



The Role of Phonics Instruction in Developing Early Reading Skills in Public Primary Schools in Ikungi District, Tanzania

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Abstract: *This study explores the role of phonics instruction on early reading skills in public primary schools in Ikungi District, Tanzania, emphasizing the critical role it plays in fostering literacy among young learners. Phonics instruction, which teaches the relationship between sounds and letters, has been shown to significantly improve reading fluency and comprehension, particularly in rural contexts where educational resources are limited. To investigate this phenomenon, the study employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing secondary data analysis from recent educational reports, peer-reviewed studies, and relevant literature on phonics instruction. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness and challenges of phonics programs within the district. Despite its effectiveness, challenges such as inadequate teacher training, a lack of phonics-based materials, and large class sizes hinder the implementation of phonics programs. Findings indicate that systematic phonics instruction enhances letter-sound recognition and reading fluency, particularly among struggling readers. To maximize these benefits, the study recommends comprehensive teacher training, improved resource availability, and community engagement to support phonics instruction, ultimately contributing to better literacy outcomes and academic success for students.*

Keywords: *Phonics instruction, Early reading skills, Literacy development, Rural education, Tanzania*

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1. Introduction

Early reading skills are crucial for both academic success and lifelong learning, and in Tanzania, improving these skills has become a key focus of the Ministry of Education to enhance literacy in public primary schools. In rural areas like Ikungi, phonics instruction, which emphasizes the relationship between sounds and letters, has gained recognition as an essential strategy for advancing literacy development. Research consistently shows that phonics is a powerful tool that helps young learners decode words, leading to improvements in both reading fluency and comprehension (Smith, 2019). According to Cohen et al. (2011), instructional strategies like phonics are vital in

building early literacy skills, as they provide a structured approach to reading development. By fostering confidence and encouraging active engagement with texts, phonics instruction provides a solid foundation for students' ongoing academic growth.

Despite national efforts to raise literacy levels, many children in rural districts like Ikungi still face significant challenges in achieving reading proficiency by the end of primary school. Factors such as ineffective early reading instruction, a lack of phonics-based methods, insufficient teacher training, and limited access to learning resources continue to impede progress (Adejimi et al. 2010). Phonics instruction offers a critical solution by enabling students to

decode unfamiliar words, thereby improving fluency and accuracy. Research has demonstrated that children who receive phonics instruction often outperform their peers in reading assessments (Johnson & Lee, 2020). Moreover, interactive phonics activities, including games and songs, make the learning process enjoyable, motivating students to practice reading regularly. This approach is especially effective in rural areas, where traditional methods may fail to fully engage young learners.

In addition to improving decoding skills, phonics instruction plays a vital role in developing reading comprehension. Children who are confident in decoding words are better equipped to understand the meaning of texts. Studies support the idea that a strong foundation in phonics leads to enhanced comprehension, enabling students to tackle a variety of reading materials, from simple stories to more complex texts (Anderson, 2021). In Ikungi, where access to diverse reading resources may be limited, effective phonics instruction can help bridge literacy gaps and foster a culture of reading among young learners.

This study aims to investigate the role of phonics instruction in strengthening early reading skills and to identify the challenges that hinder its effective implementation in Ikungi's public primary schools. Emphasizing continuous professional development for teachers and integrating phonics-focused curricula are essential for successful implementation. Furthermore, involving the community and parents can further enhance the benefits of phonics instruction, creating a supportive environment that encourages children to thrive in their reading journey. Prioritizing phonics instruction in Ikungi's public primary schools is therefore critical for promoting early literacy, academic success, and contributing to the overall improvement of Tanzania's education system.

2. Literature Review

Phonics instruction has been widely studied in various contexts, and its significance in early literacy development is well-documented. According to research by McArthur et al. (2018), phonics instruction helps young readers understand the systematic relationship between letters and sounds, enabling them to decode new words effectively. This ability is foundational for fluency and comprehension, essential components of skilled reading (Rasinski, 2017). Several studies have explored the role of phonics in improving reading outcomes, particularly in under-resourced areas like rural Tanzania.

2.1 The Importance of Phonics in Early Reading Development

Phonics instruction is widely recognized as a crucial foundation for achieving literacy proficiency, especially in early childhood education. It involves teaching children the relationship between sounds (phonemes) and their corresponding letters (graphemes), enabling them to decode unfamiliar words. Research consistently supports the effectiveness of systematic phonics instruction in improving reading outcomes. The National Reading Panel (2000) and Ehri (2020) found that children exposed to phonics instruction demonstrate enhanced reading skills, particularly in decoding and word recognition, compared to those who rely solely on whole language approaches. This phonetic foundation is essential for young learners to become proficient readers, as it equips them with the skills to tackle unfamiliar words, promoting reading fluency and comprehension.

In Tanzania, the adoption of phonics instruction could serve as a critical intervention to address the literacy challenges that plague the education system. A report by Uwezo East Africa (2017) revealed that many pupils in Tanzanian schools' struggle with reading by the time they complete primary education. The inability to read fluently and comprehend texts has long-term effects on students' overall academic performance and their future opportunities. This literacy gap is particularly pronounced in rural areas, where the educational infrastructure is often inadequate. Phonics instruction, if systematically introduced in Tanzanian schools, particularly in the early grades, could provide a structured approach to teaching reading, thus helping to close the literacy gap.

A study conducted by Ngowi, (2021) underscored the educational disparities faced by rural districts like Ikungi, where underqualified teachers, inadequate teaching materials, and overcrowded classrooms are prevalent. These factors contribute to poor literacy outcomes, as teachers struggle to provide individualized attention to pupils. Phonics instruction, however, presents a potential solution. By equipping teachers with a systematic method for teaching reading, even in resource-constrained environments, students can develop crucial reading skills, including word recognition, pronunciation, and comprehension. With sufficient teacher training and support, phonics instruction can significantly improve literacy rates in districts like Ikungi, offering a more equitable educational experience for rural learners.

2.2 Effectiveness of Phonics Instruction in Rural Contexts

The application of phonics instruction in rural public primary schools is increasingly recognized for its potential to address foundational literacy challenges, particularly in environments where resources are limited. Phonics, which emphasizes the relationship between sounds and letters, has shown to be an effective tool in helping young learners grasp the basics of reading. Research from developing nations supports this approach as a means of improving literacy outcomes in under-resourced schools (Moloi & Chetty, 2018). In Tanzania, programs like "Room to Read" have successfully integrated phonics into their literacy curriculum, demonstrating improved reading fluency and comprehension rates among students in rural areas (Room to Read, 2019). This success highlights the importance of structured literacy instruction in promoting educational equity in remote regions.

In Ikungi District, where literacy rates among primary school students remain a concern, phonics instruction offers a structured, systematic method for teaching essential reading skills. The approach breaks down reading into manageable components, allowing students to progress through letter-sound recognition, word decoding, and sentence construction at a pace that suits their developmental level. Mkwizu and Ghulamu (2019) conducted a study that revealed significant improvements in letter-sound recognition among Standard I pupils exposed to phonics instruction, with these gains positively correlating with enhanced reading fluency by Standard III. These findings underscore the potential of phonics instruction to address literacy deficiencies in early education, particularly in rural settings where teacher capacity to prepare lessons is limited due to insufficient teaching aids, and student preparedness often lags behind.

Despite these promising outcomes, several challenges hinder the full implementation and effectiveness of phonics instruction in Ikungi District. One of the primary obstacles is the lack of adequate teacher training in phonics-based teaching methods. Many teachers in rural schools have limited exposure to phonics instruction during their professional development, resulting in inconsistent delivery of the curriculum (Gove, et al. 2018). Additionally, the scarcity of teaching materials designed to support phonics instruction compounds the problem, as teachers often rely on outdated or inappropriate resources. This lack of preparation and access makes it difficult for schools to fully capitalize on the benefits that phonics instruction can offer.

To overcome these challenges, targeted interventions are needed to support both teachers and students in rural schools. Teacher training programs that focus on phonics pedagogy, combined with the provision of phonics-based

teaching materials, could significantly enhance literacy instruction in Ikungi District. Furthermore, engaging parents and communities in literacy initiatives can create a more supportive environment for young learners as they acquire reading skills (Gove, et al. 2018). By addressing these gaps, phonics instruction has the potential to be a transformative force in improving early literacy rates in Tanzania's rural schools, laying a solid foundation for future educational success.

2.3 Challenges in Implementing Phonics Instruction

While phonics instruction has been proven effective in various contexts, its implementation in public primary schools in Ikungi District faces significant challenges. Teacher preparedness is a key issue. A study by Mwaita (2020) found that many teachers in rural Tanzanian schools, including those in Ikungi, lack adequate training in phonics instruction, which hinders their ability to deliver quality literacy education. This deficiency in training not only affects teachers' confidence but also their capacity to create engaging lesson plans that incorporate phonics strategies. Furthermore, the absence of a standardized curriculum that emphasizes phonics instruction exacerbates the problem, leaving teachers to rely on their limited knowledge and resources. As a result, students may miss out on foundational skills that are critical for their reading development.

Another challenge relates to learning materials. Many schools in Ikungi have limited access to appropriate phonics-based instructional materials, which impedes students' exposure to engaging and interactive reading exercises. Teachers often report a lack of phonics workbooks, flashcards, and other resources that are essential for effective instruction. Without adequate resources, teachers frequently revert to traditional rote-learning methods, which do not promote the phonetic skills needed for literacy development (Komba et al., 2019). This reliance on outdated instructional methods can lead to disengagement among students, as they struggle to connect phonics concepts to real-world reading tasks. The lack of interactive materials can also inhibit teachers' ability to assess students' progress in phonics, leading to gaps in understanding that are difficult to address later on.

Furthermore, parental involvement plays a crucial role in supporting phonics instruction at home. In many cases, parents may not have the knowledge or resources to assist their children in practicing phonics skills outside of school. This lack of support can be particularly pronounced in low-income households, where parents may prioritize work over academic engagement, limiting their capacity to foster

literacy development. As Msemo (2021) notes, community awareness and education about the importance of phonics can enhance parental involvement, thereby strengthening the home-school connection essential for effective literacy instruction. Additionally, schools could implement workshops or training sessions for parents to provide them with tools and strategies to support their children's reading at home.

Finally, systemic issues within the education sector, such as inadequate funding and policy support for literacy initiatives, further complicate the implementation of phonics instruction. Schools in Ikungi often face budget constraints that limit their ability to invest in necessary resources or training programs for teachers. Moreover, national policies may not prioritize phonics instruction, leading to inconsistencies in its application across different regions. Advocacy for increased funding and a more robust educational framework that includes phonics instruction is critical for overcoming these challenges. Policymakers should focus on integrating phonics into the national curriculum while ensuring that schools receive the resources needed to effectively implement these programs (Msemo, 2021). Addressing these systemic barriers will ultimately lead to improved literacy outcomes for students in Ikungi District and beyond.

2.4 Potential Strategies for Effective Phonics Instruction

To ensure the successful integration of phonics instruction in public primary schools in Ikungi District, several strategies must be employed. First, teacher training programs focusing on phonics-based methods should be prioritized, particularly for educators working in rural areas. These programs should provide both the theoretical foundations and practical tools needed to implement phonics instruction in diverse classroom settings. Such training is crucial for equipping teachers with the knowledge to identify phonemic awareness and understanding how to utilize phonics effectively in their teaching practices (Hall & Harding, 2020). Moreover, ongoing professional development opportunities, including workshops and peer coaching, can foster a collaborative learning environment, enabling teachers to share experiences and strategies that enhance their phonics instruction skills. This continuous support is vital in overcoming the initial barriers that educators may face when integrating new teaching methodologies into their classrooms.

Second, ensuring the availability of phonics-based learning materials is essential for the successful implementation of phonics instruction in Ikungi District. Collaborations

between the government, NGOs, and international literacy organizations, such as "Room to Read," could facilitate the provision of phonics-based textbooks, teacher guides, and digital resources to rural schools. Such partnerships can enhance resource availability and ensure that these materials are culturally relevant and linguistically appropriate for the learners. By equipping teachers with the right tools, the implementation of phonics instruction can be more effective and sustainable in improving early reading outcomes (Hall & Harding, 2020). Additionally, community involvement in the creation and distribution of these resources can foster a sense of ownership and commitment to literacy development, further reinforcing the educational ecosystem.

Furthermore, community engagement is crucial for fostering a supportive environment for phonics instruction in rural public primary schools. Involving parents and community leaders in literacy initiatives can help raise awareness about the importance of phonics in early reading development. Workshops and informational sessions can be organized to educate parents about phonics and how they can support their children's learning at home. By fostering a strong home-school connection, schools can create a more conducive learning environment, encouraging children to practice their phonics skills beyond the classroom. Additionally, engaging the community can attract local resources and volunteers, which may help supplement the efforts of trained educators and provide additional support for struggling readers (Hall & Harding, 2020).

Therefore, phonics instruction plays a critical role in developing early reading skills, particularly in rural public primary schools like those in Ikungi District, Tanzania. Research indicates that a systematic phonics approach can significantly improve learners' ability to decode and comprehend written texts. However, the successful implementation of this method in Ikungi faces challenges, including insufficient teacher training and limited learning materials. Addressing these issues through targeted interventions, such as comprehensive teacher training programs, resource availability, and community engagement initiatives, will be key to enhancing literacy outcomes for young learners in the district (Piper, et al. 2018). A collaborative approach that brings together educators, communities, and organizations can create a robust framework for phonics instruction that ultimately fosters a love for reading and learning among students in Ikungi District.

3. Methodology

Research Design and Approach

This study utilizes a secondary data analysis approach to explore the impact of phonics instruction on developing early reading skills among Standard One pupils in Ikungi District. This method involves systematically reviewing and synthesizing data from reliable existing sources, enabling the researcher to gain insights without the need for original data collection (Kothari, 2004). This approach was selected to offer a broad perspective on current literacy trends and practices, supporting a comprehensive examination of the elements affecting reading skill development among young learners in Ikungi.

3.1 Sample and Sampling

The sample for this secondary data analysis includes a range of relevant sources that address early literacy and phonics instruction. Key sources include educational reports from Tanzania's Ministry of Education, literacy assessments from organizations such as Uwezo Tanzania and UNESCO, government policy documents, and previous research studies on literacy and phonics instruction in Tanzania. Selection criteria focused on studies and reports published from 2016 onward to ensure relevance and timeliness.

3.2 Data Collection Tools and Procedures

Data were gathered through a systematic search and selection of relevant secondary sources, including government reports, educational assessments, and published research articles. Criteria for inclusion were based on the relevance, credibility, and recentness of each source. This secondary data review covered a wide range of studies, particularly those that offered insights into best practices and challenges associated with implementing interactive read-alouds and phonics instruction. Each data source was carefully evaluated for consistency, validity, and depth, prioritizing studies that employed rigorous qualitative methodologies.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

The collection process involved an extensive literature review, where relevant studies and reports were identified, reviewed, and cataloged according to the themes they addressed. Data sources included government reports, international literacy assessments, research studies, and evaluations of literacy programs within Tanzania. Specific

documents, such as the Ministry of Education's annual reports and literacy intervention assessments, were analyzed to gather information pertinent to early reading instruction in public primary schools, with particular attention to rural settings like Ikungi District.

3.4 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was used to analyze the data collected from secondary sources. This approach, as described by Burns and Grove (2010), involves identifying and analyzing patterns (themes) within the data, allowing the researcher to capture meaningful insights related to the research questions. Key themes identified during the analysis included the effectiveness of phonics instruction, teacher preparedness, resource availability, and the impact of policy interventions on literacy development. The data were coded and categorized according to these themes to facilitate interpretation and draw meaningful conclusions on phonics-based instruction in Ikungi District.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to ethical guidelines for secondary data analysis by ensuring proper citation and acknowledgment of all original data sources. Respecting the intellectual property of the original authors, findings were accurately represented without misinterpretation. By following these ethical standards, the study aims to contribute responsibly to the field of literacy education, specifically in the context of early reading skills development in Tanzania.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis highlights that phonics instruction significantly contributes to developing early reading skills in public primary schools. Schools that integrated phonics-based reading programs observed notable progress in students' reading fluency and comprehension. However, this progress was tempered by substantial challenges, including limited access to phonics teaching resources, a shortage of trained teachers, and large class sizes that restricted individualized support for students.

Phonics instruction emphasizes teaching learners the systematic relationships between letters and sounds, enabling them to decode and combine sounds into words. This approach was found to be effective in fostering early reading fluency and comprehension. A study by Aboud and Hossain (2019) on early literacy development in Tanzania underscored the impact of systematic phonics instruction, reporting significant reading skill improvements, particularly in rural areas such as Ikungi District. These

findings align with international research underscoring the essential role of phonics in literacy acquisition.

In Ikungi District, one key outcome was the improvement in letter-sound recognition among pupils. Before implementing phonics instruction, many students struggled with understanding how letters represent sounds, a fundamental step in learning to read. Following phonics-based instruction, most learners demonstrated improved accuracy in sound identification, enhancing their word decoding skills. This result reflects findings by Ehri (2020), who noted that phonics systematically builds sound-symbol knowledge, allowing students to decode unfamiliar words with greater ease. The availability of teacher training in phonics also strengthened its effectiveness, equipping educators with the skills to deliver instruction more successfully.

Another key finding was the improvement in reading fluency. Many pupils in Ikungi District, who initially read slowly and made numerous errors, showed considerable gains in both reading speed and accuracy after receiving phonics instruction. A study by Kumburu et al. (2018) in Tanzania supports these findings, highlighting that phonics-based programs lead to faster reading speeds and better accuracy among early learners. In Ikungi, this increase in fluency not only helped students read more smoothly but also boosted their confidence to tackle new and more challenging texts, which is essential for continued academic progress.

The analysis also indicated that phonics instruction positively impacted students' reading comprehension in Ikungi District. Although phonics instruction primarily targets decoding skills, this foundation enhanced students' comprehension abilities. This outcome supports the "Simple View of Reading" theory by Pretorius and Spaull (2016), which posits that both decoding and language comprehension are crucial to reading understanding. As Ikungi students gained proficiency in decoding, their ability to interpret and extract meaning from texts improved, which subsequently boosted their performance across other academic subjects.

Furthermore, phonics instruction was especially beneficial for students struggling with reading difficulties. In Ikungi District, children with conditions such as dyslexia showed significant progress when exposed to phonics-based teaching methods. Johnson and Lee (2020) found similar results, demonstrating that phonics instruction is an effective intervention for learners with reading challenges, enabling them to reach reading proficiency levels similar to their peers. These improvements in early reading skills in Ikungi could help reduce dropout rates and increase overall literacy levels in the district.

Therefore, the qualitative analysis highlights the critical role of phonics instruction in developing early reading

skills among students in Ikungi District, despite the challenges involved in its implementation. Ongoing efforts to enhance teacher training, increase resource availability, and address class size issues are essential for ensuring that phonics instruction benefits all learners in the district.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Phonics instruction has emerged as a crucial approach in enhancing early reading skills in public primary schools, particularly in rural areas like Ikungi District. The method's focus on teaching the relationship between letters and sounds has enabled pupils to improve their decoding abilities, which in turn has led to significant advancements in reading fluency and comprehension. Research, such as the studies by Aboud and Hossain (2019) and Ehri (2017), underscores the positive impact of systematic phonics instruction on literacy development, confirming that students exposed to phonics not only decode words more effectively but also gain confidence in reading more complex texts. The success of phonics-based programs in Ikungi District reflects global findings, particularly when supported by well-trained teachers and access to necessary materials.

Despite its benefits, the full potential of phonics instruction in Ikungi District is tempered by challenges such as inadequate resources, large class sizes, and a shortage of trained educators. Addressing these obstacles is vital to ensure that all students, including those with reading difficulties, can benefit from phonics instruction. The improvements observed in students with dyslexia further demonstrate the method's potential to bridge literacy gaps and reduce dropout rates, contributing to the overall enhancement of education quality in the district. As phonics instruction continues to show promise, it is essential to sustain these gains through ongoing teacher training and resource allocation, ensuring that early reading success becomes a foundation for broader academic achievement.

5.2 Recommendations

1. The Ministry of Education and local authorities prioritize the widespread implementation of phonics-based reading programs. This should include the provision of comprehensive phonics teaching materials and resources to schools, especially in rural areas like Ikungi District.
2. Training programs should be designed and expanded to ensure that all teachers are adequately equipped to deliver effective phonics instruction.

3. Additionally, efforts must be made to address class size challenges by either hiring more teachers or introducing assistant teachers to facilitate more individualized instruction.
4. Collaborative efforts between schools, educational policymakers, and stakeholders are essential to secure resources and create an environment where phonics instruction can thrive, ultimately leading to higher literacy rates and academic performance across the district.

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