PARENT OCCUPATION AND PRE-PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN'S LEARNING PERFORMANCE

Magondu Karimi Reginah.
Department of Early Childhood & Special Needs Education, Kenyatta University, Kenya.
Dr. Juliet W. Mugo.
Department of Early Childhood & Special Needs Education, Kenyatta University, Kenya.
Prof. Catherine Gakii Murungi.
Department of Early Childhood & Special Needs Education, Kenyatta University, Kenya.

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ABSTRACT

Learning performance is the behaviour, knowledge and understanding of a learner that can be measured in the short term. A concern among students, parents and teachers was poor learning performance among pre-primary two (PP2) children in Kirinyaga East Sub-county (KESC), Kirinyaga County, Kenya. A Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) report indicated a consecutive decline in Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) performance in KESC between 2017 and 2019, while pre-primary education, the foundation for learning, was excluded from such investigations. It remained unclear whether children's low performance was related to parents' type of occupation, given their expected partnership with schools. This study therefore examined the relationship between parents' occupation and PP2 children's learning performance in KESC. A correlational research design, anchored on Maslow's (1987) theory of motivation, was adopted. Purposive sampling selected Kirinyaga County and KESC, while proportionate stratified random sampling selected 13 of 45 PP2 schools, 140 of 1,421 parents, of whom 135 participated, and 13 of 99 PP2 teachers. Data were collected through parent questionnaires, teacher interview schedules and analysis of children's progress records. Instruments were piloted in two PP2 schools; content validity was applied, and split-half reliability yielded 0.71. Qualitative data were thematically analysed, while quantitative data used descriptive statistics and chi-square at 0.05 significance. Findings showed 47.4% of parents engaged in crop farming, 26.0% in business, 10.4% in casual employment, 5.9% in formal employment, 5.2% in livestock farming and 4.4% in other activities. Chi-square results ($\chi^2 = 8.0974$, df = 6, p = .01, rxy = .781) indicated a statistically significant relationship. The study recommends income-generating and skills-training programmes and greater sensitisation of parents on balancing work demands with active involvement in PP2 education.

Keywords: parents' occupation, learning performance, pre-primary education, PP2 children, socio-economic status.

INTRODUCTION

The accomplishment of a learning activity is the definition of learning performance (Moccozet, 2012). Parents are the first teachers for their children and play a critical role in their child's growth and development, which is not only physical but also social-emotional

and academic (Dawson, 2024). Among the many parental attributes examined in relation to children's schooling, occupation has attracted particular attention because of its close association with a family's income, time availability and access to resources. Dictionary.com (n.d.) defines occupation as a person's regular or common activity, profession, or business. Parents' employment is closely tied to their income and functions as an indicator of a family's resources, which can in turn shape children's attitudes towards school, their attendance and their overall learning (Schmid & Garrels, 2021; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022).

Evidence on the relationship between parents' occupation and children's academic performance remains mixed internationally. In Bahrain, Fateel et al. (2021) studied 402 children in Grades 1–3 using a quantitative approach and stratified random sampling. They found no significant relationship between children's academic achievement and parental occupation or income. In Pakistan, Ali et al. (2023) reported that parental involvement, which may be influenced by parents' occupational circumstances, was associated with better academic achievement, although statistical significance was not tested. In China, Yu (2024) found that family investment mediated a positive relationship between parental occupation, income and adolescents' academic performance, particularly among learners from higher socio-economic backgrounds.

African studies have generally reported significant associations. In Nigeria, Salaudeen and Azeez (2022) surveyed 140 Primary Six pupils from seven schools and found a high correlation between parents' occupation and pupils' mathematics performance. In Tanzania, Kyao and Onyango (2024) surveyed 192 respondents and established that parents' careers influenced children's academic performance. Similarly, Owuor et al. (2022), using an Ecological Systems Theory perspective in Homa Bay Sub-County, Kenya, found that parents' occupation significantly affected students' academic performance. However, a meta-analysis by Kim et al. (2019), covering learners aged 5–18 across 38 developing countries, found a weak overall association between parental socio-economic status, including occupation, and learning outcomes.

In Kenya, Victor (2019) found that poverty associated with limited parental employment opportunities constrained the provision of learning materials and basic needs in Siaya County. Muthomi and Mwangi (2020) similarly reported that low occupational status, together with education and income, influenced parental support and provision of learning resources in ECDE programmes in Meru County. Locally, MoEST reported declining KCPE mean scores in Kirinyaga East from 280.46 in 2017 to 276.56 in 2018 and 272.23 in 2019. However, no study appeared to have examined the relationship between parents' occupation and PP2 children's learning performance in KESC. This gap informed the present study.

Statement of the Problem

Although parents' occupation may influence children's learning through household resources and parental involvement, evidence on its relationship with academic performance remains inconsistent. Studies in Nigeria, Tanzania and Kenya found significant relationships between parents' occupation and children's performance, while evidence from Bahrain and a 38-country meta-analysis reported weak or statistically insignificant relationships (Salaudeen & Azeez, 2022; Fateel et al., 2021; Kyao & Onyango, 2024; Kim et al., 2019). However, these studies largely focused on primary, secondary or adolescent learners, leaving pre-primary learners insufficiently examined. In KESC, MoEST reported declining KCPE mean scores between 2017 and 2019, yet the relationship between parents' occupation and PP2 children's learning performance remained unexplored. This study therefore sought to establish this relationship.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between parents' type of occupation and PP2 children's learning performance in Kirinyaga East Sub-county, Kirinyaga County, Kenya. The study sought to establish whether parents' occupational circumstances, including crop farming, business, casual employment, formal employment, livestock farming and other economic activities, were associated with children's learning performance. The study primarily aimed to determine whether the type of occupation undertaken by parents was related to the learning performance of PP2 children in pre-primary education in Kirinyaga East Sub-county, Kirinyaga County, Kenya.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Fateel et al. (2021) categorised parents' occupational status into three groups: low socio-economic status, where parents held only a high school education and worked in manual or blue-collar jobs; average socio-economic status, where parents were employed as office workers, teachers or trainers; and high socio-economic status, where parents held white-collar occupations. Despite this detailed categorisation, univariate analysis in that study showed no significant relationship between parental occupation and elementary pupils' learning outcomes, a finding that departs from evidence gathered within Sub-Saharan Africa.

In Homa Bay Sub-County, Kenya, Owuor et al. (2022) examined how parents' occupation related to secondary school students' performance using Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Comparing mean performance scores across four zones between 2016 and 2018, the study reported mean scores of 3.63, 3.46 and 5.03 for Rangwe; 3.63, 3.33 and 4.62 for Rachuonyo South; 3.74, 3.49 and 4.64 for Rachuonyo East; and 3.82, 4.29 and 4.49 for Homa Bay Town, respectively, giving an overall mean rating of 3.55. On this basis, the researchers concluded that parents' occupations had a significant effect on students' academic performance. Kyao and Onyango (2024) reached a similar conclusion in Njombe Town Council, Tanzania, while Salaudeen and Azeez (2022) and Abubakar and Musa

(2019), working in Nigeria, both reported strong statistical relationships between parents' occupation and children's academic outcomes.

Locally, Victor (2019) and Muthomi and Mwangi (2020) linked limited job opportunities and low occupational status among parents in Siaya and Meru counties, respectively, to reduced provision of learning materials and support for children, which in turn constrained learning outcomes. Taken together, the reviewed literature suggests that the relationship between parents' occupation and children's learning performance, while contested at the international level (Fateel et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2019), tends to be significant within the Kenyan and wider East and West African context. It was on this basis that the present study sought to establish whether a similar relationship held for PP2 children in KESC, a population and educational level not previously studied in this regard.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a correlational research design, which was appropriate for examining the relationship and degree of association between the independent and dependent variables without manipulating them (Creswell, 2014). The independent variable was parents' type of occupation, while the dependent variable was PP2 children's learning performance. A mixed-methods approach was used for data collection, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques, and the study was anchored on Maslow's (1987) theory of motivation.

Independent variable: parents' type of occupation, based on the type of job parents held. For purposes of data collection and analysis, occupation was categorised into six descriptors: livestock farming, crop farming, business, casual employment, formal employment, and other economic activities.

Dependent variable: learning performance of PP2 children, measured through (i) class attendance; the weekly in-person presence of PP2 children in school, categorised as very high (16–20 days a month), high (11–15 days), low (6–10 days) and very low (0–5 days); and (ii) class participation/involvement; individual or group engagement in structured (adult-guided) and unstructured (child-led) activities such as peer communication, sharing materials, taking turns, critical thinking and problem-solving, as documented in teachers' existing records (see document analysis).

Location of the Study

The study was conducted in KESC, Kirinyaga County. According to the Kenya Population and Housing Census (2009), as cited in the Kirinyaga County Integrated Development Plan 2018–2022, most residents in the county lived in their own homes, with 53,073 households in wooden houses, 28,517 in mud houses, 25,800 in brick houses and 37,393 in stone houses (County Government of Kirinyaga, 2018). Farming was reported as the leading economic

activity and source of income for most households in the county (County Government of Kirinyaga, 2018). MoEST (2017, 2018, 2019) data, however, showed a consistent decline in KCPE mean scores in KESC between 2017 and 2019, and Mbugi et al. (2017) and Luketero and Kangangi (2019) reported similarly low learning performance in neighbouring sub-counties, yet no study had focused on the pre-school level, which forms the foundation for all subsequent learning. The sub-county also had numerous pre-schools and a fairly balanced distribution of families across different occupational groups, making it a suitable setting for the study.

Target Population

The target population comprised 45 public PP2 schools spread across 5 wards in KESC, 99 PP2 teachers, and 1,421 parents of PP2 children, according to Ministry of Education Science and Technology and KESC (2021) records.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

County and sub-county: Kirinyaga County and KESC were purposively selected because of the reported decline in learning performance and the presence of a balanced mix of occupational groups. Pre-primary schools: the 45 PP2 schools were stratified by the five wards in the sub-county and proportionally sampled to minimise bias. The names of the schools in each ward were written on slips of paper, placed in ward-labelled baskets, and a blindfolded random draw was used to select 13 schools (about 30% of the total): 3 of 10 in Kabare, 2 of 8 in Baragwi, 3 of 10 in Njukiini, 3 of 10 in Karumandi, and 2 of 7 in Ngariama. Teachers: 13 PP2 teachers (13.13%) were randomly selected from the 99 targeted teachers, proportionally distributed across the five wards. Parents: 142 parents were proportionally selected from the 1,421 targeted parents using lists provided by teachers, of whom 140 were ultimately sampled and 135 participated.

The final sample comprised 13 of 45 PP2 schools (30%), 13 of 99 teachers (13%), and 140 of 1,421 parents (10%). Creswell (2014) suggests that a descriptive correlational study should sample between 10% and 30% of the target population, a threshold met by the sampling strategy used in this study.

Research Instruments

Questionnaires: parents' responses were collected using questionnaires, which allowed a broad range of data to be gathered from a large number of respondents within a relatively short period (Creswell, 2014). The questionnaire had two parts: Part I sought parents' demographic information, such as gender and marital status, while Part II focused on parents' type of occupation and its perceived link to their PP2 children's learning performance. Where parents were semi-literate or illiterate, the researcher read the questions aloud and recorded their responses.

Interview schedules: used to collect teachers' views on how parents' type of occupation influenced PP2 children's learning outcomes. This allowed the researcher to follow up on teachers' responses and enabled teachers to clarify or elaborate on their answers.

Document analysis: PP2 children's learning performance was also assessed through their attendance and progress records, providing an independent perspective drawn directly from teachers' existing documentation.

Pilot Study, Validity and Reliability

The research instruments were piloted in two PP2 schools in KESC that were not included in the main study. The pilot lasted three weeks and helped estimate the time required for data collection and identify and correct weaknesses in the instruments. The same respondents completed the instruments a second time two weeks later to test consistency.

Content validity was used to ensure that the information collected corresponded to the study's objective, as recommended by Creswell (2014). During piloting, university supervisors reviewed the instrument to confirm that it soundly measured the intended construct (Maina, 2012), and items found to be inconsistent or irrelevant were corrected or removed.

The split-half method was used to assess the internal consistency of the research instrument. The instrument was divided into two equivalent halves, and the Spearman correlation coefficient (rho) was computed between them. A coefficient of 0.71 was obtained for the occupation construct, which is considered acceptable since a correlation above 0.7 is regarded as reliable in descriptive research (Creswell, 2014).

Data Collection

Over four weeks, each sampled school was visited for physical observation and in-person interviews with teachers, who also helped distribute and collect questionnaires from parents through their children.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from the teacher interviews were analysed thematically. Quantitative data on parents' type of occupation and PP2 children's learning performance were summarised using descriptive statistics (means and percentages). Pearson's Chi-square test of independence was then applied to test HO1 at the 0.05 level of significance, to determine whether a statistically significant relationship existed between parents' type of occupation and PP2 children's learning performance.

Findings and Discussion

The study sought to establish the relationship between parents' type of occupation and PP2 children's learning performance. Figure 1 presents the descriptive statistics on parents' type

of occupation, including livestock farming, crop farming, business, casual employment, and formal employment.

Distribution of Parents by Type of Occupation

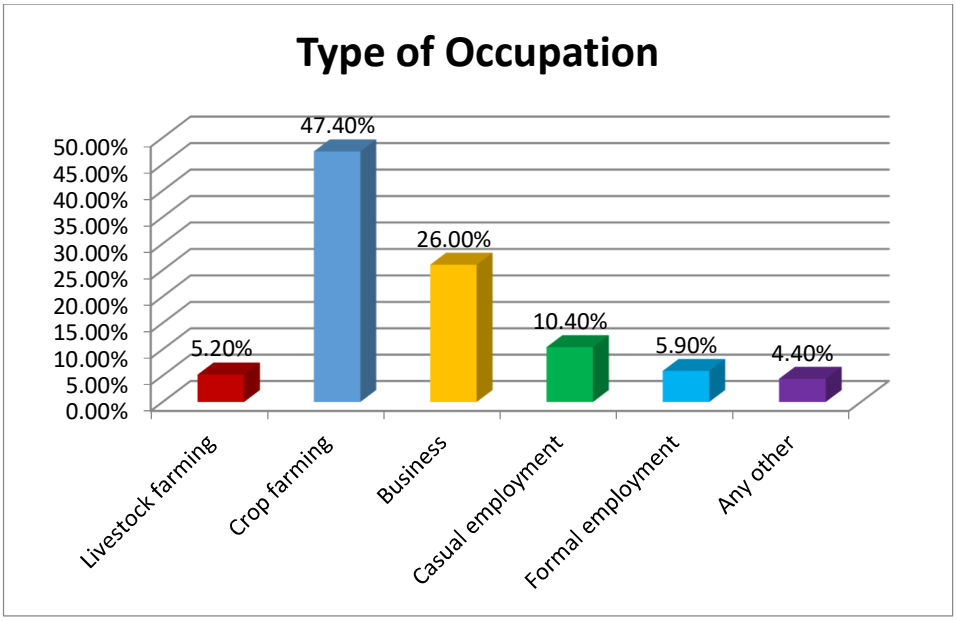

Figure 1: Distribution of Parents by Occupation

Figure 1 shows that the majority of parents, 64 (47.4%), earned a living through crop farming, 36 (26.0%) through business, 14 (10.4%) through casual employment, 8 (5.9%) through formal employment, 7 (5.2%) through livestock farming, and 6 (4.4%) through other economic activities. This finding is consistent with the county's development plan, which identifies farming as the leading occupation and source of income in Kirinyaga County (County Government of Kirinyaga, 2018).

As an indicator of parents' occupational and socio-economic standing, respondents were also asked about the type of house they lived in and its ownership status.

Table 1: Types of Houses Families Live In

House Type	Frequency	%
Wooden	69	51
Stone	31	23
Brick	19	14
Mud	16	12
Total	135	100

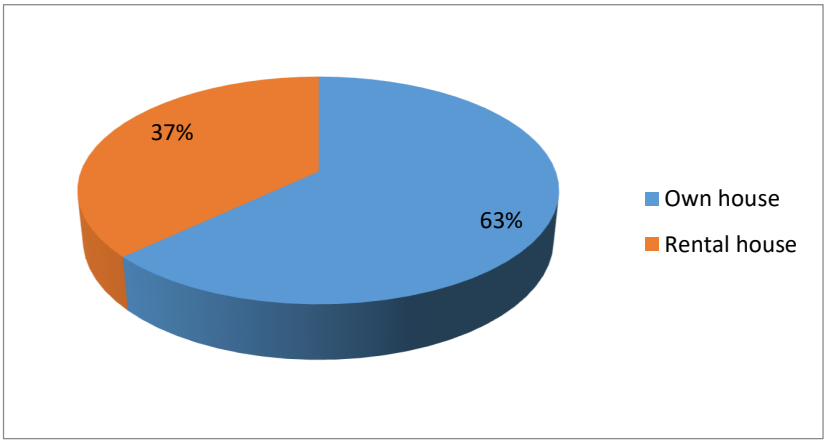

Figure 2: House Ownership Status by Families

Tables 1 show that most parents, 69 (51.0%), lived in wooden houses, 31 (23.0%) in stone houses, 19 (14.0%) in brick houses, and 16 (12.0%) in mud houses; and that most parents. Figure 2 shows that 85 (63.0%), lived in their own houses while 50 (37.0%) lived in rented houses. These patterns are broadly consistent with county-level housing and home-ownership statistics (County Government of Kirinyaga, 2018), and lend support to the view that the type of work parents do, and the resources this affords them, are closely linked to their households' living conditions.

Parents' Occupation and Children's Learning Performance

Parents were asked to rate the extent to which their occupation affected their PP2 children's school success.

Table 2: Parents' Responses on Occupation and Children's Learning Performance

Item	VGE %	GE %	LE %	VLE %	N
i. Occupation relates to ability to provide a home with play and learning materials	20	55	17	7.4	135
ii. Job allows checking child's school progress daily	26.7	60	13	0	135
iii. Occupation cultivates child's learning interest and performance	31.9	37.8	23.7	6.7	135
iv. Work allows attending school opening meetings	19.3	40.7	28	11.9	135
v. Job gives free time to help child study at home	24.4	28.9	34.8	11.1	135
vi. Work allows time to participate in child's education	26.7	25.2	35.6	12.6	135

VGE = Very Great Extent; GE = Great Extent; LE = Low Extent; VLE = Very Low Extent.

More than half of the parents, 75 (55.0%), agreed to a great extent that their occupation was linked to their ability to provide a home where their PP2 children could engage with play and learning materials, while only 10 (7.4%) agreed to a very low extent, suggesting that parental occupation was connected to the capacity to supply learning materials to children. Most parents, 81 (60.0%), also agreed to a great extent that their occupation enabled them to monitor their child's learning progress daily, and 57 (37.8%) agreed that their occupation helped foster their child's interest in learning. However, fewer parents felt that their occupation gave them the time to attend school meetings (40.7% to a great extent, 11.9% to a very low extent), to help their children study at home (28.9% to a great extent, 34.8% to a low extent), or to participate more broadly in their children's education (25.2% to a great extent, 35.6% to a low extent). These results suggest that while parents' occupations in KESC generally supported their children's access to learning materials and daily progress monitoring, they constrained the time available for more sustained forms of involvement. This is consistent with The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2022), which notes that when parents remain involved in school, children attend more regularly, develop stronger social skills and are more likely to succeed in the long term.

Parents also identified occupational factors that hindered their fuller participation in PP2 children's school activities, chief among them low pay, high living costs and long working hours. This is consistent with recommendations in comparable studies that schools should recognise the influence of parents' work schedules on children's learning while encouraging parents to balance career obligations with active involvement in their children's education.

Hypothesis Testing

HO1 stated that there is no significant relationship between parents' type of occupation and PP2 children's learning performance. A Chi-square test of independence was applied to test this hypothesis at the 0.05 level of significance.

Table 3: Chi-Square Test Results for Parents' Occupation and Children's Learning Performance

Statistic	**Value**
Chi-square value	8.0974
Degrees of freedom (df)	6
Significance (2-tailed)	0.01
N	135

The computed Chi-square value was 8.0974 with 6 degrees of freedom, at a significance level of $p = 0.01$, which is below the 0.05 threshold. The null hypothesis (HO1) was therefore rejected, indicating a statistically significant relationship between parents' type of occupation and PP2 children's learning performance in KESC. This finding is consistent with Owuor et al. (2022) in Homa Bay Sub-County, Kyao and Onyango (2024) in Njombe Town Council, and Abubakar and Musa (2019) and Salaudeen and Azeez (2022) in Nigeria, all of whom reported significant relationships between parents' occupation and children's academic performance. It contrasts, however, with Fateel et al. (2021) in Bahrain and the cross-national meta-analysis by Kim et al. (2019), which found the relationship between

parental occupation and learning outcomes to be weak or statistically insignificant. This divergence may reflect contextual differences between the largely agrarian, lower-income economy of KESC and the settings of the earlier studies, as well as differences in the age of the learners studied, since the present study focused on children at the pre-primary level.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that parents' type of occupation is significantly related to PP2 children's learning performance in KESC. Most parents felt that their occupations allowed them to engage in various pre-primary school activities, such as monitoring their children's progress and attending school meetings. However, low pay, long working hours, and the high cost of living were identified as key occupational constraints that limited parents' full participation in their children's learning. Addressing these challenges, particularly through measures aimed at reducing the cost of living, could enhance parents' capacity to support PP2 children's learning.

Recommendation

The study recommended that:

i. The County Government of Kirinyaga, in partnership with non-governmental and community-based organisations, should develop income-generating projects and skills-training programmes to help parents, particularly those in low-paying occupations such as casual employment and small-scale farming, improve their earnings and time flexibility.

ii. The Ministry of Education, through the Sub-County Director of Education, should work with employers and school management committees to sensitise parents on strategies for balancing work obligations with active participation in their children's pre-primary education.

iii. Schools should design flexible engagement opportunities, such as staggered meeting times, to accommodate parents in occupations with limited or irregular free time, so as to strengthen parental participation in PP2 children's learning.

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