Branching Out: Mobilising Parents' Assets to Support Children's Learning in Pre-Primary Schools

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Abstract

Mobilising parents' existing assets is increasingly regarded as an important strategy to improve early childhood education in resource-limited contexts. This pilot study utilised Participatory Action Research (PAR) in conjunction with Ward's (2019) Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) logical model in two government pre-primary schools in the Nzega district, Tanzania. Thirteen parent connectors received training and support to identify community assets, prioritise actionable steps, and implement peer-led training and volunteer programs. Thematic analysis of meetings, interviews, and observations indicated a transition from a deficit perspective of parents to an acknowledgement of their social and human capital as significant assets. Data from 160 parents, collected before and after the study, showed a significant improvement (p < 0.001) in parents' competencies in home learning support, homework assistance, meeting attendance, and school volunteering. In three months, parent volunteers made 54 instructional aids in the intervention schools. This pilot study shows that an ABCD logical model may be effective, acceptable, and a promising start toward increasing parents' engagement in their children's pre-primary education in Tanzania.

Keywords: asset-based community development, parental engagement, participatory action, pre-primary education

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Introduction

As governments strive to promote early childhood education, more attention is being paid to parents' roles in supporting children's pre-primary education (Shukia & Marobo, 2024; Tong et al., 2021; Wolf, 2020). Parental engagement has significant, lasting impacts on cognitive, social, emotional, and health outcomes (Jeong et al., 2021; Lase et al., 2022; Levickis et al., 2022). While traditional parenting interventions focused on schools' and teachers' needs, the emergence of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach in the 1990s offered a new way to promote parental engagement in pre-primary education. ABCD renewed its focus on the community, and policies addressing health, education, and inequality began to centre around a bottom-up approach (Bryant, 2006). They empowered the community, enabling them to address their needs with greater autonomy and self-reliance (Gadaire et al., 2025; Iruka et al., 2020). ABCD may take many forms in enhancing parental engagement (Cassetti et al., 2024), depending on context and resources (Blickem et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2020). It broadened parental engagement beyond supporting children and school infrastructure to six aspects as described by Epstein (2002): parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community.

An expanding body of literature highlights the value of ABCD for supporting parental engagement (Dadswell et al., 2024; Forrester et al., 2020; Proscovia et al., 2019). ABCD emphasises the utilisation of parents' knowledge, skills, interests, networks, experiences, leadership, and cultural practices to support children's academic and social development (Iruka et al., 2020). However, Myende and Nhlumayo (2020) indicate that most efforts to enhance parental engagement are organised by schools or researchers without parental input, reflecting a deficit lens. This deficit approach, as noted by Stacy et al. (2019), overlooks community assets and can ultimately disempower the very people these efforts aim to support. The main argument is that while school-led initiatives are important, true success in parental engagement requires recognising and mobilising parents' own strengths and resources. With the ABCD approach, schools can collaborate with parents, providing opportunities for parents to draw on their knowledge, skills, interests, networks, and cultural practices to support their children's learning (Chuang et al., 2025). Thus, applying an ABCD approach shifts the focus from viewing government as the sole provider of solutions in pre-primary education to valuing parents as key partners in children's education. For example, Shukia and Marobo (2024) suggest that activities such as reading with children, attending parent-teacher meetings, or

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volunteering in school-related activities are directly related to children's literacy and numeracy skill development.

Tanzania's Education Training Policy of 2014 (Revised Edition, 2023), the 2023 curriculum and syllabus for pre-primary education, and the 1996 child development policy all emphasise the importance of parental engagement in children's learning. Similarly, initiatives like the Education Quality Improvement Programme (EQUIP) and USAID's "Tusome Pamoja" aim to promote this engagement (EQUIP-T, 2017). However, these efforts rarely use the ABCD as a specific intervention approach to mobilise parents' assets in pre-primary schools (Kigobe et al., 2021). Although research recognises the ABCD as an effective model for community empowerment (Chuang et al., 2025; Ure et al., 2021), studies in Tanzania offer limited explanation of its use to support parental engagement in preprimary schools (Kigobe et al., 2021; Kojo et al., 2025). As a result, there is a lack of clear evidence and implementation of the ABCD approach to enhance parental engagement in pre-primary schools.

Within this context, the study reflects on the 'Branching Out' research, which sought to explore how an ABCD approach can promote parental engagement in pre-primary schools. While the benefits of the approach are well known, there are limited examples of how it works in real contexts, particularly in mobilising parents' assets to support children's learning in pre-primary schools. Using the ABCD logical model as proposed by Ward (2019), this study addresses the research question: In what ways can parents' assets be mobilised and used to support children's learning in Tanzanian preprimary schools? Based on this, the study describes the process and explores participants' experiences of implementing parental engagement interventions through the ABCD logical model.

Methods

This study is an exploratory pilot utilising Participatory Action Research (PAR) alongside the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) logical model (Ward, 2019) in two government pre-primary schools in rural Tanzania. PAR involves people facing challenges working together to improve their environments: they identify issues, generate new knowledge, and implement solutions (Macdonald, 2012). These processes foster new ways of thinking, acting, and relating within a practice (Jesus et al., 2025; Kemmis, 2010). In this study, the PAR

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process included the researcher, pre-primary school teachers, and parents of pre-primary school children, collectively referred to as "parent connectors". The Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) framework (Ward, 2021) served as the lens for the intervention. Willatt et al. (2024) note that combining the ABCD framework with critical action research supports development in the field of practice-based research. For over a decade, researchers have used the ABCD framework in community development, education, health, and praxis networks, applying it to improve local practices (Clark et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2020).

The ABCD approach began in the 1990s to counter deficit-based thinking. It focuses on the use of community assets for development (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996). Deficit models focus on community shortcomings (Stacy et al., 2019). In contrast, ABCD holds that every community, even disadvantaged ones, has unique assets, skills, networks, traditions, and resources that fuel progress (Stacy et al., 2019). First applied in community development in the United States in the 1990s, ABCD now influences education and public service reforms globally (Ward, 2019). In education, it supports strong community partnerships and initiatives that help children's learning (Myende, 2015). Rather than focusing just on challenges in pre-primary schools, ABCD highlights opportunities. These include parents' abilities, local organisations, and community stories that can strengthen school-community ties (Myende & Nhlumayo, 2020). The approach encourage contributions shaped by parents' experiences, interests, and cultures (Myende, 2015; Myende & Hlalele, 2018). Thus, Islam (2019) argues that parents have access to different information about their children, and that sharing this information with teachers facilitates intervention on both sides. For example, parental engagement in home learning activities, such as supervising homework, could be part of interaction with the school if it occurs in response to teachers' recommendations. The ABCD logical model was adapted and implemented in eight steps as proposed by Ward (2021). The ABCD logical model was adapted and implemented in eight steps (Figure 1), as proposed by Ward (2019): identification of parent connectors, asset mapping, exploration of assets, identification of potential projects, empowering parents, developing a vision for change, and inviting professional input.
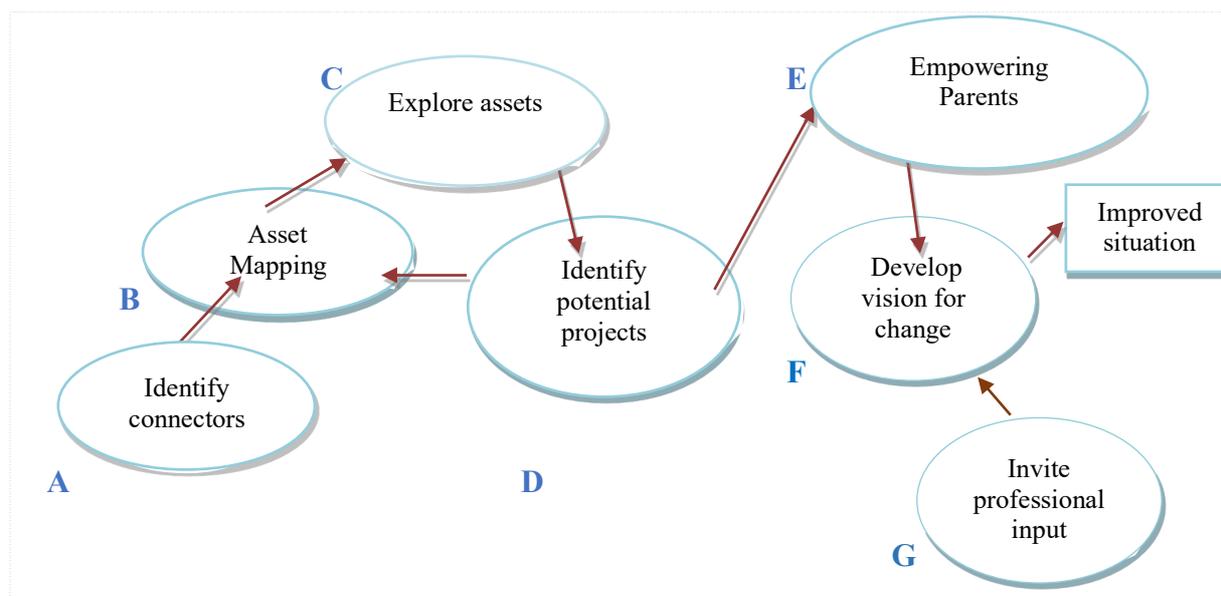
Fig. 1. ABCD intervention process (source: adapted from Ward, 2019)

Applying PAR within the study's context

The PAR was conducted in two pre-primary schools in the Nzega district, Tabora region, Tanzania. The participants were pre-primary school teachers and parents of pre-primary school children. Nzega district was chosen as the study site due to its notably low levels of parental engagement in children's early learning at home and at school. The Uwezo (2019) assessment across 56 districts in Tanzania Mainland reported the lowest parental engagement in Nzega (32 per cent), compared to Iringa urban, which had the highest national average (87 per cent). A purposive sampling method was employed. For this study, aimed at enhancing parental engagement in pre-primary schools, all pre-primary school teachers and parents in intervention schools were invited (N = 250), with 160 participating in line with PAR requirements and stages. Pre- and post-intervention data on parental engagement behaviours were collected using a simple, 9-item frequency checklist administered to 160 parents in intervention schools. Data was collected through participatory observation, sound recordings, field notes, and logbook documentation. On some occasions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with parent connectors, both individually and in groups. All group meetings, conversations, and interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data was analysed repeatedly to identify patterns and insights. The focus was on how new experiences contribute to the next step in the ongoing action research process. In the initial phase, the researcher and the teachers discussed issues related to the nature of parental engagement in pre-primary schools. They considered which activities dominate practice and

how to improve the situation. Experiences gained during the lower level of the intervention phase provided the basis for new discussions and planning in the next phase. By regularly reflecting together, participants viewed parental engagement practices from different perspectives. The analysis of the empirical data raised participants' knowledge and understanding of what happened during the joint meetings and discussions. In the analysis, Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps served as an analytical lens. Using this approach, a preliminary thematic analysis was conducted on meeting minutes, field notes, and facilitator remarks. After the coding scheme was discussed and agreed upon, the transcripts were reviewed and organized into subthemes and themes.

Ethical issues were considered at every stage of this study. The researcher adhered to ethical guidelines and practices throughout the research process, including planning, data collection, data analysis, and report writing (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Ary et al. (2010) add that, when planning a study, ethical considerations should take precedence. The focus of the current study was on ethical concerns such as respect for persons, kindness, and privacy. Moreover, to ensure that participants' rights are legally safeguarded, the researcher obtained ethical approval and a research clearance letter from relevant authorities, as described in the following sections. The sections provide a brief discussion of the issues related to these ethical worries. Access to the research site, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, privacy for study participants, protection from harm, and freedom to withdraw are among the ethical issues that were addressed appropriately.

Results and Discussions

Results

The study's findings are presented through the eight-step ABCD logical model, adapted from Ward (2019). Three overarching themes emerged from the thematic analysis: from needy to resourceful parents, the power of peer connection, and a practical pathway to sustainable engagement.

Phase 1-2: Identification and training of parents' connectors

Parent connectors constitute a parent-to-parent strategy intended to unite caregivers and family members who possess specific abilities, skills, or knowledge that may enhance children's

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learning (Kigobe et al., 2021).In the present study, parent connectors were defined as parents identified as having specialised talents, practical skills, or contextual knowledge that could meaningfully support learning in pre-primary schools. Thirteen parent connectors were selected by pre-primary school teachers (Table 1). They then participated in a four-day orientation training, during which they were introduced to and equipped with ABCD principles for parental engagement.

Table. 1. Characteristics of parent connectors

Parents' Connectors	Number of the Participants		Sub-Total
	School A	School B	
Teachers	2	1	3
Painters	-	2	2
Drawers	1	1	2
Community leaders	1	1	2
Farmers	1	1	2
Traders	1	1	2
Total			13

Phase 3-4: Asset mapping and exploration

Table. 2. Exploration of assets by using the traffic light system

Asset	Category	Score (N = 13) Accessibility	Affordability	Connectedness
Family size	Human	Yellow	Green	Yellow
Educational background	Human	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
Financial support	Financial	Red	Red	Red
Home learning environment	Built	Yellow	Green	Green
Support with instructional materials	Built/Natural	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
Child supervision	Human	Green	Green	Green
Natural resources, e.g., flowers	Natural	Green	Green	Green
Parent-child relationships	Social	Green	Green	Green
Parent-parent networks	Social	Green	Green	Green
Influence on decision-making	Political	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
Parent-teacher network	Social	Green	Green	Green
Racial identity development	Cultural	Red	Yellow	Red
Skills and talents	Human	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
Volunteers	Human	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
Family dreams and aspirations	Human	Green	Green	Yellow

Key				
Score	0-3	4-8	9-13	
Traffic Light	Red	Yellow	Green	
Remarks	Not accessible Not affordable Not connected	Fairly accessible Fairly affordable Fairly connected	Not accessible Not affordable Not connected	

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The Emery and Flora (2006) Community Capital Framework (CPF) was used as a lens to guide the asset-mapping process. Parent connectors identified 14 assets (Table 2). Through the CPF, the mapped assets were grouped into the following categories: human, social, natural, political, financial, built, and cultural. The traffic-light approach proposed by Collinson and Best (2019) was used to rank assets based on affordability, accessibility, and convenience. Social capital (parent-teacher network) and human capital (local crafts, storytelling, leadership) ranked highest in affordability, accessibility, and connectedness (all green; Table 2) for most parents. Financial, cultural, and political ranked lowest (mostly yellow and red).

Phase 5-6: Project identification and implementation

Parent connectors ranked training and the production of teaching aids as the top priority (Table 3). The training programme was delivered as an orientation seminar to 160 parents in both intervention schools. Using the ABCD approach, the programme content was carefully considered to utilise parents' assets and ensure maximum feasibility. The orientation training took place over three days (9th June 2021 to 11th June 2021) and included question-and-answer sessions, discussions, and case studies. The production of teaching aids was conducted weekly. Every Friday, 5 to 10 parent-connector groups spent time at school making teaching aids for their children. They created and drew items such as numbers, letters, and objects. The photos indicating parents participating in the implementation phase are presented in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

Fig. 2. Parents attending the orientation training

Fig. 3. Parents preparing instructional materials

In three months (August 2021 to October 2021), parent volunteers prepared 54 instructional materials (see example in Figure 4) across both intervention schools (Table 4). Many of these may support preschool children's numeracy and literacy skills. The instructional materials were then evaluated based on the teachers' guide for pre-primary education of 2016 by the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) and the *Guidelines for the Evaluation of Electronic Teaching and Learning Contents, ETLC/eB by TIE of 2019.*

Fig. 4. Instructional materials prepared by parent volunteers

Table 4. Number of instructional materials prepared

Instructional material	Number of items prepared		Total
	School A	School G	
Alphabet cards	5	3	8
Number cards	6	4	10
Animal puzzles	3	2	5
Boxes	8	9	17
Number tree	-	1	1
Alphabet tree	1	-	1
Wooden objects	-	2	2
Soil objects	10	-	10
Total	33	21	54

Phase 7: Co-Developing a School Vision for Parental Engagement

An open forum was held on the last day, attended by parents, teachers, and experts. The group agreed that schools should guide decisions on parental engagement by prioritising community values. Parents and teachers should commit to supporting initiatives and ensuring the community shapes future efforts. Participants also agreed to enhance collaboration through expert input and empowerment programmes, as well as by building trust and respect among themselves. To support this argument, one of the participants commented: "Schools must prioritise the ABCD approach for guiding parental engagement while committing to partnership, local value, trust-building, and expert-led empowerment programmes" (T02, group discussion, 24 Nov 2021).

Pre- and post-changes in parental engagement behaviors

All subsequent pairwise comparisons yielded statistically significant results, indicating that the orientation training improved parents' abilities to engage in their children's learning. The overall mean score for parental engagement in identified behaviours increased from (M = 2.37) before the intervention to (M = 4.37) after (Table 3). On the 5-point Likert scale used in this study, the average post-test score is approximately 4, and all 9 items showed post-test scores higher than their pre-test scores. This demonstrates that the programme effectively enhanced parents' competencies in engagement in pre-primary education.

Table 3: Pre- and post-changes in parental engagement behaviors

Behavior	Baseline Mean (SD)	Endline Mean (SD)	Mean Difference	p-value
Volunteering time/talent at school	2.35 (0.97)	4.40 (0.60)	+2.05	< .001
Helping with homework	2.28 (1.00)	4.45 (0.65)	+2.17	< .001
Attending school meetings	2.29 (1.04)	4.39 (0.65)	+2.10	< .001
Supporting children's regular school attendance	2.18 (0.96)	4.40 (0.64)	+2.22	< .001
Reading/telling stories at home	2.43 (1.06)	4.38 (0.62)	+1.95	< .001
Participating in play-based learning activities	2.39 (1.00)	4.35 (0.64)	+1.96	< .001
Taking part in decision-making related to children's learning	2.40 (0.97)	4.27 (0.69)	+1.87	< .001
Borrowing books	2.53 (0.86)	4.33 (0.63)	+1.80	< .001
Helping prepare teaching aids	2.48 (0.81)	4.39 (0.59)	+1.91	< .001
Overall composite score (average of all items)	**2.37 (0.85)**	**4.37 (0.56)**	**+2.00**	**< .001**

5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = not sure, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree

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Findings from semi-structured interviews with parents

In parallel with the quantitative results, the researcher also conducted interviews with parents to assess the programme's preliminary effects. The effectiveness of the ABCD intervention is presented from parents' perspectives. Table 5 presents the final themes and illustrative quotations indicating parents' behavioural change following the intervention programme.

Table 5. Themes and illustrative quotations

Theme	Sub-Theme	Illustrative Quotation (Participant ID, date)
From "needy" to "resourceful" parents	Shifting identity	"Before we thought only teachers know how to teach. Now we see we also have knowledge." (P05, 15 Nov 2023)
	Discovering hidden assets	"I never thought my drawing skills could help the school until we mapped assets." (P03, 22 Nov 2023)
Power of peer-to-peer connection	Parent connectors as bridges	"When it comes from another parent, not the teacher, we listen more." (P11, 08 Nov 2023)
	Building trust	"We feel free to ask Mama D because she is one of us." (P09, group discussion, 12 Nov 2023)
Practical pathways to sustained engagement	Volunteer Fridays	"Every Friday we come to draw letters and numbers. Children love the new charts." (P07, 29 Oct 2023)
	Desire for continuity	"Please don't let this end. We want to continue even without researchers." (P12, 20 Nov 2023)

Discussion

The literature shows that combining PAR and ABCD approaches enhances the success of parent engagement interventions (Collinson & Best, 2019; Jack et al., 2021). These approaches help community members feel free to discuss support, learning problems, trust, and best practices (Scott et al., 2020). However, despite these benefits, many parents view their roles through a deficit lens, making it hard to recognise strengths or connect with their children's learning (Collinson & Best, 2019). To address this, Stacy et al. (2019) suggest that parenting interventions should focus on the ABCD approach. The use of this approach fosters trust through regular discussions and gives parents ways to link their strengths to educational support. As a result, parents become more engaged, understand available resources, and gain confidence in supporting their children (Myende, 2015). Emery and Flora (2006) describe the Community Capital Framework (CPF), which groups community assets into human, political, social, built, cultural, financial, and natural categories.

Human and social capital constitute the most accessible, affordable, and connected assets among most parents in this study. Similarly, Myende's (2015) study argues that these forms

of assets/capital consistently dominate parental engagement practices in pre-primary schools. Human capital encompasses the skills, knowledge, and leadership qualities within families and communities that directly support cognitive abilities and self-efficacy (Jabar et al., 2021). These characteristics empower parents to establish effective home learning environments, assist with homework, build parent-teacher relationships, and support children's academic progress (Gao et al., 2023). Social capital comprises network ties, reciprocity, and interpersonal trust, which enable families to access valuable information and facilitate collective action (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009). These factors enable parents to mobilise support and resources that benefit children's learning.

Literature demonstrates how these two types of capital can work together. For example, Jabar et al. (2021) conducted a study in the Philippines and found that families familiar with their children's close friends were significantly more likely to monitor their children's homework. Similarly, Jabar et al. (2021) reported that mutual trust among parents enables collective engagement, thereby fostering effective parental engagement in schools. However, in situations where parents possess low human capital, social capital may primarily facilitate basic monitoring rather than enriched, curriculum-aligned support (Jabar et al., 2021). Additionally, communities with greater human capital may be less dependent on social capital. Supporting this, Chen et al. (2018) contend that educated parents frequently circumvent social networks, favouring professional engagements with schools. Conversely, in resource-scarce settings, social capital can help compensate for the deficiency of human capital by providing informal networks and shared childcare within the traditional parent community (Jabar et al., 2021). Thus, further studies are needed to explore the interaction effects and contextual boundaries of the relationship between human and social capital in predicting and sustaining parental engagement across different sociocultural settings.

Parent-to-parent support leverages parents' skills and relationships through peer networks led by "parent connectors." This model relies on parents guiding peers with similar socioeconomic backgrounds, cultures, and languages to support children's learning (Hurley & Angelo, 2018). Literature shows that empowering parents as community facilitators, rather than external professionals, can increase impact. For instance, US mother-led parenting programmes improved parental confidence and home learning support more than professional models (Garoutte, 2018). In Kenya, Lugongo (2020) and in Ghana, Bartoli et al. (2022) argue that

parent leaders enhanced school-community communication more effectively than teachers, primarily because of their relatability and trust. This approach aligns with Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003), which argues that mobilising community assets is vital for development. However, further research is needed to assess the scalability and sustainability of parent-led programmes for improving children's learning outcomes. The positive results to date suggest that investing in parent leaders is a promising, community-driven strategy with significant potential impact.

Conclusion

Adapting the PAR and ABCD models to parenting interventions in pre-primary education empowers parents to support children's learning. These models decisively replace deficit-based frameworks by promoting parental decision-making, inclusivity, shared knowledge creation, and democratic participation in learning. However, this study is limited in scope, focused on two primary schools, and lacks a control group. Furthermore, the six-month duration restricts the evaluation of long-term viability. To overcome these challenges, future investigations may use clustered random designs, include larger samples, and extend follow-up periods to directly inform national-scale implementation.

Acknowledgements

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