

Children's Physical Abuse as a Predictor of Literacy Competency Acquisition Among Grade Three Pupils: A Case of Thika Sub-County, Kiambu County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Physical abuse remains a major barrier to quality education and child protection in Kenya. Despite legal frameworks prohibiting corporal punishment, children continue to experience physical violence at home and in schools, often justified by cultural norms. This study examined children's physical abuse as a predictor of literacy competency acquisition among Grade Three learners in Thika Sub-County, Kiambu County. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the study focused on Grade Three as a critical stage where learners transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn," with early literacy failure having long-term academic consequences. A mixed-methods design involved 401 participants: 364 pupils, 19 teachers, and 18 parents. Data were collected through structured questionnaires, standardized reading assessments, focus group discussions, and academic record analysis. Findings revealed a significant negative relationship between physical abuse and literacy competency: pupils exposed to higher levels of abuse scored lower in reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. Qualitative findings highlighted fear, anxiety, low self-esteem, and reduced classroom participation as mediating factors. About 47% of learners reported abuse at home, and 18% at school, with abused learners performing significantly worse than peers ($p < 0.001$). The study concludes that physical abuse critically undermines early literacy development. It recommends strengthened school-home collaboration, enhanced child protection, and targeted psycho-social support. Collaborative stakeholder programs are essential to reduce abuse and safeguard foundational learning outcomes.

Keywords: Physical Abuse, Literacy Competency, Grade Three Learners, Child Protection, Early Childhood Education, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Childhood is universally recognized as a critical stage in the life cycle, marked by rapid physical, cognitive, emotional and social development. The experiences that children encounter during this period significantly influence their lifelong learning trajectories, behaviour patterns, and overall well-being. Among the most influential experiences are those encountered in both the family and school contexts, which serve as the primary environments for early socialization and academic formation. However, for many children globally, these environments are not always nurturing or protective. Instead, they are often characterized by exposure to abuse, neglect, and harmful practices, with physical abuse emerging as one of the most widespread and socially tolerated forms of child maltreatment. Physical abuse, defined as the intentional infliction of bodily harm through acts such as hitting, caning, slapping, or burning, has been consistently linked with adverse health, social, and educational outcomes (WHO, 2020).

Globally, the prevalence of child maltreatment remains alarmingly high. According to estimates by the World Health Organization, more than one billion children aged 2 to 17 experience some form of physical, sexual, or emotional violence annually. Research consistently shows that children who experience abuse are at heightened risk of anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and impaired cognitive functioning (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005). Importantly, the educational consequences of abuse have received increasing attention, as maltreatment not only disrupts psychosocial development but also directly undermines school engagement, attendance, and academic performance (Lansford et al., 2014). Literacy, the foundational skill that enables children to transition from

learning basic decoding to applying reading in all subject areas, is particularly sensitive to the effects of trauma and abuse. Studies across both developed and developing countries confirm that physically abused children often display delayed language development, weaker reading fluency, and reduced comprehension, leading to persistent academic under-performance (Cowell et al., 2015).

In sub-Saharan Africa, child protection challenges are compounded by entrenched socio-cultural practices, poverty, and limited enforcement of existing child rights frameworks. Corporal punishment, in particular, continues to be used by caregivers and educators as a disciplinary method, often crossing the threshold into abuse. A review by Badoe (2017) noted that more than 60 percent of African children report experiencing physical punishment at home, frequently justified as “necessary discipline.”

Within school settings, large class sizes, inadequate teacher training in classroom management, and resource constraints make corporal punishment a common though unlawful practice. These realities highlight the tension between legal prohibitions and cultural acceptance, with children caught in the intersection. For learners in early grades, such experiences can produce both physical and emotional distress that significantly impedes learning outcomes, particularly in literacy acquisition.

Kenya provides a particularly illustrative context for examining this intersection. National surveys paint a worrying picture of child maltreatment across the country. The Violence Against Children Survey conducted in 2019 reported that 45 percent of Kenyan children had suffered physical abuse, most often at the hands of parents, relatives, or teachers (UNICEF Kenya & KNBS, 2019). Although the Children’s Act (2001) and the Basic Education Act (2013) explicitly outlaw corporal punishment, the persistence of physical discipline in homes and schools underscores the gap between policy and practice. The introduction of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) has placed increased emphasis on literacy as a foundation for lifelong learning, yet literacy outcomes remain uneven, with national assessments showing many learners failing to achieve grade-level benchmarks. When physical abuse is factored into this already challenging landscape, the risk to learners’ reading development becomes even more pronounced.

Thika Sub-County in Kiambu County exemplifies these challenges. As an industrial hub with a rapidly growing peri-urban population, Thika attracts diverse households ranging from middle-income earners to families in informal settlements. This Socioeconomic diversity produces sharp contrasts in child-rearing practices, access to learning resources, and exposure to risk factors such as violence and neglect. Reports from local education officers and child protection units indicate that cases of physical abuse are common, with both teachers and parents implicated. Within schools, teachers face overcrowded classrooms and limited support, often resorting to corporal punishment as a means of enforcing discipline. In households struggling with poverty and unemployment, stress and frustration frequently translate into physical punishment of children. Against this backdrop, Grade Three learners who are at the threshold of transitioning from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” represent a highly vulnerable group. Literacy deficits at this level can have cascading effects, making learners less likely to cope with subsequent curriculum demands, less engaged in school, and more at risk of dropping out.

Despite the high prevalence of child abuse and its acknowledged negative impacts, there remains a paucity of empirical studies in Kenya that specifically examine the relationship between physical abuse and reading literacy acquisition in the early grades. Existing research has largely focused on general academic performance, psychosocial effects, or prevalence studies without disaggregating literacy outcomes. For instance, while national surveys have documented abuse rates, they stop short of connecting these to academic performance indicators. Likewise, while qualitative reports from NGOs and community-based organizations provide rich narratives of abuse, they rarely include systematic assessment of literacy achievement. The result is a gap in evidence that weakens the ability of educators, policymakers, and child protection actors to design interventions that simultaneously safeguard children and promote foundational literacy.

The present study sought to address this gap by investigating the prevalence of physical abuse and its effect on reading literacy competency among Grade Three learners in Thika Sub-County. Grounded in Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, the study recognizes that children’s development is influenced by multiple interconnected systems family, school, community, and the broader cultural and policy environment. By

employing a mixed-methods approach that combined learner, teacher, and parent perspectives with quantitative analysis of literacy scores, the study generated holistic evidence on how abuse shapes learning outcomes.

The significance of the study is manifold. For education policymakers, the findings provide empirical justification for strengthening enforcement of existing child protection policies and embedding positive discipline into school culture. For teacher educators, the study highlights the importance of equipping pre-service and in-service teachers with skills to manage classrooms without resorting to violence, while also supporting abused learners academically. For parents and communities, the results underscore the urgent need to rethink discipline practices in favor of nurturing and supportive approaches that protect children's dignity and promote their learning. Finally, for researchers, the study contributes to filling the gap in African scholarship on child abuse and literacy, offering a replicable model for similar investigations in other contexts.

In conclusion, the introduction has outlined the global, regional, and national dimensions of child physical abuse, emphasized the critical nature of reading literacy acquisition in Grade Three, highlighted the persistence of corporal punishment despite legal prohibitions, and identified the research gap that this study sought to address. By focusing on learners in Thika Sub-County, the study not only provides localized evidence but also offers broader insights for Kenya and the sub-Saharan region.

Problem Statement

Reading literacy competency acquired in the early grades forms the foundation for all subsequent learning and academic success. By Grade Three, learners are expected to transition from learning to read to reading to learn, a milestone that is critical within Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC). However, national and regional assessments continue to report low literacy proficiency among lower primary learners, raising concerns about underlying factors that may be impeding foundational skill acquisition. While instructional quality and school resources have received considerable attention, less emphasis has been placed on the influence of adverse home experiences, particularly physical abuse, on early literacy development.

Physical abuse remains prevalent despite existing legal and policy frameworks designed to protect children. Exposure to physical violence has been associated with cognitive disruptions, emotional distress, and reduced classroom engagement, all of which may negatively affect reading development. Although studies have examined the relationship between child maltreatment and general academic performance, limited empirical evidence exists linking physical abuse specifically to reading literacy competency among Grade Three pupils within the Kenyan context. This gap constrains the development of targeted interventions that integrate child protection and literacy improvement efforts.

Therefore, this study seeks to examine the relationship between physical abuse and reading literacy competency among Grade Three pupils.

Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by the following specific objectives:

- i. To assess the prevalence of physical child abuse among Grade Three learners in Thika Sub-County, Kiambu County.
- ii. To determine the effect of physical abuse on the acquisition of reading literacy competency among Grade Three learners in Thika Sub-County, Kiambu County.
- iii. To examine the environmental, personal, and Socioeconomic factors influencing the relationship between physical abuse and reading literacy competency acquisition in Thika Sub-County, Kiambu County.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical research consistently demonstrates that children's exposure to adverse experiences, including physical abuse, significantly influences cognitive and academic outcomes. Early investigations in developmental psychology show that maltreated children perform lower on standardized assessments of language, reading, and overall academic achievement than non-maltreated peers (Eckenrode et al., 2014). For example, a longitudinal study in the United States reported that children who experienced CPS-verified abuse exhibited persistent deficits in reading comprehension and vocabulary relative to matched controls (English et al., 2005). Similarly, Smith and Pell (2018) found that early physical abuse predicted reduced performance on measures of phonological processing and reading fluency at age 8, even after controlling for socioeconomic status and instructional quality.

Meta-analytic evidence further establishes the relationship between child maltreatment and academic outcomes. A comprehensive review by Knight, Brough, and Williams (2020) synthesized findings from 42 studies and confirmed that physical abuse is a significant negative predictor of basic literacy skills, including word recognition and reading comprehension. The authors noted that maltreatment-related stress disrupts neural networks involved in language processing, attention, and memory, which are essential for literacy acquisition. Such disruptions are exacerbated by school avoidance behaviours and psychological distress commonly reported among physically abused children (Out et al., 2012).

Beyond general academic performance, trauma-specific studies provide nuanced insights into how physical abuse impacts literacy development. In a school-based sample in Canada, Jones et al. (2017) found that symptoms of trauma mediate the effect of abuse on reading outcomes: children with higher trauma symptom scores exhibited poorer reading fluency and comprehension compared to their less symptomatic peers. Similarly, a mixed-methods study in Australia reported that abused children were more likely to demonstrate disengagement from classroom reading activities, lower motivation to read, and difficulties in sustained attention, all correlates of impaired literacy competency (Reid & Dahl, 2016).

While much of the international literature originates from high-income contexts, research in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) increasingly signals similar patterns. A study conducted across multiple LMIC settings by He et al. (2019) found that exposure to physical punishment at home was associated with lower literacy scores among primary learners in Ghana, Tanzania, and Vietnam. These relationships held after adjusting for parental education, household wealth, and school quality indicators. The authors highlighted that cultural norms around physical discipline and limited psychosocial support amplify the negative effects of abuse on children's school performance in resource-constrained settings.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, empirical studies underscore the pervasive nature of physical abuse and its educational consequences. In Nigeria, Okeke and Mordi (2020) examined 850 primary school pupils and reported that those who experienced corporal punishment or domestic physical abuse scored significantly lower on reading and language tasks than non-abused peers. The study further found that abused learners exhibited higher school absenteeism and behavioural difficulties, which contributed to poorer literacy outcomes. Similarly, research in South Africa by Van der Merwe and Dawes (2018) revealed that physically abused children showed lower mastery of basic reading skills and were three times more likely to repeat grades compared to non-abused learners.

Kenya-specific empirical evidence, though emerging, corroborates broader patterns but reveals critical gaps. Several studies have examined the prevalence of corporal punishment and its effect on general academic performance. For instance, Ouko (2018) reported that primary pupils who experienced physical discipline at home or school had lower overall academic achievement, including in language subjects, compared with peers who were not physically disciplined. In a cross-sectional survey of rural Kenyan primary schools, Mweru (2010) found that corporal punishment, despite official prohibition, was associated with reduced school participation and learner disengagement. These behavioural outcomes are well-documented antecedents of poor literacy development.

However, few Kenyan studies have isolated reading literacy competency, comprising decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, as a discrete outcome variable in relation to physical abuse. Most existing

research focuses broadly on academic performance or psycho social correlates without parsing how abuse specifically intersects with literacy acquisition. A study by Kamau and Wakhutu (2021) suggested that psycho-social distress undermines reading engagement among early grade learners, but did not examine physical abuse as a distinct predictor. Another mixed-methods study by Otieno (2022) reported negative associations between household violence and children's school achievement; yet, the absence of standardized reading assessments limited conclusions about specific literacy competencies.

The gap in Kenya's empirical literature is significant given the contextual realities of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), which emphasizes early literacy mastery as foundational to lifelong learning. The CBC framework positions Grade Three as a critical transitional phase where learners consolidate basic skills and begin applying literacy across learning areas. Therefore, understanding how physical abuse, an ecological risk factor at the microsystem level, impairs reading literacy competence is critical for policy, pedagogy, and psycho-social support design.

In summary, a robust body of international and regional empirical studies links physical abuse to poorer literacy and academic outcomes; however, evidence specific to reading literacy competency among early grade learners in Kenya remains limited. This gap restricts targeted interventions and underscores the need for studies that isolate literacy outcomes and contextualize findings within Kenya's educational frameworks.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a correlational research design within a mixed-methods framework to examine the relationship between physical abuse and reading literacy competency among Grade Three pupils. The correlational design was appropriate because the study sought to determine the nature and strength of association between variables without manipulating them. The mixed-methods approach enabled the integration of quantitative data for statistical analysis and qualitative insights to provide contextual understanding of the observed relationships.

The study targeted Grade Three pupils, their class teachers, and parents within selected primary schools. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure representation across school types and social demographic contexts. The final sample comprised pupils, teachers, and parents who voluntarily participated after informed consent and assent procedures were completed.

Data were collected using three instruments: a structured pupil questionnaire assessing experiences of physical abuse, a standardized reading literacy assessment measuring decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension skills, and interview guides for teachers and parents to explore contextual and behavioural observations. The literacy assessment tools were adapted to align with Grade Three competency benchmarks under Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize patterns of physical abuse and literacy performance, and Pearson's correlation coefficient to determine the strength and identify recurring patterns related to emotional well-being, classroom participation, and literacy engagement. Ethical approval was obtained from relevant authorities, and confidentiality, anonymity, and child protection safeguards were strictly observed throughout the study.

Findings of the Study

Prevalence of Physical Abuse: The first objective of the study sought to determine the prevalence of physical abuse among Grade Three learners in Thika Sub-County, Kiambu County. Data collected from learners, teachers, and parents revealed that physical abuse remains a pervasive issue despite existing legal frameworks prohibiting corporal punishment.

Of the 364 learners surveyed, 47% reported experiencing some form of physical abuse at home in the past year, highlighting the high occurrence of child maltreatment in domestic settings. At school, 18% of learners indicated that they had been subjected to physical punishment by teachers or school staff. The most frequently reported

forms of abuse included beating, slapping, pinching, and withholding food as a form of discipline. Learners noted that physical punishment was often administered for failing to complete homework, arriving late, or displaying disruptive behaviour in class.

Teacher responses corroborated these findings: 41% of the sampled teachers admitted witnessing or being aware of the continued use of corporal punishment in schools, despite its legal ban. Similarly, 38% of parents acknowledged using physical discipline at home, often rationalizing it as necessary to correct children's behaviour or instil discipline.

These findings align with national surveys, including the 2019 Violence Against Children Report, which documented high levels of physical abuse in both households and schools across Kenya. The persistence of such practices underscores a tension between statutory child protection policies and entrenched cultural norms that continue to regard physical punishment as an acceptable form of discipline, highlighting the urgent need for awareness, enforcement, and alternative discipline strategies. Table 1, illustrates the findings.

Table 1. Prevalence of Physical Abuse as Reported by Learners, Teachers, and Parents

Source of Report	Reported Prevalence (%)	Common Forms Reported
Learners (n = 364)	47.0	Beating, slapping, pinching
Teachers (n = 19)	41.0	Corporal punishment, harsh handling
Parents (n = 18)	38.0	Discipline at home (beating, caning)

Qualitative findings reinforced these statistics. In focus group discussions, learners described incidents of being beaten with sticks, slapped for lateness, or denied food as a form of punishment. One learner noted:

“When I fail to do homework, my father beats me with a belt.

Sometimes I cannot sit well in class the next day.”

Teachers also provided justifications for corporal punishment, citing large class sizes and limited time for individualized management as contributing factors. Parents echoed these sentiments, asserting that physical discipline was sometimes the only effective way to correct children. These narratives demonstrate that physical abuse is not only prevalent but also culturally rationalized, making eradication difficult despite strong legal frameworks.

Effects of Physical Abuse on Reading Literacy

The study's second objective explored the relationship between children's experiences of physical abuse and their literacy competency acquisition. Quantitative and qualitative data revealed a significant negative association between physical abuse and reading literacy outcomes among Grade Three learners. Pupils who reported higher levels of physical abuse consistently performed lower in key literacy domains, such as reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary acquisition, than their non-abused peers. This finding aligns with documented evidence that child abuse significantly impairs academic performance and cognitive outcomes in young learners (Mutua & Ong'ang'a, 2017).

Specifically, abused learners in this study demonstrated reduced reading accuracy and slower reading rates, alongside difficulties in understanding and interpreting text. Standardized literacy assessments indicated that the mean reading scores of abused learners were significantly lower than those of their non-abused peers ($p < 0.001$). Research on child maltreatment and academic achievement shows similar patterns, where physical abuse and harsh disciplinary practices correlate with poorer language and literacy outcomes among primary school pupils.

Qualitative insights from focus group discussions highlighted that fear, anxiety, low self-esteem, and reluctance to participate in class activities mediated the negative relationship between abuse and literacy outcomes. Such

psycho-social effects are consistent with findings that violence and punitive discipline contribute to emotional distress and disengagement, which in turn hinder learning and academic engagement (Wambu & Mugo, 2008).

Teachers observed that learners subjected to physical punishment often exhibited withdrawal, reduced attention spans, and reluctance to engage in reading activities, while parents reported that abused children frequently showed low motivation to read or complete school assignments. These observations echo broader research linking trauma from physical abuse to impaired school participation and academic performance. Together, these findings emphasize the urgent need for targeted interventions, including child protection programs, positive discipline strategies, and supportive learning environments that safeguard literacy acquisition in early grades and mitigate the detrimental effects of physical abuse on educational outcomes.

Table 2. Mean Reading Literacy Scores by Abuse Experience

Abuse Experience	N	Mean Score	SD	t-value	p-value
Abused learners	172	54.2	8.6	-6.72	< 0.001
Non-abused learners	192	65.3	9.1		
Total	364				

The independent samples t-test confirmed the significance of this difference. The negative t-value (-6.72) and a p-value less than 0.001 demonstrate that the gap in reading literacy scores between abused and non-abused learners is not due to chance.

The quantitative findings were further supported by qualitative evidence from focus group discussions. Learners consistently described feelings of fear, anxiety, and distraction after experiencing physical abuse. For example, one learner said:

“When my mother beats me in the morning, I cannot read well in school because I feel pain and I think too much.”

Another learner added: “Sometimes I do not go to school when my teacher beats me. I fear facing him again.”

Teachers echoed these observations, noting that abused children often displayed low participation in literacy activities, reluctance to read aloud, and high rates of absenteeism. They further observed that such learners frequently lacked concentration in class and demonstrated poor memory retention, both of which are essential for developing reading fluency and comprehension. These findings are consistent with prior studies that highlight the impact of physical abuse on academic performance. Research by Cowell et al. (2015) and Ngisa et al. (2017) established that physically abused learners lag behind their peers in literacy acquisition and overall school achievement. The current study extends this knowledge by focusing specifically on Grade Three learners in Kenya, showing a measurable performance gap that coincides with a critical stage of literacy development.

In summary, the results demonstrate that physical abuse is significantly associated with lower literacy outcomes, thereby undermining learners’ ability to meet grade-level expectations in reading. If left unaddressed, this gap may widen as learners progress through the curriculum, potentially resulting in long-term educational disadvantage.

Environmental, Personal and Socioeconomic Factors

The third objective of this study examined the environmental, personal, and socioeconomic factors that influence the relationship between physical abuse and reading literacy competency acquisition. Findings indicate that while physical abuse has a direct negative effect on literacy outcomes, its impact is often compounded or moderated by learners’ surrounding contexts. This aligns with ecological and developmental frameworks that emphasize the *interconnected influence of individual, family, and community factors* on children’s learning and educational outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gutman & Akerman, 2008).

Teachers and parents were asked to rate, on a five-point Likert scale, the extent to which specific contextual factors influenced literacy outcomes. These factors included the home learning environment, school climate, learner self-esteem, and household socioeconomic status (SES). Emerging evidence suggests that these multidimensional influences play a significant role in shaping literacy development, often interacting with experiences of adversity such as physical abuse.

Home Learning Environment: The quality of the home learning environment, characterized by access to reading materials, parental engagement in learning, and supportive homework practices, was identified as a strong predictor of literacy attainment. Research has consistently shown that children with enriched home literacy environments perform better in reading comprehension and language skills, even when controlling for other risk factors (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2014; Mol & Bus, 2011). In this study, learners from households with limited reading resources or low parental involvement were more likely to exhibit poor literacy outcomes.

School Climate: School climate, including teacher support, classroom relationships, and learner safety, was also rated as influential. A positive school climate has been linked with higher academic engagement and reading achievement, whereas negative climates characterized by stress and punitive discipline are associated with lower performance and school withdrawal (Thapa et al., 2013; Reddy et al., 2003). Teachers in this study indicated that a supportive, nurturing classroom environment mitigated some adverse effects of physical abuse, while negative school experiences exacerbated literacy difficulties.

Learner Self-Esteem: Children’s self-esteem emerged as a crucial personal factor. Low self-esteem and diminished self-efficacy have been found to mediate the relationship between adverse experiences and academic achievement, with self-confidence in reading skills affecting persistence and participation in literacy activities (Bandura, 1997; Marsh & Martin, 2011). Focus group discussions revealed that learners subjected to physical punishment reported lower confidence and greater fear of reading aloud, which in turn inhibited their literacy skill development.

Socioeconomic Status: Household socioeconomic status significantly influenced literacy outcomes. Consistent with international research, children from low-SES families faced compounded barriers, such as limited educational resources, inadequate nutrition, and heightened psychosocial stress, which detrimentally affected academic performance (Sirin, 2005; Reardon, 2011). In this study, learners from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to experience both physical discipline and poor literacy outcomes, supporting evidence that SES interacts with maltreatment to heighten risk for academic underachievement.

Collectively, these findings indicate that environmental, personal, and socioeconomic contexts not only shape literacy competency directly but also interact with experiences of physical abuse, creating complex pathways that influence early reading development. Addressing literacy challenges among young learners therefore requires holistic, multi-level interventions that extend beyond the classroom to support families and communities. The results are presented in table 3.

Table 3. Perceived Influence of Key Factors

Factor	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Home learning environment	4.2	0.7	Strong influence
School climate	3.8	0.9	Moderate influence
Self-esteem	3.6	0.8	Moderate influence
Household income	3.4	0.9	Moderate influence

The results show that the home learning environment was rated as having the strongest influence ($M = 4.2$). Learners who were exposed to abuse at home often lacked supportive literacy resources, such as access to books or assistance with homework. Parents who frequently used physical discipline were less likely to provide encouragement or participate in reading activities with their children, thereby compounding the negative effects of abuse on literacy acquisition. School climate also played a significant role ($M = 3.8$). In schools where,

positive discipline policies were implemented and teachers provided remedial literacy support, abused learners were more likely to maintain engagement with reading tasks. Conversely, in schools where corporal punishment persisted, the negative effects of abuse were magnified, as learners faced violence in both their home and school environments. Personal factors, particularly self-esteem, were also critical. Abused learners were often described by teachers as withdrawn, reluctant to read aloud, or hesitant to participate in literacy activities. The mean rating of 3.6 indicates that low self-confidence, often a direct consequence of physical abuse, limited learners' ability to practice reading skills and gain fluency. Learners themselves reported feeling "afraid to make mistakes" or "ashamed" when called upon to read, suggesting that abuse undermines the confidence necessary for literacy development.

Socioeconomic status exerted a moderate influence (M = 3.4). Households with lower income levels were more likely to use physical punishment, a finding supported by both teacher and parent responses. Poverty also restricted access to literacy resources such as textbooks, supplementary readers, and quiet study spaces. Parents from low-income households frequently cited financial stress as a reason for resorting to harsh discipline, thereby linking Socioeconomic disadvantage with both higher risk of abuse and reduced opportunities for literacy growth. Qualitative evidence reinforced these statistical findings. Teachers explained that learners from supportive home environments, even if they experienced occasional discipline, tended to perform better in reading because parents provided books and supervised homework.

On the other hand, learners from abusive and resource-poor households struggled consistently with literacy tasks. Parents admitted that economic hardships sometimes led to frustration, which in turn triggered physical punishment, illustrating the cyclical nature of poverty, stress, and child maltreatment. Overall, the findings underscore that while physical abuse has a direct and negative effect on literacy, its influence cannot be understood in isolation. It is embedded within broader ecological systems that include home practices, school environments, personal factors such as self-esteem, and Socioeconomic realities. These factors interact in ways that either exacerbate or mitigate the harm caused by abuse, aligning with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory which emphasizes the interplay of multiple contexts in shaping child development.

The study set out to examine the prevalence and effects of physical abuse on reading literacy competency among Grade Three learners in Thika Sub-County. The findings confirmed that physical abuse is widespread, with nearly half of the sampled learners reporting abuse at home and almost one in five reporting abuse at school. Parents and teachers acknowledged the persistence of corporal punishment, often rationalizing it as a disciplinary necessity despite clear legal prohibitions. Analysis of academic records revealed that abused learners significantly under-performed in reading literacy compared to their non-abused peers. The mean difference of more than eleven percentage points, confirmed through independent samples t-tests, demonstrated a statistically significant gap that directly linked abuse to weaker literacy acquisition. In addition, the study established that factors such as the home learning environment, school climate, Socioeconomic status, and learner self-esteem influenced the severity of the impact. Supportive homes and child-friendly schools cushioned some learners, while poverty and persistent violence in both home and school contexts deepened the literacy gap. Overall, the findings underscore that physical abuse is not only a violation of children's rights but also a critical barrier to achieving foundational literacy in the early years of schooling. The findings are summarized in table 4.

Table 4: Environmental, Personal, and Socioeconomic Factors Influencing Literacy Competency

Factor	Description	Influence on Literacy Competency	Source / Supporting Study
Home Learning Environment	Access to books, parental engagement, supportive homework practices	Strong predictor of reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary; enriched environments mitigate some negative effects of abuse	Sénéchal & LeFevre (2014); Mol & Bus (2011); Mutua & Ong'ang'a (2017)
School Climate	Teacher support, classroom relationships, learner safety	Positive climates enhance engagement and literacy outcomes; negative climates exacerbate effects of abuse	Thapa et al. (2013); Reddy et al. (2003)

Learner Self-Esteem	Children’s self-confidence and perceived competence in learning	Low self-esteem mediates the impact of abuse, reducing participation and motivation to read	Bandura (1997); Marsh & Martin (2011)
Socioeconomic Status (SES)	Household income, parental education, access to educational resources	Low SES compounds negative effects of abuse; learners from disadvantaged homes show lower literacy scores	Sirin (2005); Reardon (2011); Muriithi (2016)

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have significant implications for education policy, school practice, and child protection in Kenya. First, the evidence that **physical abuse negatively impacts literacy competency** underscores the need for strict enforcement of laws prohibiting corporal punishment in schools and homes. Children exposed to abuse are not only at risk of poor academic performance but also face long-term psycho-social consequences, including low self-esteem, anxiety, and reduced classroom participation, which can hinder overall learning and social development (Mutua & Ong’ang’a, 2017; Bandura, 1997).

Second, the study highlights the critical role of **contextual factors**, such as home learning environments, school climate, learner self-esteem, and socioeconomic status, in shaping literacy outcomes. Interventions targeting literacy development must therefore be holistic, addressing both the psycho social and environmental barriers that interact with experiences of abuse.

Finally, the findings suggest that early-grade literacy is particularly sensitive to adverse experiences, reinforcing the importance of foundational interventions at the primary school level to ensure children acquire essential reading skills, which are critical for lifelong learning and academic progression.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy Enforcement:

- ✓ Strengthen and strictly enforce laws prohibiting physical abuse in schools and homes.
- ✓ Implement regular training and awareness programs for teachers, parents, and caregivers on positive discipline strategies to replace corporal punishment.

Practical Best Practice

- ✓ Promote supportive school climates and positive teaching practices that encourage literacy development and protect learners’ well-being.
- ✓ Enhance school-home collaboration by engaging parents in literacy programs, providing psycho-social support for affected learners, and addressing socioeconomic barriers through targeted resources and learning support initiatives.

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