



Photo: National Cancer Institute on Unsplash

Our first educational building blocks

– *the role of the home*

Learners' success does not begin on the first day of school – it is founded on early engagements facilitated by parents and caregivers. The learning environment that is created at home shapes children's social and cognitive development, as well as their achievement and attitudes towards education. *Sylvia Hannan and Andrea Juan* use grade 5 data from the 2019 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) to explore the home context of South African primary school learners.

The family represents the first, and likely most influential, learning context for children's acquisition of language, knowledge, skills, and behaviour. The home learning environment is linked to children's cognitive and social development and plays a role in shaping their school readiness and attitudes towards learning. A [2015 study](#) defined a cognitively stimulating home learning environment as one where a variety of interactions and activities are encouraged. Parental involvement is an important ingredient in supporting children's development. Furthermore, learners are more likely to succeed academically if they have a supportive home environment. However, not all caregivers can be involved in their children's learning due to the demands of daily life. This is particularly so for parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

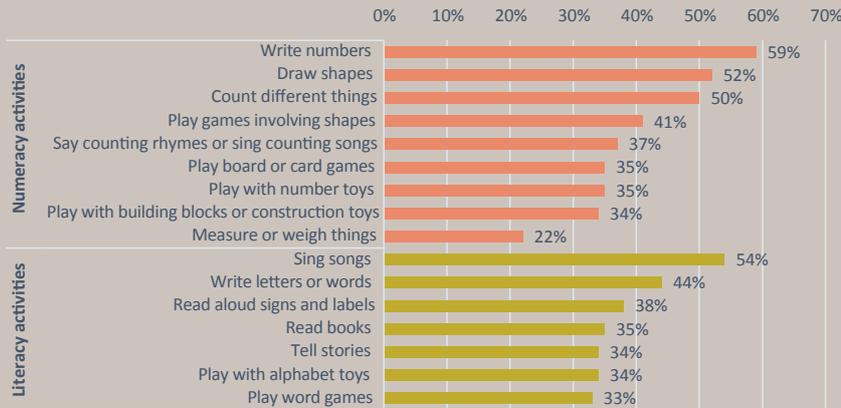
To understand more about the home learning environment in South Africa, we used TIMSS 2019 data from 11 903 grade 5 learners to look at the home context in relation to early learning activities, parental involvement in schoolwork and challenges to involvement.

Early learning activities

Parents' involvement in literacy and numeracy activities with children before they begin school has important implications for later achievement. TIMSS asked parents about what educational activities they involved their children in at home. Figure 1 shows the numeracy and literacy activities that parents conducted 'often'.

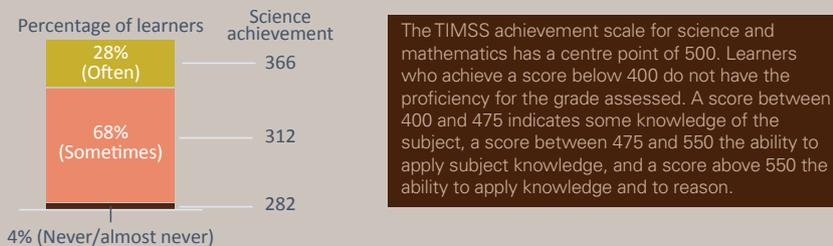
More parents reported often engaging in activities like writing numbers (numeracy) and singing songs (literacy) with their children (59% and 54% respectively). However, parents were far less likely to conduct more cognitively demanding literacy and numeracy activities. For example, only 33% reported often playing word games, and only 22% measured or weighed things often with their children.

Figure 1: Percentage of learners often involved in numeracy and literacy activities



Eighteen educational activities were combined to form a single scale (Figure 2). Sixty-eight per cent of learners were involved in these activities ‘sometimes’, while 28% did these activities ‘often’. The frequency shows a relationship with learners’ grade 5 science achievement: those learners who ‘often’ did these activities scored higher than those who ‘sometimes’ or ‘never/almost never’ did these activities. This highlights how important parental involvement is for children’s educational success.

Figure 2: Frequency of early learning activities and achievement



The [TIMSS grade 5 results](#) showed that parents of learners in fee-paying schools spent significantly more time with their children on early educational activities – with 36% conducting these activities ‘often’, compared with a quarter of parents of learners in no-fee schools. This has implications for the later academic success of learners attending different school types.

Parental involvement and support

Parental involvement helps extend teaching and learning outside the classroom, creates a more positive experience for children and can help children perform better at school. Seventy-one per cent of learners reported that someone at home asked them what they learned at school almost every day, while 65% had someone talk to them about the work they did at school with the same frequency.

Yet, despite these positive responses, learners were performing poorly. Perhaps learners were providing what they believed to be desirable responses, or the role of parents or guardians needs to extend beyond talking about schoolwork to include more interactive learning support.

Challenges parents experience with supporting schoolwork

As much as we would like all parents to be involved in their children’s learning, this is not always possible. Many of these learners come from homes with limited educational attainment. Only 29% of grade 5 learners came from homes where the highest level of education completed was a post-secondary qualification. This was the case for 20% of learners in no-fee schools, while

in fee-paying schools it was 46%. Additionally, about half of the learners came from homes where their parents reported that they were unable to help with their schoolwork due to it being too difficult (57%) or because the schoolwork was in a language they did not understand (51%). This is expected, as four in five learners (79%) attended school in a language that was not their home language. This would affect the support that parents could provide, as they would likely experience difficulties with the language of instruction (English or Afrikaans).

Conclusion

The involvement of parents at home is a crucial building block for learners’ long-term success. However, wide disparities exist between the more and less advantaged homes in relation to the capacity of parents or caregivers to provide a stimulating home learning environment. It is promising that parents are involving their children in early learning activities from a young age, as this has important implications for their literacy and mathematics achievement; and that many parents are actively involved in their children’s schoolwork, although this may be hindered by the difficulty of the subject matter and the language of instruction.

Research shows that parental involvement is most effective when parents are considered as partners in promoting educational success. In 2016, the Department of Basic Education released [Practical Guidelines: How parents can contribute meaningfully to the success of their children in schools](#). Such interventions are required at the national, provincial, district, and school level, while the different contexts within which schools operate and in which children live must be taken into account. Education policies must reflect on the home environment and develop relevant interventions to encourage and support parental involvement in learning.

Authors: Sylvia Hannan, senior researcher, and Dr Andrea Juan, senior research specialist, in the HSRC’s Inclusive Economic Development research division

shannan@hsrc.ac.za
ajuan@hsrc.ac.za