benefit from the findings of the research as it shows them the role parents need to play and the techniques they need. It is also believed that it might enable them to get an opportunity to contribute their share in the improvement of the teaching and learning process of reading comprehension. Parents are also supposed to be beneficiaries and contribute their share. Generally, the results might play a significant role in designing proper educational policy and its implementation strategy in terms of contents and training of teachers. The results obtained from the study might also be relevant inputs to the realization of quality education in English language teaching in general and English reading literacy, in particular.

3. The role of Parents in enhancing their Children’s literacy skills

One of the research works conducted by USAID (2010) underlines that if literacy has not been successfully achieved during the early grades, it will be difficult to achieve when children become older. In its earlier publication, USAID (2009) states that if children fail to do this during the first few grades, they are more likely to repeat and ultimately dropout.

Many educators agree that the responsibility of equipping children with efficient reading skills lies on teachers. There are also many scholars and educators who strongly argue that children at the primary level need to be strongly supported not only by teachers, but also by parents.

Brewster *et al.* (2002) describe parents as “true educators”, “the first teachers” and “role models” for their children. In relation to this, Ellery (2008) elaborates that the goals of reading in each grade level from kindergarten to fourth grade can be realized if teachers support and parental involvement are available as well. The significance of parental involvement

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has been further elaborated by McLaughlin (2003) who writes that parents can play indispensable role in helping children improve their reading skills.

Some of the roles that parents are supposed to play to enhance their children's literacy are the following: encouraging their children to read for them and asking them to share what they have learned about reading, creating conducive atmosphere and reading place at home, and praising the children for their efforts to read, buying and reading materials that engross the children's interest (McLaughlin, 2003).

In order to follow up their children's achievements, parents need to establish regular contact with teachers. In addition to the follow up, they need to employ different types of reading strategies and assist their children. Some of the strategies UNESCO (2005) identified are shared reading, reading aloud, making reading text available, and showing positive attitudes towards reading as well as the practice of wide reading. Children are powerful learners at home if they are helped by their parents because, according to Barbara Tizard and Martin (1989) "... a home is a very powerful learning environment." Research has confirmed that parents' support to their children can positively affect the children's performance at school. Consequently, those children who are the outcome of a stimulating environment, where the latter is giving emphasis to learning, are found to do better in their school performance irrespective of their families' socioeconomic background (Clark, 2007).

4. The importance of parental involvement in children's education

The ultimate goal of reading is comprehension. With regard to this, Storch and Hurst (2002) point out that this important component of skilled reading along with fluency could be developed during the early level of primary education. In order to achieve this, children need to develop code related abilities that include phonological awareness and the concept of print. The two elements are said to be important prerequisites to achieve comprehension. According to Bradley & Bryant (1983), during the early

years, children need to practice reading aloud emphasizing on phonological awareness. By means of manipulating sounds, what letters are associated with what sounds, children are supposed to develop their reading skills. This could be primarily achieved by parents in the home environment where children get the opportunity to have access to a variety of letters, words, etc.

Interaction does not only help children to develop interest in reading but also helps them to develop positive attitudes towards reading and show activity in the actual classroom. The most important outcome of parents-children interaction is the development of background knowledge on the part of children. Carrell *et al.* (1988) write that background knowledge is a prerequisite to understand a text. As indicated in the same source, Emanuel Kant, who was a notable philosopher of the 19th century, had once said that the ideas found in the text get meaning when they are united with the background knowledge of the reader. In other words, in order to make a certain text meaningful, a reader is required to bring considerable information (composed of ideas, attitudes and beliefs) to the text he or she reads. Hence, it is possible to argue that efficient interaction, taking place between linguistic knowledge and prior knowledge will result in reading comprehension. Nevertheless, if a reader lacks prior knowledge, as Harmer (2001) explains, reading becomes a difficult activity.

5. Parents as the first teachers for their children

Children learn many things from their parents from the very outset. Brewster *et. al.* (2002: 257) write that researchers and educators regard parents as the “only true educators”. What is argued by these scholars here had been further explained by Braselton and Cramer (1990) who argued that children could obtain their emotional, physical and intellectual developments if there existed a consistent interaction with their parents. Children will be able to develop self-esteem, and model different types of behaviors and skills including emotional and expressive ones from their parents. In fact, the relationship between parents and their children should develop as early as possible. In connection with this, Dawson and Ashman

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(2000) contend that if relationship is developed between parents and children, it has a significant aftermath on the development of a child's well-being. What follows from this is that the unilateral efforts of teachers at school, especially at the first cycle primary level, cannot bring about the required results.

Although children at the earliest grades of the first cycle primary level are said to have potential to be acquainted with the basic ideas of education, the probability of failure could be high due to the absence of "multiple layers of support". One of them who are expected to provide support to children are parents. The major problem that parents in developing countries, such as Ethiopia, have been confronted with is illiteracy, which prevents most of them from supporting their children. However, parents' lack of academic skills could be alleviated, and still parents could give the support to their children. For instance, Global Education Center (2009) states that "even parents with few or no academic skills can be valuable resources, especially when professional teachers guide their efforts." Of course, this requires commitment on the part of parents to create regular contact with their children's teachers. This work/assignment done in consultation with the teachers can be essential to the development of literacy skills of children at the first cycle primary level.

6. Research Methodology

There are several stakeholders that significantly contribute to the achievement of literacy skills of children. Parents are one of them that share this responsibility. The purpose of this study is to explore the roles played by parental involvement in developing the literacy skills/reading proficiency of children.

It is a descriptive study intended to visualize the specific details of a situation in which the responses are based on "what" (Best & Khan, 1993). In terms of approach, it is mixed methods that include qualitative and quantitative. Since there are ten sub cities in Addis Ababa, a random

sampling technique was used to identify one sub city, that is, Yeka, where several first cycle primary schools are found. Accordingly, two primary schools were randomly chosen, i.e., Dejazmach Wodirad and Kotebe Primary schools. Selection of sites was done in line with Dornei's (2007) ideas where he writes that there is always a limit to how many sites a researcher can visit. Parents, teachers and students, the core subjects of the study were selected using different types of data collection instruments. To be more specific, lottery method was used to identify the required number of respondents and 24 teachers, 12 from each school, and 40 students, twenty from each school, were purposively chosen. 12 parents were also randomly selected for Focus Group Discussion. Grade four (The end of the first cycle primary level) was purposively chosen, and the sections were identified randomly. Accordingly, two sections from each school were randomly selected.

Students who were made to gather by teachers in one room were given the questionnaire to fill out. All the questionnaire papers were filled out and returned. Besides, the teachers also filled out the questionnaire, and twenty three questionnaires were returned. The questionnaires, both for the teachers and the students' respondents were in Amharic which were later on translated into English for the sake of analysis.

Twelve student respondents were randomly selected (six from each school) for the purpose of identifying parents for Focus Group Discussion. These parents were divided into two groups where each focus group consisted of six parents. The focus group discussion was held in Amharic and facilitated by the researchers. The FGD was later transcribed and translated into English.

During the focus group discussions, questions that would help achieve the research objectives and answer the research questions were raised. The participants of the FGD were informed about the objectives of the research and they were also encouraged to give responses based on their own

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understanding. They were told that there would not be such a thing as wrong answers.

7. Analysis, Findings and Discussions

The selected 4th grade students were given questionnaire papers to respond to. They did this with the support and supervision of teachers in their respective schools. The findings are analyzed as follows.

No	Items	Yes in number	%	No in number	%	total per. %
1	Are your parents literate?	10	25	30	75	100
2	Do your parents provide you with supplemental materials?	5	12.5	35	87.5	100
3	Do your parents allot a reading time at home?	15	38	25	62	100
4	Do your parents read short stories in English to you?	-	-	40	100	100
5	Do your parents come to school to follow up your academic performance?	10	25	30	75	100
6	Do your parents follow up your daily lesson?	15	38	25	62	100
7	Do you think your home is conducive for reading?	16	40	24	60	100
8	Do your parents model reading and ask you to read next?	5	12.5	35	87.5	100
9	Do your parents ask you first to read and they then show you the way you read?	5	12.5	35	87.5	100
10	Do your parents support you in doing your homework?	10	25	30	75	100
11	Do your parents encourage you to ask in English at home?	---	---	40	100	100
12	Do your parents ask you questions after you have listened to their reading?	5	12.5	35	87.5	100

13	Do your parents encourage you to read with a louder voice?	17	42.5	23	57.5	100
14	Do your parents ask you to read words by combining them with materials?	7	17.5	33	82.5	100
15	Are there materials used to develop reading skills at home?	5	12.5	35	87.5	100

Table 1: Students' Questionnaire

When students were asked about the literacy level of their parents, 25% of them said that their parents were able to read and write, where as a large majority of students reported that they had illiterate parents. As far as getting supplementary materials from their parents was concerned, 87.5% of the respondents argued that they were not getting support from their parents. Only 12.5% of the respondents said that their parents provided them with additional materials. Based on the above information, the following findings were obtained: the great majority of parents were illiterate and probably as a result of this, they found it difficult to provide academic support for their children. Almost all the students in the selected sites could not receive supplementary materials necessary to the enhancement of reading skills.

As noticed from Table One above, 12.5% of the respondents said that their parents did not allot adequate time at home for reading activities. A considerable number of students (*i.e.* 37.5%) reported that their parents were willing to allot sufficient time. When asked whether their parents read short stories in English, all of the respondents confirmed that they did not get such support from their parents. Besides, it was learnt that a considerable percentage of students could not get sufficient time for their study.

When students were asked whether their parents came to school to follow up their academic performance, only 25% of the respondents explained that their parents would come to school to see their academic progress; whereas

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the large majority, which is equal to 75%, did not visit their children's schools. With regard to the existence of conducive environment for the development of reading skills, 40% of the participants claimed that the houses they lived in were suitable for reading lessons, where as 60% of the respondents had the view that they did not have a suitable area for reading skills. Regarding parents' model reading, parents' insistence in asking their children to read first and parents' support in their children's homework, the Table above portrays that majority of the parents did not practice model reading. They did not have their children read for them either. Likewise they did not provide support to enhance the children's reading proficiency. By and large, the practice of supporting children by modeling reading and by making children read at home, on the part of parents, has been insufficient which could be contributing to the children's poor performance of reading skills.

Twenty-one teachers teaching English in the two primary schools of grade four filled out and returned the questionnaire. Concerning whether students face challenges while dealing with English reading lesson, 95% of teachers had the view that students faced challenges when they read. When asked if they met up with parents regularly to discuss students' progress, all of them responded that they did not do so. This claim was also confirmed by the parents' comments during the FGD. Parents would normally go to the schools only when they were called by the school to discuss disciplinary issues or to celebrate end of the academic year. With regard to students' familiarity with the important components of reading skills, 62% of the respondents indicated that the students were not aware of segmentation, dividing a word into sounds. There were, of course, some respondents, 38%, who had the view that students were capable of identifying a word.

Similarly, the majority of the respondents, 67%, mentioned that their students were not able to create a word after changing the letters into sounds. What can be inferred from the responses is that the students'

reading capabilities are very low, requiring a lot of interventions both from teachers and parents.

No	Items	Yes	Percent	No	Percent	Total per%.
1	Students face challenges when they practice reading	20	95.2	1	4.8	100
2	Meeting with students' parents regularly to discuss students' progress	21	100	0	0	100
3	Students' familiarity with segmentation	8	38	13	62	100
4	Students' familiarity with synthesizing	7	33	14	67	100
5	Students' familiarity with identifying sight words rapidly	7	33	14	67	100
6	Students familiarity with summarizing	6	29	15	71	100
7	Using model reading strategy in the classroom	13	62	8	38	100
8	Using wide reading strategy to make students fluent readers	5	24	16	76	100
9	Using questions as a strategy of teaching reading	7	33	14	67	100

Table 2: Teachers' responses about students' challenges

Concerning identifying sight words, 67% of the teachers said that the students were not capable of recognizing sight words. Likewise, 71% of the respondents said that the students were not capable of summarizing what they had read. The major finding from the responses given is that grade four students were not capable of doing what a student at their grade level is supposed to do regarding reading skills. This finding is consistent with previous findings such as the EGRA research at a national level.

With regard to teachers' strategies of teaching reading, Table 2 above shows that a considerable percentage of respondents (62%) claimed that they used

model reading when teaching reading in the classroom. Contrary to this, 38% said that they did not use wide reading as a reading strategy to help students become fluent readers. As far as using questioning method as a strategy to teach reading is concerned, 67% of the respondents replied that they did not apply this strategy. From the teachers' self-evaluation response, it could be argued that they used some of the teaching reading strategies for teaching reading. There is also a gap in using wide reading strategy which indicates that the teachers need some short-term training on teaching reading strategies.

8. Findings obtained from Focus Group Discussion

Group discussions revealed that parents made teachers responsible for looking after their children. They also argued that they hadn't known how to support their children, and the type of materials they had to provide to their children with. In spite of the best wish of parents for their children's education, they were not seen practically involved in supporting them academically. Parents' responsibilities remained at the level of principle instead of being practical. As far as supporting their children in their study is concerned, the majority could not be involved in this activity. In connection with letter reading, parents failed to support their children. Apart from this, the provision of supplementary materials and an arrangement of suitable areas for reading could not be materialized in most cases. Many parents visited schools only when they were called by teachers and school officials. They did not, in most cases, go to school to discuss the academic progress of their children. With regard to challenges, parents (most of them) faced with problems of illiteracy and financial difficulties.

Whether parents consider themselves as the first teachers and role models for their children

Almost all FGD participants stated that they had given a lot of responsibilities to teachers. What were reported by the parents during the FGD were wish lists about their children's future academic destiny. For

example, what one of the parents said during the FGD seems to have represented the interest of many parents. She said, “Like all other parents, I wish the best for my children. I wish them to be competent and successful. .” Most of the parents involved in this study focus on advising their children to study hard without showing them how to study or without providing them with materials that support their reading skills.

The parents do not consider themselves as first teachers. They entrusted teachers with the task of educating their children. Most of them during the FGD argued that their illiteracy was a big hindrance that prevented them from being a model and a teacher, thereby helping them improve their reading skills. One of the parents said, “Of course, I wish I would be a model for my children. Since I am illiterate, I am afraid I could not be a model for them. I don’t read because I am not educated.” The parents could have made their children read for them. Having children read what they have learnt is one of the strategies parents can employ to help the children improve their reading skills. Since they do not have frequent contact with teachers, they do not get sufficient advice as to what to do to their children.

The roles parents play in realizing quality education by providing supplementary materials

The provision of supplemental learning materials to children positively contributes to the enhancement of reading skills of children. Despite this, it was learned from the students’ questionnaire that the large majority of them (in the selected schools) could not receive supplementary materials appropriate to their age and grade level, aimed at enhancing their reading skills. Similarly, the responses of the majority of the parents were associated with the fact that since they did not frequently go to the schools and establish contact with the teachers, they did not know how to help their children and what type of reading materials they had to provide.

Children of the first cycle primary level should be acquainted with emergent literacy skills which serve as predictors of reading development in future

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days. That is why Weinberger (1996), as cited in Gratz and School (2006), stated that if a child is exposed to books, his emergent literacy skills are likely developed.

The presence of supplemental learning materials at home, as Brewster, *et al.* (2002) suggest, can create effective learning environment. Of course, this condition enables children to have improved background knowledge when they participate in the schools. In spite of the importance of the provision of supplementary reading materials by parents to their children, parents and the majority of students considered in this study were not able to provide and receive such materials, respectively. Although parents during the FGD indicated that they had a role to play to bring about quality education, they seemed to have given the utmost responsibility to teachers. What they did to their children was often limited to giving advice. One of the participants elaborated her role as follows:

I support my child as much as I can. I advise her to know what quality education is about. What is important for her is to know what education is for her. Education is what changes her life. She has to identify each letter. I tell her to study. I also tell her to ask her teachers and have a good rapport with them. Because of my economic background, though I burden her with chores.

As elaborated above, the parent was determined to see her child being a very good student by giving her advice. The reality on the ground, however, was different. It is true that parents wish to see their children being succeed in all aspects including their education. However, what parents would like their children to be in the future should be translated into concrete actions from the outset. Buying reading materials, creating conducive atmosphere and reading place, having them read what they have learnt at school and showing interest to listen when they read and the likes maybe some of the things parents are required to full fill. Doing such things does not necessarily require literacy. However, parents feel that their illiteracy prevented them from discharging such parental roles. A response from one

of the parents who got involved in the FGD confirms this: “Of course, parents have great responsibilities in supporting their children in their education. However, since I am not an educated parent, I could not help my children.” Another parent also lamented that illiteracy is an obstacle saying, “We parents always wish success for our children in their education. However, this has not been supported by practical activities as we do not read and write ourselves.”

What can be learned from the responses is that parents aspire to see their children at higher positions in life. Despite this aspiration, they are not seen practically getting involved in supporting their children with their academics. Although most of the parents are believed to have known the various responsibilities they are entrusted with, they are not seen translating it into measurable actions, often blaming and cursing their illiteracy and attributing it to their failure to it.

The support parents provide for their children at home

A few parents attempted to support their children in their study. Such parents supported their children in subjects like Amharic and environmental science. When parents are supportive enough, the students are also clever enough to do assignments and grasp concepts. However, from the discussions with parents during the FGD, most of them did not get involved in more practical help than verbal encouragement, allowing a child to study alone, with friends, etc. One of the parents, for instance, said, “She studies with neighboring children as she likes it. ... As I don’t read I don’t support her.” What this shows is that the parent’s involvement and consistent checkup is missing here. This parent claimed that her daughter studied with her friends, but one cannot for sure say that her daughter was with her study group and that she was actually studying even when she was with them. She neither checked her note and exercise books nor read with her. Her daughter’s going to her friend’s house did not guarantee and prove that she is studying. Respondent three on the other hand, supported her child in her study. Another parent reported the following, “I work in a market. When I

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come back home I start to prepare food for my family. Because of these routine activities, I don't get time to deal with my children's academic activities." Like illiteracy, time factor was presented as an excuse for not supporting children at home.

Another parent argued that because of her illiteracy, she could not help her child academically. All she did to her child was providing encouragement. Encouragement, to this parent, was telling the child to study. She did not go to school and check if the student was attending her lesson regularly, neither did she talk to teachers to know if the student was attending school. Merely telling children to study did not help them study. Generally, with the exception of a few parents, the majority could not involve in the academic activities of their children for a variety of reasons.

As discussed above, support can be given in many forms: reading together, reading for children while they are listening or vice versa, checking their assignments, and many more. What follows from this is that a parent committed and convinced can spare some time to do one of the aforementioned supports. However, the majority of the parents considered during this study did not live up to expectations. If they had frequently contacted and discussed with the teachers, they would have better understood what parental role would include.

From the FGD with the selected parents, it was learned that only a few of them attempted to check the children's exercise books at home. They complained that their illiteracy prevented them from checking the children's exercise books. One of the parents said that he could not see his child's exercise books but he only encouraged the child to read and revise the lesson. Other parents during the FGD confirmed that they would look at their children's exercise book without checking what had been done and what had not been done. When asked whether they could go to the school and check how their child was learning, they responded that they would not go to the school. They assumed that teachers would call them if necessary. From this one can conclude that parents do not know what to supervise as

they check their children's note book. Generally, most of the parents see their children's exercise books, but they could not be involved in helping their children in improving their reading abilities.

Helping children to improve their reading from letter reading to sentence reading

Basically, the support parents provide to children can help them to go to school with prior knowledge. Their involvement makes learning, including reading, a collaborative activity (McLanughlin, 2002, Brumfit, *et al*, 1984 Daniels, 2001). It should be noted here that a very powerful learning environment is found at home (Language & Literacy, 1989). A child who is able to get his or her parents' support at home is likely to be an influential learner in school.

Parents are also expected to show positive attitudes towards their children. Scholars such as Coppel & Promas (2009) explain that those parents who frequently read for their children and are ready to answer the questions they raised are able to positively influence the literacy/reading development of children. Besides, if parents are showing interest and then involved in listening to what their children read, they will be able to enhance the reading abilities of their children. Since parents' involvement is essential, the illiteracy of the parents can have its own contributions in negatively influencing the improvements of reading skills of their children. Parents' illiteracy is a given domain and is hardly possible to educate them easily. However, schools can exert efforts and help parents participate in the teaching learning process. As to Abdulkadir (2004), not only parents, other members of the family, for example, brothers, and sisters and relatives can contribute their share in helping children improve their learning including reading skills. In fact, parents' educational background can have paramount influence on children's education. Nevertheless, if the parents' positive attitudes are expressed in terms of consistent follow up of children's education, the possibility of creating an academically successful child and brighter future will be inevitable (Sclafani and Gratz, 2006).

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There were only a few parents who used to buy alphabet charts to help their children improve their literacy skills. One of the parents explained that she bought an alphabet chart to help her child study. However, reading is not limited to alphabets. It also includes reading words, sentences, paragraphs and texts. The supplementary materials we provide our children with at home should also include all these, depending on their age and grade level, of course. Majority of the parents during the discussion, however, reiterated that they did not buy various books for their children. When asked why they did not buy other supplementary materials, most of them said that they assumed what the school provided the children with were sufficient. One of the parents said, "If I had known she needed additional books, I could have bought." Another parent reiterated the same feeling saying, "I also want to buy my child some books, but I don't know what books to buy and from where." Parents' failure to help their children improve reading skills either by tutoring them at home or buying them some books seems to have boiled down to the weak connection between parents and teachers: parents are not advised as to how to support their children.

Most parents explained that the houses they lived in were each a single room where every activity would take place. Due to the narrowness of the room, it was difficult to create comfortable and pleasing atmosphere for reading. There were also some parents who argued that they prepared a suitable room to study in. Other parents also said they would prepare reading rooms when the children requested them. Regarding supplementary materials, most of the parents, as discussed above, did not know what materials are needed and where they could be accessed from. One of the parents argued that some supplementary materials were bought by her brother because she said he was a teacher and knew what to buy. On the basis of the information indicated above, parents presented lots of excuses for not doing enough to support their children's education.

Parents' presence in the children's schools to follow up their education

It can be argued that, in principle, most parents have the views that they should help their children. In most cases, these views had not been translated into actions; they rather remained at the level of articulation. Mere wish does not translate itself into actions. In connection with parents' support, one teacher among the participants stated on the questionnaire, "Parents do not contribute what is necessary to their children. They only prepare food for them and send them to school. They are not seen working hard to improve their children's literacy skills." The teacher's response indicates that parents have a role to play. He seemed to have felt considerable resentment towards parents as he used the word 'only' when referring to what parents did to their children's education.

It is true that illiteracy remains to be a challenge for parents. However, there are a number of other things illiterate parents can do to help their children in their reading. They can, for example, go to schools and discuss issues with teachers on how they can support their children. They can also check whether their children go to the school and attend classes. In connection with this, N'namidi (ibid) contends that in spite of the fact that illiteracy is a challenge, the teacher needs to take the responsibility of encouraging parents how constructively they can participate in helping their children improve their reading skills.

Parents' lenience and inabilities to support their children will have in the long run repercussions for their children's academic success, specially reading skills. Scholar such as N'namidi (2005) writes that reading abilities of children can be developed by the combined efforts of the stakeholders that include teachers and parents. Many agree that loud reading, and speaking in English at home, reading stories and the likes need parents support. As a matter of fact, encouragement, provision of vital learning materials and showing positive attitudes towards reading are strategies that need to be introduced by parents. In general, the more parents are literate, the more they start to take the responsibilities of supporting and following

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up their children. When this happens, along with the teachers and principals encouragement, the parents will start to play their roles. Their illiteracy, however, does not and should not preclude parents' from getting involved in their children's academic endeavors.

During the FGD, parents said that they sometimes would go to schools where their children attended. They added that they would go to school only when they were called on by the school. This shows that their school visit was not aimed at consistently following up the academic performance of their children. The parents usually visited schools when they were called by school director, usually at the end of the semesters or when disciplinary issues occurred. The response given by one of respondents can be regarded as a representative example when she answered: 'I don't go to the schools and followed up unless I am called for a meeting as I am busy with work. It may be a weakness, but I don't want to leave job and come to the school. I believe that the school administration would call me when there are issues that demand my presence at the school.'

Majority of the respondents during the FGD repeatedly used the clause, 'When we are called' in their responses when asked whether they would go to the school and check their children's performance. Invitation from school authorities for the parents to go to the school is salient in the minds of most parents. This might indicate that parents did not go to school probably on the assumption that teachers are solely responsible for their children in school. This shows how lack of awareness about parental roles on students' performance affects their involvement.

Other parents also claimed that they were busy and were unable to get adequate time to visit the schools to discuss their children's academic achievements. The word 'busy' was the most repeatedly used word in the responses of parents during the FGD. Parents did not go to schools because they were busy; it might follow from this that they would go to the school when they were free and had enough time. This shows that visiting schools to see what is happening regarding children's lesson is something extra, to

be done only when one has the time. None of the parents tried to have contacts on phones with teachers or school authorities such as the director or the supervisor. This signals that parents gave little regard to the role they were to play regarding their children's performance. One of the parents said that he would go to the school when there were disciplinary issues. He said, "I used to go to the school when I was called by teachers because of disciplinary problems my child committed." Such parents would go to the school only when obligatory circumstances occurred. However, scholars argue that parents should visit schools to learn what the children are doing and how they are doing it, be it good or bad. With regard to parents' presence in school, what stood out vivid is that parents went to schools at the end of each semester when they were called by teachers. In most cases, parents did not go to the school to discuss the academic achievements of their children.

The support parents get from school teachers and principals about what they should do regarding their children's educational activities

The findings indicated that most of the parents would go to the school when they were called on by teachers either for the disciplinary issues their children commit or for the purpose of participating in the certificate award ceremonies, which are held twice a year. These parents, in most cases, did not go to school to discuss the academic performance of their children. On the other hand, the teachers and principals did not give support and trainings in this regard. In other words, the parents were not equipped with the essential strategies to effectively deal with their children's academic progress.

Teale and Elizabeth (1980:192) argue that "Children experience literacy primarily as a social progress during their preschool years." This confirms that parents can make huge influence on their children's lives including their education, especially during the early years of childhood. The background knowledge of a child can be developed at home. This shows how important parental involvement in the education of children is. As

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indicated previously, the teacher's efforts alone cannot bring about the required results. This leads us to say that a child's foundation of basic skills can be established by the collaborative efforts of teachers, children, parents and the community. Besides, several research works have confirmed that parents spend much time with their children, especially during the early ages; accordingly, they are able to be their children's first teachers and models (Morrow, 1995 & Brewster *et.al*, 2002). Given this decisive role parents are to play, they need to get support and training from schools on supporting children at home. Without effective parental involvement, it will become difficult to bring about quality in the education in our country. In support of this, Glickman (2004: 229) writes:

Research separately demonstrates that schools...do better when parents are engaged as equal partners in the decision making that affects their children and their school. Only through this richer level of engagement will parents and the public at large better understand their vital connection to quality public education.

Parents should be given due place in the decision making of the school system. It is only when they are recognized as one important stakeholder that parents are expected to be curious to develop positive attitudes in their child's education which ultimately contributes to the quality of education. The development of positive relationships between teachers and parents could develop the interest of the former to willingly equip the latter with vital strategies of reading that enable them to involve in their children's education at home. UNESCO (2005), for instance, identifies the most vital strategies parents should be acquainted with and practice them at home including model reading, sharing reading, making reading texts available and showing positive attitudes towards reading skills. The first two strategies require literacy skills, but the other two can be implemented irrespective of educational background. Moreover, those parents with low level of education or who are illiterates can also use another strategy in which they need to allot time to listen when a child attempts to read. It is

true that listening skill requires the knowledge of the target language, but showing positive attitudes and interest indicates the parents' encouragement to their child's educational efforts.

Basically, most of the parents in the study explained that they did not get training and support both from the teachers and from the principals in the school. One parent attempted to compare it with the former private school where his child had attended. He said "... When my child was in a private school, I had been given a training; they told me what materials my child needed ... They told me to fulfill her learning materials." This parent argued that the teachers in the former school used to provide him with pertinent support which he said he was not getting from the present school. When asked if they needed to get some guidance from teachers or training on how to support their children, all of the parents agreed that they would like to have support from teachers on that regard. One of the parents said:

Yes, teachers' support and training are important Even a discussion with two people is very good. I may have some knowledge gaps and bad attitudes. If I take training, it will be good; it teaches how to take care of children and helps to fill that gap. We really need training and support from the teachers. We don't know how to psychologically treat children; we sometimes throw some words which might affect our children. If I take a training, I will prevent myself from uttering words that may hurt my children's feelings.

As can be deciphered from the parent's explanation, she was eager to get support and training to follow up her child in a safe way. It shows that this parent understood the importance of teachers' support and training for child's academic progress. From the responses parents gave during the FGD, it stood out that significant numbers of parents did not seem willing to go to the schools to consult with the teachers about their children's academic progress. On the other hand, school authorities and teachers called on parents only during the end of each semester, and when disciplinary issues occurred. From this, one can infer that the teachers and school

authorities did not give the necessary support and training for parents. This might have prevented the latter from knowing the essential strategies to deal with their children's academic progress in general and reading skills development in particular both at home and in schools.

The challenges parents face while attempting to give support to their children

The teachers' unilateral effort cannot help the child to equip himself/herself with improved reading skills (UNESCO, 2005). The teachers' efforts, therefore, need the participation of several stakeholders such as parents. Parent's role in developing countries could be limited because of illiteracy. The fact that the majority of the parent respondents associated with this study were found predominantly illiterates, they believed that they could not give any effective support to their children. Though it is undeniable that illiteracy and poor economic background have their own influence on parental support, they cannot be absolute obstacles to it. At first cycle primary level (focusing grade four), students increase their vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. Morrow (1995) and Irwin (1967) contend that parents, as first teachers, spend most of their time with their children at home. Hence, they get the opportunity to stimulate them intellectually which is essential for the reading development. What follows from this is that for the development and improvement of children's literacy skills, particularly reading, the support of parents to their children is a must. Although the parent's literacy level are very low, they are still expected to be willing to participate in the school program where teachers and principals should take the lead to encourage and train parents to establish a firm foundation on the part of the children's academic background. It is only this that makes parents a reliable stakeholder and contributor to the learning process.

Those parents who attempted to support their children usually faced major problems such as the following: financial problems, illiteracy, and shortage of time to go to the schools and discuss their children's progress. One of the

FGD participants shared the following: “In spite of my interest to support my child in his education, my economic problem prevents me from doing that. I couldn’t provide my child with the necessary materials aimed at improving the reading performance.” Other parents also hinted economic problems as a hindering factor. Parental poor economic condition, coupled with illiteracy and being tied up all day with chores and office works, has a detrimental effect of children’s academic competence. Not knowing the role parents play, inter alia, is another challenge parents face in their endeavor to support their children.

9. Conclusion

Children’s education needs to be supported by parental involvement which obviously increases the children’s interest in learning. Parents’ interest to support their children in their education means a lot. This becomes pertinent when their support is expressed in terms of a daily follow up. Of course, as indicated in various research findings, what is performed by a child on a daily basis creates opportunities for parents to establish positive relationships with their children. Although parents are important stakeholders in establishing the foundation of education, these responsibilities do not seem to have been fairly materialized. In fact, illiteracy, economic problems and other related factors have been considered pertinent factors by parents that prevented them from fulfilling their responsibilities.

Parents are the first teachers and models to their children and their involvement is a guarantee for the establishment of the foundation of children’s education. Since the children’s future success is based on the early period of childhood, parents-children interactions and parents-teachers positive relationships need to be firmly established and encouraged.

Since parents’ involvement in their children’s education is indispensable and has several benefits (Karter and Lowden, 1997), teachers and

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principals need to take the responsibility to train parents on how to help their children in developing their reading literacy. The government has to exert efforts to involve parents and help improve the quality of education in Ethiopia. This can be done, as explained by Hornby (2000:153), by having legislation, national policy, resources and public awareness (at government level), policy, procedures and resources (at local education level), policy, activities and evaluation feedback (at school level) and commitment, knowledge, skills and action (at teacher level).

It is during the early stage that children start reading. Since children are required to develop their reading literacy before they join the formal school, parents should strive hard to help children achieve it. English teachers of primary level education need to create opportunities to contact parents more often to discuss the children's literacy skills. This must be supported, encouraged and monitored by the school authorities.

Teachers and principals need to orient parents who believe that their low level of education is a hindrance to support their children's education and motivate them that they can still help their children. Since it has been proved by research that showing positive attitudes and being ready to support are found more important than parents' economic conditions or low level of education, parents should be supported and made aware of this.

Teachers are important stakeholders who are able to influence parental involvement either positively or negatively and therefore should consider the importance of maintaining positive interactions with parents. This contributes to the enhancement of parents' interest in their children's education at home. Both stakeholders need to use different communication methods to promote their positive interactions.

Parents need to figure out their indispensable role, especially, at the foundation level. They need to show willingness to visit schools and create good relations with the children's teachers. The necessity of supplemental materials to children is unquestionable. Parents should provide the relevant

materials to their children. This is one of the measures that help children to reach the required level of literacy. The government should explore mechanisms of empowering illiterate and busy parents so that they can play a more active role in their children's education.

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