

## Reading Achievements of Pupils with Pre-school Background and those Without at One Primary School in Lusaka District of Zambia

by

**Morgan Mumba and Sitwe Benson Mkandawire**

*The University of Zambia*

### **Abstract**

*This article sought to investigate the variance, if any, in reading achievements of primary school pupils with pre-school background and those without by comparing their technical reading abilities in Grade two at one primary school with multiple classes in Lusaka. The essence for the comparison was to highlight the importance of pre-school or early childhood education to the general well-being of children's technical reading achievements of print letters in early grade classes. It is common practice in Zambia that some pupils enter formal primary school with pre-school background while others do not and, therefore, this comparison would shed more light on the importance of early childhood education in Zambia in the area of technical reading of print letters. This was a concurrent mixed method research design. Quantitative and qualitative modes of inquiry were used to collect and analyse data. A technical reading test of print letters and words was administered to Grade two pupils with and those without pre-school background. Face to face interviews were conducted with early grades in-service teachers, head teacher and parents to the pupils. The sample size consisted of one primary school, one headteacher, twelve primary school teachers, forty (40) Grade two pupils and 36 parents or guardians to the pupils. The forty pupils that took part in the study consisted of twenty pupils with pre-school background and the remaining 20 comprised those without pre-school background. Quantitative data from the test was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), whereas the findings from interviews were analysed thematically by grouping related data together into themes. Findings revealed that, on reading test, pupils without pre-school background performed slightly better in reading than those with pre-school background on all the variables assessed. Furthermore, teachers noted that there were several factors that affected reading achievements which included pupil pre-school/nursery education background, parental educational background, parental socioeconomical status, home environment, pupil interest and commitment towards learning, and teacher-pupil ratio. The study recommended that parents should encourage their children to go to school to avoid absenteeism.*

**Keywords:** Reading, Reading Achievements, Literacy, Pre-school, Phonics.

## **Introduction**

The education system in Zambia is split into formal and vocational education systems as career pathways. The two systems start with early childhood education or early childhood care development education (ECCDE), followed by primary, junior secondary, senior secondary and tertiary education (Mkandawire and Ilon, 2018). The vocational education was previously given a little attention as a meaningful education sector but recently, the government of Zambia began to stress on it in the early years of primary school as well as early childhood education.

Early childhood education is critical and government is aware of the positive relationship of early childhood education (ECE) and a child's cognitive development. Several countries around the world have implemented reforms of their early childhood education systems with a strong emphasis on education in preparation for school (Thomas & Thomas, 2009). Like other countries around the world, Zambia commenced the provision of early childhood education in government schools in 2014. Before 2014, early childhood education or pre-schools were provided by the private sector or churches mainly located in urban areas. Early childhood care development education (ECCDE) is defined as the level of education, both informal and formal, which a child from birth to age six undergoes prior to reaching the compulsory age (seven years) of entry to a primary or basic school (Ministry of Education, 2006). Early childhood care development education is not relatively new in Zambia, as the colonial government came up with Day Nurseries Act of 1957, which was Zambia's first policy with regard to the provision of early childhood education. The Act facilitated the establishment, registration and regulation of day nurseries for children aged between zero and six years (Shikwasha, 2014).

Pre-school or early childhood education is good for children as it exposes them to social and academic life through the various activities that teachers introduce to them such as games, songs, narratives, chorusing and letter sounds which are pre-cursor to learning reading skills. Pre-school also prepares children to be in primary schools and also introduces them to formal group settings. Due to children's observant and curious nature, pre-school helps children to find answers to several questions thereby, helping them emotionally and socially. Pre-school also introduces children to technical reading of ABCs and counting of numbers 1, 2, 3, 4... The benefits of pre-school or ECCDE include; low dropout rates, better academic performance, and the development of brain cells (Munthali, Mvula & Silo, 2014).

Pre-school education in Zambia is not compulsory and it is not a pre-conditional entry into primary school. Thus, the study's main purpose was to investigate the variance, if any, in reading achievements of primary school pupils with pre-school background and those without. The study further strived to establish factors that are associated with pupils reading achievement from different backgrounds.

## **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

A number of studies (Munthali, Mvula & Silo, 2014; Shikwasha, 2014; McCarthy, Whitebook, Ritchie, & Frede, 2011) have shown the relevance of pre-school education to the overall development of children socially, mentally and physically. However, little is known in the area of comparing the performance between children with pre-school education and those without before entering primary school in Zambia. As a result, there is a gap in the knowledge on which one between the two groups breakthrough to technical reading of letters and words earlier than the other. This study, therefore, served to investigate reading achievement of primary school pupils with pre-school background and those without.

## **1.2 Research Objectives**

The study addressed the following objectives:

- (i) Compared reading achievements of pupils with pre-school background to those without at a primary school.
- (ii) Establish teachers' views about the factors that affected pupils' reading achievements in Grade 2.

### *1.3 Research Questions*

- (i) What were the reading achievements of pupils with pre-school background and those without in Grade 2?
- (ii) What were the views of teachers regarding factors that affected pupils' reading achievement from different backgrounds in Grade 2?

## **1.4 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the reading achievement of primary school pupils with pre-school background and those without in Grade 2 classes and to ascertain the views of teachers on the factors that could affect pupils' reading achievements in Grade 2.

## **1.5 Significance of the Study**

The study intended to investigate the reading achievements of primary school pupils with pre-school background and those without. In so doing, it was hoped that the empirical evidence would help to inform the Ministry of General Education (MoGE) and other concerned stakeholders on the role played by early childhood education, thereby enabling the Ministry to implement policies that would be in line with the prevailing situation. The findings of the study would also enable the MoGE to provide suitable mechanisms to deal with the factors thought to be associated with pupils' reading achievements in primary school as reported by the respondents.

## 1.6 Delimitation of the Study

The locality from which the study was done is Lusaka district. One primary school was targeted from a high-density area. Lusaka was chosen because it has a long history of pre-school education in comparison to other districts.

## 1.7 Limitation of the Study

Prince and Murnan (2004) noted that the limitations of the study are those characteristics of design or methodology that impacted or influenced the interpretation of the findings from your research. They are the constraints on generalisability, applications to practice, and/or utility of findings that are the result of the ways in which you initially chose to design the study or the method used to establish internal and external validity or the result of unanticipated challenges that emerged during the study. The limitation of the current study is that the findings could not be generalised to all primary schools in Zambia since the study targeted only one primary school.

## 1.8 Exclusion Criteria of Literacy Assessment

The researchers were aware that literacy assessment as outlined in the Zambia Assessment of Early Literacy Abilities (ZAELA) focuses on early reading and writing skills where several variables are assessed. Among the assessed variables include; recognising letter sounds, phonological/phonemic awareness, reading comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, spelling, and dictation. This study assessed two variables and these were; recognising letter sounds and phonological/phonemic awareness with a focus on reading only.

## 1.9 Operational definitions

**Preschool** - is an early childhood programme in which children between the ages of zero to six combine learning with play before they enroll for formal elementary primary school.

**Reading** - a process of looking at a series of written symbols and getting meaning from them. In this case, the focus was on pupils technical reading abilities of alphabet letters and words.

**Achievement** - the state or condition of having accomplished something from a given test performance.

This section has dealt with a number of aspects, which include; background of the study, statement of the problem, research objectives, research questions, purpose of study, significance of study, delimitations, limitations as well as definition of key terms used in the study.

## 2.0 Literature Review

Cooper and Schindler (2003) define literature review as an account of

what has been published on a topic by accredited scholars and researchers. The literature is presented under the sub-headings reflecting the research objectives of the study. These objectives were as follows: (i) compare reading achievements of pupils with pre-school background to those without at a primary school in Grade two, and, (ii) establish teachers' views about the factors that affected pupils' reading achievements in Grade two.

## **2.1 Factors Associated with Pupils' Reading Achievements**

According to Maynard (2007), reading is a deliberate process of looking at and understanding written language. Reading should be a primary school's biggest priority as it is one of the most important skills any child needs to succeed in education (Mkandawire, 2018). Reading is a means of understanding the world and a fundamental skill required to succeed in various aspects of both school and ordinary life (Mkandawire and Tambulukani, 2017). In other words, reading as a functional skill is applied in our daily lives to survive as it is used when reading receipts, newspapers, books, and others (Silavwe, Mwewa and Mkandawire, 2019). However, knowing how to read in a particular language posits a number of challenges that learners have to overcome in order to breakthrough to reading. In light of this revelation, it can be concluded that pupils' breakthrough to reading at different times depend on the rate at which they succeed in overcoming the challenges that might delay their ability to read. To help understand the factors that influence the rate at which pupils overcome such reading challenges as phonemic awareness, phonics and others, a number of studies have been done (Chileshe et al., 2018; Weir, 2001).

Weir (2001) carried out a study in Ireland whose main objective was to investigate the reading achievement of primary school pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. The findings of this study indicated that the reading achievement of pupils in schools designated as disadvantaged were consistently below those of pupils in non-designated schools in test standardisation samples. Literacy problems were also particularly noticed to be serious in schools serving concentrations of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. The study, therefore, acknowledged socioeconomic status of pupils' parents and availability of reading materials in school as factors among the forecasters of reading achievement of pupils. Similarly, an empirical study done by Thorndike (1973) whose main objective was to investigate reading comprehension education in 15 countries found that socioeconomic status (based on pupils' reports of fathers' occupation, fathers' or mothers' education) and availability of reading resources in the home were the two most predictors of reading achievement among the set of variables related to school characteristics and type and pupils' home and community background. However, although the report presents a great insight on the relationship between socioeconomic status and students' reading achievements, Thorndike's report can be criticised on a number of grounds. Firstly, the research has no guiding theoretical basis and lacks a

general logical framework. Thus, no attempt is made to relate the study to previous research in reading or in comparative education. Secondly, incomplete and often unclear reporting makes it difficult to understand and evaluate the methods used and the results obtained, and replication of the study is hardly possible. Thirdly, several methodological weaknesses raise grave doubts about the findings. For example, weaknesses in the tests that were revealed in pilot trials were not acted on; inferences about the validity of the instruments appear to be biased by the investigators' expectations; and there appears to be serious deficiencies in the sampling of subjects.

In addition, another qualitative study done in South Africa by Geske and Ozola (2008) whose major objective was to find out the reasons behind the low levels of reading among primary school students, found that pupil interest and absenteeism were critical to pupils' performance in school. The data from IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2001 were also analysed and reported that there were multiple factors that affected the performance of learners in early grades. Among the findings of the PIRLS study were that the socioeconomic situation of the family has a great impact on students reading achievements. They also reported that the well being and parents' education background also contributes as they would be reading aloud to a child at the pre-school age. Students who are high achieving in reading literacy usually like reading for their own enjoyment and come from families where parents spend a lot of time on reading. Similarly, one other study done in Minneapolis, USA by Dawkins (2017) whose purpose was to understand the reasons, as perceived by elementary school teachers at the target Title I school, for low student achievement in reading. The findings indicated that the teacher participants believed that there is a need for increased parental involvement in reading. Parental involvement and the home environment were listed as two of the most important factors in student achievement in reading.

As can be observed from the findings presented on factors believed to influence reading achievement of primary school pupils, all the cited studies have similar findings. Based on the findings of these studies, it can be concluded that all of them share one particular weakness in that the conclusions are overgeneralised. In particular, the inference that home background is more important than schooling receives no support from the data presented in the studies. While acknowledging the contribution of distal factors such as socioeconomic status of pupils' parents in explaining the variance in scholastic achievement of pupils, much of the remaining variance are unexplained. Thus, the researcher intends to establish other factors, if any, associated with pupils' reading achievement from different backgrounds in addition to such factors as socioeconomic status of pupils' parents, parental involvement in pupils' education and availability of reading materials, and also to have a feel of a Zambian perspective on the topic

considering the fact that all these studies cited in this study are not based in Zambia (Mkandawire, 2012).

## **2.2 Comparing Reading Achievement of Pupils With Pre-school Background to Those Without**

Data from several policies on education in Zambia indicate that only a small fraction of Zambian children estimated to be 17% attend pre-school education and enter primary education with pre-school background (Ministry of General Education, 2014). The majority of children, for one reason or the other, enter primary schools without pre-school education. For this reason, one of the researcher's objectives was to compare reading achievement of primary school pupils with pre-school background to those without. Evidence from empirical studies have shown that there is a huge correlation between pre-school education and students' academic achievement in later years (Daniels, 1995). The main objective of this study was to establish whether pre-school education can affect children's achievement in primary school. The evidence presented in this study suggested that exposure to pre-school experience has a significantly positive effect on the outcomes of the first two runs of the National Curriculum assessment results for seven-year olds. A hierarchical linear model (using ML3E software) enabled the evidence of this pre-school to be identified whilst taking into account the nested structure of the children within the class. Further, the study also concluded that both nursery and playgroup experience have considerably positive effect on pupils' academic achievement in primary school as compared to non-attendants of preschool education. One weakness associated with this study is that it places much emphasis on preschool education as the sole precursor of students' reading achievement in primary school. This does not appear to be the case as other learners enter primary school without pre-school background, yet their reading achievement are good or even better than those with pre-school background (Munthali et al., 2014).

On the contrary, during the 1930s and 1940s educators believed that children should not be taught to read until they were six and a half years old. This belief was based on a study showing that most children who received formal reading instruction when they were that age usually succeeded in learning to read, leading to the conclusion that learning to read was natural (Morphett and Washburne, 1931). Later researchers went beyond simple chronological age and looked at the literacy experiences children had during their early years (Wells, 1986). Other researchers studied children who learned to read without direct instruction before school entrance (Holdaway, 1979). Some concluded that children learned to read naturally, although a great deal of supportive and interactive behaviours conducive to the learning were apparent. Overwhelmingly, the studies show that children from homes with high socioeconomic backgrounds learn to read early with or without-school education. Other researchers looked at the acquisition of reading from

a developmental point of view. Clay (1966), a leader in the field, introduced the concept of emergent literacy—the idea that learning to read and write begins very early in life and follows a continuum instead of appearing in distinct stages. Research in emergent literacy shows that children acquire considerable knowledge about language, reading, and writing before coming to school. By the time they are two or three year old, many children can identify signs, labels, and logos they see in their homes and communities (Goodman, 1986). Children learn to read through active engagement and construct their own understanding of how written language works. Adults help learners by modeling behaviours, such as writing a shopping list. Even more important than the demonstrations of literacy are the occasions when adults interact with children around print, reading together from pictures and texts (Clay, 1966) and (Nkhata et al., 2019).

Additionally, early childhood experiences strongly influence literacy acquisition. Studies of daycare experiences show that children’s literacy learning depends heavily upon what adult caregivers do. Morrow (1993) studied the relation between the early literacy activities in children modeled by caregivers and children’s voluntary literacy behaviour. The findings showed that, in centers where high literacy behaviour was observed, adults engaged children in frequent reading and writing activities. They not only made books available, they made them unavoidable. Children’s enthusiasm for books and stories was contagious. In the centers where low literacy behavior was observed, caregivers perceived play as a time for social and motor development; they did not model nor facilitate literacy activities and therefore, few occurred. The conclusion, therefore, was that children with high literacy behaviour performed better than their counterparts with low literacy behaviour regardless of whether they had preschool education or not. However, some cited studies do not present a clear picture because; firstly, the findings do not allow the implementation of teaching reading until children reach the age of six and half; secondly, these studies also recognise the importance of early childhood education which seem to fall under the prohibited age bracket, which is quite confusing. Moreover, considering the fact that these studies were done outside Zambia, the researcher, therefore, intends to have a Zambian perspective by comparing the reading achievement of primary school pupils with preschool background to those without, in order to establish which one between pre-school education and other literacy behaviors impact the most on reading achievement of primary school pupils. It can also be noted from these studies that little has been done with regards to comparing reading achievement of pupils with pre-school background to those without. It is in light of this that the researcher resorts to try to investigate the variance in reading achievement between these two categories, if at all there are any.

In conclusion, this chapter has reviewed relevant literature done on the “factors related to pupils reading achievement in primary school” and

“comparing reading achievement of primary school pupils with pre-school background to those without”. A number of factors and data have been advanced from previous studies to underpin this study’s existence.

### **3.0 Method**

This section describes the methodology that was used in conducting the study. The section is organised under the following sub-headings: research design, study population, study sample, sampling techniques, methods of data collection, research instruments, data analysis and ethical considerations.

#### **3.1 Research Design**

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018:173) noted that “a research design is a plan or strategy that is drawn up for organizing the research and making it practical so that research questions can be answered based on evidence and warranty. In this study, a concurrent mixed method research design was used as data was collected and analysed by using both the qualitative and quantitative modes of inquiry. The mixed method design enabled the researchers to deal with quantitative data from pupils’ test results and qualitative data from the interviews with teachers and one head teacher. In other words, qualitative data was collected through interviews with primary school teachers and head teacher, and reading test results were collected from primary school pupils as quantitative data. It was in light of this that the researchers opted to use the mixed method design.

#### **3.2 Study Population**

Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) define target population as a specific group of people relevant to a particular study. In this study, the target population was drawn from Lusaka district, and it constituted of all the primary schools, all Grade two pupils, all Grade two teachers as well as the headteachers of the primary school.

#### **3.3 Sample Size**

The total sample size of this research was 89 participants. These included 40 primary school pupils drawn from selected classes at one primary school. Twenty among the forty pupils were those with pre-school background and another 20 pupils constituted those without pre-school background. Thirty six respondents were parents or guardians who were interviewed physically or by phone to state whether or not their child attended pre-school. The 13 remaining research participants constituted 12 Grade two teachers and 1 head teacher of the school where the study took place.

#### **3.4 Sampling Techniques**

Typical case sampling of the purposive sampling technique was used in this research to select participants of interest to the study. This procedure

was chosen in order to have a representative sample because the Grade two participants drawn were coming from different backgrounds but shared similar traits and characteristics. For instance, all pupils were in Grade two but (20) had a pre-school background at that school and the other (20) had no pre-school background and these were randomly selected. Among several teachers at that school, the 12 that were selected were teaching Grade two classes.

The sampling procedure was that, when researchers visited one class, class registers were requested and records of pupils backgrounds were also investigated to establish whether or not they came from pre-school. This investigation, involved class teachers, a head teacher and parents or guardians to pupils to confirm certain details related to pre-school status of pupils.

### 3.5 Methods of Data Collection

Quantitative data was collected through in class tests with the 40 pupils comprising 20 with pre-school background and another 20 without pre-school background. Qualitative data was collected through face to face interviews with teachers, a head teacher and parents or guardians to the pupils as shown in Table 2 below.

*Table 2: Research Questions with Data Collection Methods*

Research Question	Data Collection Method	Target Respondents
1. Reading achievements of pupils in Grade 2	Test	40 Pupils (with and without Pre-school)
	Interviews	Parents and Guardians
2. Views of teachers about factors that contribute to reading achievements	Face to face interviews	12 Grade 2 teachers and 1 head teacher.

It is important to note that, research question 1 was quantitative in nature and its data was collected using in-class tests. A reading test was given to all Grade two pupils with pre-school background and selected Grade two pupils without pre-school. The nature of the test included pupils' knowledge of both consonants and vowel sounds/letters in the regional official language (Nyanja) for Lusaka. Pupils were also assessed on their ability to read words with one syllable, two syllables, three syllables as well as words containing some consonant clusters.

Research question 2 was qualitative in nature and its data was collected through interviews with respondents. For the teachers and the head teacher, a number of open-ended interview questions were administered to them through oral interviews. These questions mainly focused on answering the research questions all together.

### **3.6 Research Instruments**

Mkandawire (2019) contended that research instruments are tools that the researcher uses to collect information. In this study, researchers used a reading test paper and interview guides for teachers and parents. The interview guides were for the head teacher and the 12 Grade 2 teachers and a different guide for parents. The interview guides were written in English language and was administered to the head teacher and the 12 Grade 2 teachers. The interview guide for parents was both in English and Nyanja depending on the language proficiency of the guardian.

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

Quantitative data from tests was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) while qualitative data from interviews was analysed thematically by grouping similar themes together. The presentation of quantitative data from the tests was done in the form of tables and graphs in quantities as described by Mkandawire (2019). These graphs consisted of all the tasks and the responses of the pupils. Based on these responses, frequencies were generated using Statistical Package for Social Sciences, which showed pupils performance in their respective categories (those with pre-school background on one side and those without on the other). Based on the performance of pupils in these two categories, comparisons were drawn. In other words, the researchers analysed interview data by grouping the findings into identified themes.

### **3.8 Ethical Considerations**

Persmission was obtained from the University of Zambia, Hummanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee, the District Educational Board Secretary for Lusaka, and the head teacher of the school where the study took place. Consent with pupils to take part in the study was an ongoing exercise untill all the data was collected. The participants started taking part in the research after they were informed about the nature of the study and what was expected of them in the study. The researchers also guaranteed anonymity of participants' identities and confidentiality of their responses. The researchers also ensured that participants on the study participated willingly. Furthermore, the analysis of data from the field was not based on subjectivity but rather, the data was analysed objectively based on the views and data collected from the field.

### **4.0 Findings**

This section of the article presents the findings of the study. The data is presented following the research questions and themes generated from the data. The questions under consideration were as follows: (1) What were the reading achievements of pupils with pre-school background and those

without? (2) What were the teachers' views related to factors associated with pupils' reading achievement?

#### 4.1 Reading Achievements of Pupils with Pre-school Background and those Without in Grade Two

This was the first research question and data was collected using a reading test for primary school pupils in Grade 2. Thus, the data below presents findings from the test given to pupils. The reading test was adopted from the National Literacy Framework through the Primary Literacy Programme assessment tools and modified to focus on technical reading only. Six technical reading variables in Nyanja Language were picked and these were: (i) naming and sounding the five vowels in Nyanja; (ii) identifying consonant sounds; (iii) reading one syllable words; (iv) reading two syllable words; (v) reading three syllable words; and (vi) reading words that had consonant clusters. The following were the findings showing the performance of pupils on each variable assessed.

##### 4.1.1 Pupils' Ability to Identify Vowels by Names or Sounds

Pupils from both pre-school and those that did not go to pre-school were assessed using the same variable. Descriptive statistics on frequencies in SPSS showed the following results in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Number of Pupils that Read Vowels

Variable	Pupils with Pre-school Background	Percentage	Pupils without Pre-school Background	Percentage
Vowel	16 pupils read all vowels	80%	17 pupils read all vowels	85%
	2 read some vowels	10%	1 read some vowels	5%
	2 could not identify any vowel	10%	2 could not identify any vowel	10%
Total	20 Pupils	100%	20 Pupils	100%

Table 3 above shows that out of 20 pupils with pre-school background that took the test, 16 pupils (80%) were able to name or sound the vowels in Nyanja while 17 pupils (85%) of the total number of pupils that did not go to pre-school were able to name or sound the vowels in Nyanja. Ten per cent of the pupils in each of the groups of pupils only read some vowels and another 10% in each group of pupils were unable to identify or name any vowel sound.

##### 4.1.2 Pupils' Ability to Identify Consonants by Names or Sounds

The results from descriptive statistics in frequencies on this variable are shown in Table 4 below, where the performance of pupils with pre-school

background and those without are reflected.

*Table 4: Pupils' Ability to Identify Consonants by Names or Sounds*

Variable	Pupils with Pre-School Background	Percentage	Pupils without Pre-school Background	Percentage
Vowel	7 pupils read all consonants	35%	11 pupils read all consonants	55%
	9 read some consonants	45%	8 read some consonants	40%
	4 could not identify any consonant	20%	1 could not identify any consonant	5%
Total	20 Pupils	100%	20 Pupils	100%

The results in Table 4 above shows that out of 20 pupils with pre-school background that took the test, only 7 pupils (35%) were able to name or sound the consonants correctly while 11 pupils (55%) of the total number of pupils that did not go to pre-school were able to name or sound the consonants correctly. The total number of pupils that were able to identify consonants or some consonants among those pupils that did not have a pre-school background was higher (19) against (16) those that went to pre-school.

#### *4.1.3 Pupils' Ability to Read One Syllable Words*

Pupils were also tested on their ability to read one syllable words. Descriptive statistics on frequencies in SPSS showed the following results in Table 5 below.

*Table 5: Number of Pupils that Read one Syllable Words*

Variable	Pupils with Pre-school Background	Percentage	Pupils without Pre-school Background	Percentage
One Syllable Words	9 pupils read all one syllable words	45%	10 pupils read all one syllable words	50%
	6 read some one syllable words	30%	7 read some one syllable words	35%
	5 could not read any one syllable words	25%	3 could not identify one syllable words	15%
Total	20 Pupils	100%	20 Pupils	100%

Table 5 above shows that out of 20 pupils with pre-school background that took the test, 9 pupils (45%) were able to read one syllable words in Nyanja while 10 pupils (50%) of the total number of pupils that did not go to pre-school were able to read one syllable words in Nyanja. Six pupils (30 %) of the pupils that went to pre-school read some words while 7 pupils (35%) of

the pupils that did not have pre-school background read some one syllable words. Five pupils (25%) of the total number of pupils that went to pre-school could not read any of the one syllable words in Nyanja while 3 pupils (15%) of the total number of pupils that did not go to pre-school were unable to read any of the one syllable words in Nyanja.

#### 4.1.4 Pupils' Ability to Read Two Syllable Words

The results from descriptive statistics in frequencies on *pupils' ability to read two syllable words in Nyanja* are shown in Table 6 below, where the performance of pupils with pre-school background and those without are reflected and compared with reference to the variable in question.

Table 6: *Pupils' Ability to Read Two Syllable Words*

Variable	Pupils with Pre-School Background	Percentage	Pupils without Pre-school Background	Percentage
Two Syllables Words	10 pupils read all two syllable words	50%	11 pupils read all two syllable words	55%
	2 read some two syllable words	10%	2 read some two syllable words	10%
	8 could not identify any of the two syllable words	40%	7 could not identify any two syllable words	35%
Total	20 Pupils	100%	20 Pupils	100%

The results in Table 6 above show that 10 pupils (50%) of the total number of pupils that went to pre-school were able to read two syllable words while 11 pupils (55%) that did not go to pre-school were able to read two syllable words in Nyanja. Two pupils (10%) of those that went to pre-school were able to read two syllable words and the same number applies for those that did not go to pre-school. Eight pupils (40%) of those that went to pre-school could not read any of the two syllable words and 7 pupils (35%) of those that did not go to pre-school were unable to read two syllable words in Nyanja.

#### 4.1.5 Pupils' Ability to Read Three Syllable Words

The results from descriptive statistics in frequencies on three syllable words variable are shown in Table 7 below. Like other variables presented earlier, the performance of pupils with pre-school background and those without are presented and described in narrative in the table that follows.

*Table 7: Pupils' Ability to Read Three Syllable Words*

Variable	Pupils with Pre-school Background	Percent-age	Pupils without Pre-school Background	Percent-age
Three Syllables Words	7 pupils read all the three syllable words	35%	9 pupils read all the three syllable words	45%
	4 read some of the three syllable words	20%	3 read some of the three syllable words	15%
	9 could not read any of the three syllable words	45%	8 could not read any of the three syllable words	40%
Total	20 Pupils	100%	20 Pupils	100%

The results in Table 7 above show that out of 20 pupils that went to pre-school, 7 pupils (35%) were able to read three syllable words while 9 pupils (45%) of those that did not go to pre-school were able to read all three syllable words. Four pupils (20%) of those with pre-school background were able to read some words while 3 pupils (15%) of those that did not go to pre-school were able to read some three syllable words. Furthermore, 9 pupils (45%) and 8 pupils (40%) of those that went to pre-school and those that did not go to pre-school respectively were unable to read three syllable words in Nyanja.

#### *4.1.6 Pupils' Ability to Read Consonant Clustered Words*

The results from descriptive statistics in frequencies on this variable are shown in Table 8 below, where the performance of pupils with pre-school background and those without pre-school backgrounds are reflected on their ability to read consonant clustered words.

*Table 8: Pupils' Ability to Read Consonant Clustered Words*

Variable	Pupils with Pre-school Background	Percent-age	Pupils Without Pre-school Background	Percent-age
Consonant Clustered Words	4 pupils read all consonant clustered words	20%	4 pupils read all consonant clustered words	20%
	4 read some consonant clustered words	20%	5 read some consonant clustered words	25%
	12 could not read any of the consonant clustered words	60%	11 could not read any consonant clustered words	55%
Total	20 Pupils	100%	20 Pupils	100%

The results in Table 8 above show that, out of 20 pupils with pre-school background that took the test, only 4 pupils (20%) were able to read all consonant clustered words and the same number, read among those that did not go to pre-school. 12 pupils (60%) and 11 pupils (55%) could not read any of the consonant clustered words in Nyanja.

### 4.3 Views of Teachers on Factors Associated with Pupils' Reading Achievements in Grade 2

The second research question sought to address the views of teachers on factors associated with pupils' reading achievement in Grade 2. Through face to face interviews with in-service teachers that were teaching Grade 2 pupils, several factors were cited associated with reading achievements. Some teachers believed that pre-school or nursery education. They noted that early childhood education lays a foundation that facilitates children's social, emotional and academic standing and their reading or writing abilities in later years of life. Some respondents added that pupils' performance in early grade classes is influenced by the foundation that is laid down during pre-school education. One of the respondents said:

*In 2018, I was given the opportunity to select the children that applied to enroll for Grade one at this school. Since we wanted a specific number of pupils to enroll that year, and the number of eligible children that applied to be considered was overwhelmingly huge, we decided to give these children some simple tests such as writing numbers, drawing objects, asking for their full names and many more in order to have a fair selection. What we discovered was that most children that managed to write numbers, draw objects and say their full names were those with preschool background because they were already exposed to these things at pre-school before they came to enroll for Grade one. Even when it comes to reading, pupils with pre-school background tended to breakthrough to literacy earlier than those without pre-school background.*

Another factor, which some respondents reported to be associated with the reading achievement for pupils from different backgrounds was home environment and parental involvement in children's education. On parental involvement in children's education, one teacher said:

*Some parents leave the education of their children wholly in the hands of the teachers and the school. What they don't understand is that education is a joint venture between what the teachers give pupils and what the pupils learn home from their parents. So, children that get more support from home academically, normally do better.*

The findings from a number of respondents further showed that pupils'

home environment as well as parental involvement in children's education are the major contributing factors towards the reading achievement of early grade learners. On home environment, one teacher said:

*In some homes, children see their parents read a lot of reading materials and most often such children also have stories read to them by their parents, which makes them develop interest and enthusiasm in reading. It is this interest and enthusiasm for reading, which acts as the driving force for children to eventually breakthrough to literacy.*

The study also revealed that in some homes where parents take time to help their children with homework and give incentives to their children when they perform well in school, the children tend to work very hard in a quest for another incentive and their performance in the end is better than that of children from homes where parents do not take their time to check on their children's progress in school. To substantiate this claim, one head teacher said:

*In some homes, parents take some time off to help their children with homework, to check their progress and how they perform, while in some other homes, parents are ever busy and no special attention is given to check on their children's progress in school or to help with homework.*

The study further revealed that home environment (availability of reading materials in the home, and parental involvement in children's education) is one among the factors that are associated with pupils' reading achievement.

The study also showed that the socioeconomic status of children's parents is another contributing factor towards the reading achievement of pupils. The most cited example by the respondents was that pupils coming from rich homes have every school material required to succeed in school at their disposal than their counterparts from poor homes. This bare fact puts children from rich home environments at an advantage to start reading earlier than their colleagues from poor homes. Another respondent said:

*Some pupils from rich backgrounds have it all because their parents can buy them every reading material and also such children can go for extra lessons, which put them at an advantage to acquire the reading skills earlier than their colleagues from poor backgrounds who can't afford to pay for extra lessons or the money to buy some reading materials.*

Language of instruction was pointed to be another factor in determining reading success in pupils. Some teachers noted that, when instruction is done in a familiar language known to pupils, their participation in classes, performance and the ability to express themselves in different context would be very high.

Findings from the respondents also revealed that children coming from homes where parents are educated tend to perform better than those children coming from homes where the parents lack education. Thus, parental educational background/level was listed among the main factors thought to influence the reading achievement of pupils from different backgrounds. One respondent said:

*Educated parents, most of the times, tend to value education a lot as compared to uneducated parents. As a result, educated parents are, mostly, involved in their children's education as compared to uneducated parents.*

This shows that parental education level is one of the factors that contributes to the reading achievement and overall learning of pupils from different backgrounds.

The study also disclosed that pupils' reading achievement is motivated by the pupils' interest and commitment to learn. Some respondents stated that learning to read can only be achieved if the learner is interested in what they are taught. One teacher said:

*Some pupils are most of the times physically present in class but mentally out of class no matter how much the teacher tries to gain such pupils' attention.*

The study, thus, showed that pupils' interest in learning or to hear what the teachers teach, has a bearing on their reading achievement and overall learning. Also, the findings revealed that pupils' commitment towards their education is one other factor that contribute to their reading achievement. The head teacher said:

*If a pupil is ever present in the classroom and never misses classes, he/she is bound to be always up-to-date with what the teacher teaches and the performances of such a pupil tends to be remarkably better than that of a pupil who is perpetually absent for classes.*

Pupil commitment by perpetually being present or absent from class has a bearing on their reading achievements. In other words, pupils' interest towards education is another factor amongst the listed predictors of reading achievement of pupils.

Further, the findings also showed that teacher-pupil ratio was one another factor that was found to be associated with pupils' reading achievement. A number of respondents revealed that in several cases, one teacher was expected to take a class of about 60 to 90 pupils, which proves very difficult for such a teacher to reach out to different learners at the same time. As it is a well-known fact, some respondents revealed that, different learners learn differently, as such, the teacher must give special attention to every learner to help them breakthrough to literacy or to learn, which is quite impossible for one teacher to handle against such a huge class size. Thus, those pupils that are sharp learn to read faster than

slow learners as they do not require special attention to grasp what the teacher is talking about. One respondent said:

*Every year, I have about 80 pupils in most of my Grade one and Grade two classes. As I have noticed, mostly, the reading achievement of the majority number of pupils is very poor and it is very hard for me to help these pupils one by one.*

The findings revealed a number of factors that respondents thought to be associated to reading achievements for pupils from different backgrounds. Thus, the chapter has presented the findings and the next chapter takes a step further to discuss or analyse the data presented.

## **5.0 Discussion of Findings**

This section discusses the findings which were presented in the previous section. The discussion or analysis of the findings was done with respect to research objectives.

### *5.1 Compare Reading Achievement of Primary School Pupils with Pre-school Background to Those Without in Grade Two.*

The first objective was to compare reading achievement of primary school pupils with pre-school background to those without. The data presented in the previous section on objective one, generally showed that pupils that did not go to pre-school performed slightly better in technical reading of print letters and words than those that went to pre-school on all the six variables that were assessed. Tables 3 to 8 indicate the numbers of pupils in the two categories against the quantities of their performance in each of the variables assessed. The difference in the reading achievement of pupils with preschool background and those without was very minimal and almost negligible. This implies that, in terms of technical reading of print text, there is no major difference in reading abilities between pupils that went to pre-school and those that did not. It is plausible to argue that pre-school education in Zambia does not add any value to pupils' ability or inability to read technical letters, syllables and words.

Table 3 assessed pupils ability to name or identify the sounds of vowels presented to them during the test. Sixteen (16) pupils out of 20 that came from pre-school background read all the vowels while 17 pupils out of 20 that did not go to pre-school read all the vowels. The difference in performance on these two groups on this variable is negligible. This is a common pattern on all variables as shown in Table 9. This imply that little is done in pre-school classes to help children breakthrough to reading and writing in Zambia. Table 9 below provides a summary of the results for discussion from research question 1 as presented in the previous section.

*Table 9: Summary of question one Results on all the Variables*

	Pupils with Preschool Back-ground	Pupils Without Preschool Background
Vowels	16 pupils read all vowels 2 read some vowels 2 could not identify any vowel	17 pupils read all vowels 1 read some vowels 2 could not identify any vowel
Consonants	7 pupils read all consonants 9 read some consonants 4 could not identify any consonant	11 pupils read all consonants 8 read some consonants 1 could not identify any consonant
1 Syllable	9 pupils read all single syllable words 6 read some single syllable words 5 could not identify any single syllable words	10 pupils read all single syllable words 7 read some single syllable words 3 could not identify any single syllable words
2 Syllables	10 pupils read all 2 syllable words 2 read some 2 syllable words 8 could not identify any 2 syllable words	11 pupils read all 2 syllable words 2 read some 2 syllable words 7 could not identify any 2 syllable words
3 Syllables	7 pupils read all 3 syllable words 4 read some 3 syllable words 9 could not identify any 3 syllable words	9 pupils read all 3 syllable words 3 read some 3 syllable words 8 could not identify any 3 syllable words
Consonant Clusters	4 pupils read all consonant clustered words 4 read some consonant clustered words 12 could not identify any consonant clustered words	4 pupils read all consonant clustered words 5 read some consonant clustered words 11 could not identify any consonant clustered words

The summary of the table above is that in all the questions given to the pupils in class, pupils that had no pre-school background performed slightly better than those with pre-school background. Although the difference in performance between the two groups of pupils was very small, the results show interesting patterns and disagrees with Daniels (1995) who reported that children that went to pre-school outperform those that did not, academically. The argument that children with pre-school background outperform those without, academically is a fallacy.

The results which indicate that pupils without pre-school background performing slightly better than those with pre-school background in technical reading of print letters and words was equally inconsistent with Munthali et al., (2014). In their study, Munthali et al., (2014) revealed that pre-school education impacted significantly on the child's future academic learning. Munthali's assumption was that pupils that entered primary education with

pre-school background would generally perform better academically than those pupils that entered primary education without pre-school education. Munthali et al. in the same study did highlight and recognise the fact that pupils without pre-school background can perform better than those with pre-school background in some cases but this was less stressed.

As shown in the findings presented in section four of this article, that does not seem to be the case. It can, generally, be noticed that although the variance in performance between these two categories is very minimal, with pupils without pre-school background performing slightly better in reading than pupils who went through pre-school, the conclusion is drawn that pupils without pre-school education performed better than those pupils with pre-school background. These findings raise a number of questions on the nature of learning or activities that are offered in pre-schools to children, qualifications of teachers in pre-schools and the curriculum that is followed. However, we cannot explain pupils' academic performance based solely on pre-school experience alone. In line with this argument, Morrow (1993) resolved that reading achievement of pupils can also be explained according to the literacy activities that children are exposed to in their homes before they enroll into formal elementary school. Thus, according to Morrow's findings, children with high literacy behaviour perform better than their counterparts with low literacy behaviour regardless of whether they had pre-school education or not. Perhaps, pupils that performed better in reading had an advantage of the factors that have been advanced to be associated with pupils' reading achievement.

Although the findings of this study discredit the argument that pupils with pre-school background perform better in reading text than those without, it does not mean that pre-school education is not important. Early Childhood Education is good for children as it exposes them to social and academic life through the various activities that teachers introduce to them such as games, songs, narratives, chorusing and letter sounds which are pre-cursor to learning reading skills. This study focused on assessing technical reading of print text and it did not assess other important skills taught in pre-schools such as socialising, playing, making friends, being cooperative which is the primary focus of pre-school early childhood education. It is also plausible to argue that poor results among pre-school learners are associated with the mismatch between curriculum development and implementation stages for Early Childhood Education (Mkandawire, 2010; Mwanza and Mkandawire, 2020).

## **5.2 Teachers' Views on Factors Associated with Pupils' Reading Achievement**

The second objective was to establish factors associated with pupils' reading achievement in Grade 2. The findings revealed a number of factors thought to be associated with pupils' reading achievements.

The study showed that nursery/pre-school education background was one among the factors believed to be associated with pupils reading achievement. This was so because a number of respondents reported that, in nursery schools, children are exposed to various prints such as the alphabet, numbers and various other symbols. That is the foundation that may help learners in early grade classes breakthrough to literacy. As a result of this early exposure to print in pre-school, when children enter primary school, they are well-groomed in the basic initial literacy skills (such as pre-reading and pre-writing skills) needed to learn to read as compared to those children without pre-school background. It was in light of this that the respondents cited pre-school/nursery education as one among the factors that are associated with pupils' reading achievement. However, Morrow (1993) disagrees with these findings because his study showed that pupils' reading achievements can be explained based on the literacy activities children were exposed to in their homes. As reported in Morrow (1993), children exposed to high literacy behaviour in their homes tend to breakthrough to reading earlier than their counterparts with low literacy behaviour regardless of whether they have pre-school education or not. In line with Morrow's findings, the study under consideration through Reading Tests given to pupils revealed that pupils that had not gone through pre-school before enrolling in Grade one performed better in reading than those that had pre-school background. Thus, pre-school education can be one among the contributing factors to reading achievement of pupils but not in most cases as shown in this study. In other words, reading test results under research question one, disagree with teachers' views on research question two.

The findings also showed that home environment and parental involvement in children's education are significant factors that are associated with pupils' reading achievement. Firstly, the findings revealed that in some homes where reading materials are readily available to children, and where parents tend to read a lot and have at times stories read to their children, the children from such homes when enrolled in primary school tend to breakthrough to reading faster than their counterparts from homes where there are no traces of any reading materials and parents hardly ever read anything to their children. These findings are consistent with Kaunda (2019).

The findings revealed that when stories are read to children, the children develop interest and enthusiasm to learn to read so as to be able to read such stories on their own. The enthusiasm to learn to read, leads to pupils applying more effort in trying, which eventually, result in the pupil breaking through to reading at last. Thus, availability of reading materials in the home was listed as one other contributing factor to the reading achievement of pupils (Mkandawire, 2012).

The findings also showed that parental involvement in children's education was another factor thought to underlie reading achievement of pupils. The study revealed that in some homes where parents take some

time off to help their children with school homework, regularly checking the child's progress in school and giving or promising incentives to children if they do better in school, children tend to perform significantly better than children from homes where parents are not involved in pupils' education. Thus, the findings of this study seem to correlate with the findings of Geske and Ozola's (2008) study which listed parental involvement in children's education and socioeconomic status of pupils' parents among others, as the predictors of pupils' reading achievement.

The language of instruction was pointed to be a predictor of reading success on the part of pupils. Some teachers noted that teaching in a language that children use when playing and at home helps them to understand things faster than in a strange language. These findings are consistent with Mkandawire (2017) whose study indicated that teaching children in a familiar language increases their participation and performance in class.

The study also revealed that some parents leave sole responsibility of their children's education in the hands of the teacher, without themselves playing any role in helping their children to progress in their academic journey. The study showed that parents and teachers should work together to ensure that pupils are given the right kind of knowledge, values and skills needed in society. Thus, the findings showed that parental involvement in a child's education as one among the determinants of the reading achievement and overall performance of the pupils, as parents and teachers work hand-in-hand in order to help children learn.

The study earlier reported that, educated parents are at an advantage as compared to the uneducated parents when it comes to helping their children with education as they have the first-hand experience of what it takes and what is required to succeed academically. Thus, the study listed parental educational background as one factor believed to be associated with pupils' reading achievement. Again, confirming with Weir's (2001) study which revealed that the socioeconomic standing of pupils' parents as well as the educational background of the pupils' parents are among the precursors of pupils' reading achievements.

The study in section four also disclosed that pupil's reading achievement is motivated by the pupil's interest and commitment to learn. For instance, the findings revealed that pupils that are perpetually absent from classes perform significantly lower than those that are ever present in class. This is so because pupils that never miss classes are always up-to-date with what the teachers teach. Thus, teachers revealed that pupil's commitment and interest in learning does contribute towards the reading achievement of the child.

The study also discovered that the teacher-pupil ratio was very unbalanced to the disadvantage of the teacher as the number of pupils in one classroom was reportedly bigger than one teacher could handle. As revealed by the study, this makes it very hard for one teacher to give individual attention

to over 80 pupils in a class in order to help them in areas they do not understand during the process of teaching and learning. Thus, slow learners in such classes are at a drawback. The study listed teacher-pupil ratio as one factor that could account for the reading achievement of pupils. The findings, through teachers' responses, also revealed that in some instances where a class had a relatively small number of pupils-40 pupils or less, the reading achievement of most children in such a class was seemingly better than that of most children in classes of about 80 pupils and above. The study demonstrated that this was so because in small classes, the teacher is able to interact with individual pupils easily after a lesson to find out what challenges they are facing in order to find the right remedy to their problems, whereas in large classes, it is impossible for a teacher to interact with individual learners so as to help them in areas they seem to lag behind.

As can be noticed from the findings presented in this article, the majority of the factors reported to underlie reading achievement of pupils from different backgrounds are similar to the findings of other studies cited in section two. Specifically, the findings reported by Weir (2001); Thorndike (1973); and Geske and Ozola (2008) namely: socioeconomic status of pupils' parents, educational background of pupils' parents, availability of reading materials in pupils' homes, and parental involvement in children's education are similar to the findings presented in this article. This study made a stride further and revealed other factors thought to be associated with pupils' reading achievement. These are teacher-pupil ratio, pupil's interest and commitment towards his/her learning and pre-school education.

## **6.0 Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **6.1 Conclusions**

This study has beyond reasonable doubt affirmed that Grade two pupils without pre-school background performed better in reading than their counterparts with pre-school background in all the questions or variables assessed. The difference was almost negligible implying that, there was no statistically significant difference in performance between pupils that went to pre-school and those that did not, as far as technical reading of print text was concerned. Pupils without pre-school background perform academically better than pupils with pre-school background. This implies that, early childhood education in Zambia does not add value in helping learners to quickly breakthrough to reading and writing in early grade classes. It would also mean that, there is need to modify the curriculum to address key issues required for children's education.

Teachers believed that the factors that contribute to pupils' reading achievements include but not limited to the socio-economical standing of the pupil's parents. It was noted that parents with high socio-economic standing could afford buying all the necessary reading materials for their

children and also such parents could take their children for extra lessons which children from low socio-economic standings could not afford. This puts the children from rich backgrounds at an advantage to breakthrough to reading earlier than those children from poor backgrounds.

Parental education background was another factor where it was reported that educated parents tended to take more interest in their children's education and they happen to provide the right kind of materials to their children to succeed as they (parents) often have the first-hand experience of what it takes and what is involved for one to succeed academically. On the contrary, uneducated parents, most often, pay little attention to their children's education.

Availability of reading materials in pupils' home is among the factors that was pointed to be associated with pupils' reading achievement. The study revealed that in homes where children see their parents read a lot of books and at times have these books read to them, children tend to develop interest and enthusiasm to read on their own. It is this enthusiasm that leads to pupils applying themselves more and eventually breaking through to reading. On the contrary, in homes where children cannot trace any piece of reading material, children tend to lack the interest and enthusiasm for books which leads into them not applying themselves more in attempting to learn to read.

Parental involvement in children's education was another factor that accounts for the reading achievement of pupils. The study revealed that in some cases where parents do not take time to check on the progress of their children's education, and often parents do not help their children with homework, the performance of such pupils tends to be significantly lower than that of their counterparts where parents take time to check on the progress of their children's education and where parents also help children with their homework.

Class size, pupil's interest and commitment towards learning were other factors that contributed or predicted reading achievements. Class size was reported to be a predictor of reading success and teachers noted that huge classes, as if one was teaching the whole community, was a factor that hindered reading success. Some teachers noted that some classes had 80 to 90 pupils in one class which is impossible to pay attention to each of these pupils. They noted that the smaller the class size, the better the performance of pupils, and the bigger the class size, the poorer the performance.

Pupil commitment on the frequency of their absence or presence in classes would predict reading achievements. Pupils that were frequently present in class perform better than those that were absent many times.

Pre-school education background was another factor raised by teachers as a predictor of reading success in early grade classes. Teachers indicated that pupils with pre-school background performed better than those without but this study proved them wrong. In fact, the performance was the opposite of what teachers stated.

## 6.2 Recommendations

In light of these findings, the following recommendations were made:

- (i) Pre-school education curriculum should be revised to address critical areas that would help children quickly breakthrough to literacy.
- (ii) Educators and other concerned stakeholders should carry out sensitisation campaigns to inform parents on the impact of their involvement in children's education. The parents should be made aware of what they can do at home to help their children succeed academically.
- (iii) The government or communities should construct more classrooms in primary schools throughout the country in order to do away with overcrowded classrooms which makes it difficult for one teacher to handle over 80 pupils in one class.

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