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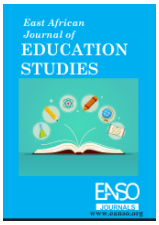

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Original Article

School-Parent Engagement on Stimulation Activities in Pre-Primary Schools in Kira Municipality in Wakiso District, Uganda

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ABSTRACT

Stimulation activities are events that parents and other caregivers give to the children to support their cognitive, emotional, and physical needs right from birth onwards. For instance, playing and talking with them (even before children can respond verbally), and exposing them to words, numbers, and simple concepts while engaging in daily routines. Whereas School-parent engagement is where schools tend to create partnerships between themselves and the parents so that they are able to work together, most especially pertaining to their children's education and holistic development. Schools can work with parents in making decisions, setting goals and attaining academic outcomes. This contributes to the enhancement of children's holistic growth and development. This research study, therefore, aimed at examining school-parent engagement in Pre-primary schools in Kira Municipality, Wakiso District, Uganda which has remained a gap for long. The study used a descriptive cross-sectional survey design. Data was collected using both quantitative and qualitative instruments. These included; Focus group discussion guides, document analysis guide, observation checklist, and questionnaires. The respondents included; headteachers, Centre Management Committee (CMC) chairpersons, parents, and teachers. The findings of this study show that parents were not closely working with the school to stimulate children's learning. Schools reported significantly lower levels of parents came in to check on their children's books or to submit homework, or drop and pick a child from school. Parents were majorly coming in for meetings and any event that had been organised by the school or to pay fees dues. Three major recommendations regarding parent engagement in stimulation activities were given. These included; ensuring that parents understand what stimulation activities mean, the materials to use and their role in supporting their children's learning. Then, it also suggested the best approach to ensure that stimulation activities are provided to the children both at Pre-primary school and at home for continuity of learning. The paper concludes by suggesting recommendations on the need for school-parent engagement to ensure that effective stimulation activities are provided at the Pre-primary schools. Thus, enabling children to receive integrated stimulation opportunities that are contextualised.

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INTRODUCTION

A strong relationship between the school and the parents on the stimulation of their children's learning has long been recognised to be of great benefit across the globe (Mleczko & Kington; 2013). To ensure that children thrive to their fullest, stimulation intercessions are critical in enhancing their sustained intelligence (Meghir et al., 2023). This contributes to increasing children's reasoning, language development, decision-making, and school readiness, as compared with children who do not receive such interventions (Meghir et al., 2023). The study points out that all children need a range of stimulation activities as a basis for their lifelong learning. Being that parents are the first centre of reference and teachers to their children; it is significant that schools work closely with them. Similarly, Manzon et al. (2015), recognised that parents play an important role in the achievement of their children's education. This would contribute to the nurturing and upbringing of a child with the full package of acceptable life skills and values in addition to early learning and stimulation. Mleczko et al. (2013), observed that children whose parents worked closely with the school, their children performed better in school in terms of grades, passed their classes and earned credits, attended school regularly, had better social skills, showed improved behaviour, and adapted well to school. This makes school-parent engagement to be critical for a child's holistic development. However, notwithstanding the strong indication of its advantages, parental engagement doesn't solve all the challenges in schools (Martin et al., 1999). For instance, issues of poverty, inequalities in the provision of facilities, and child dropouts.

Much as school-parent engagement has been observed to be significant in achieving stimulation and early learning activities in Kira Municipality and is highly needed, there is limited research about it. The majority of research papers on parental engagement in Uganda and specifically Kira Municipality focused on children at a higher level, ignoring the Pre-primary learners. Engagement of parents including other stakeholders has been very low in frequency. Where it is observed parents are only involved at a glance and not fully part of the implementation. This has been observed in informal documents. Though not effectively implemented, school-based engagement in Uganda has been recognised since the launch of the National Integrated Early Childhood Development (NIECD) Policy (MOGLSD, 2016). Since Pre-primary schools in Uganda are private-led, the recent study by GENISIS and UNICEF reflected that only 16.6% of the Ugandan children are accessing early childhood care and education services in a quality facility (GENISIS, 2023). Evidence also suggests that parents may be uninterested in educational engagement most especially in rural areas. This article, therefore, aims to lay a foundation on which Pre-primary school practitioners can appreciate the role of the parents in the development of their children's stimulation. It provides some findings of what was observed in the field in addition to the literature both at local and international level, on school-parent

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engagement. The literature also reviews similar papers that show success in implementing the model.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine school-parent engagement in stimulation activities in pre-primary schools in Kira Municipality, Wakiso District, Uganda.

Objectives of the Study

This study was guided by the following objectives:

- To establish the influence of School-Parents Engagement on Stimulation Activities.
- To find out the type of stimulation activities that the school develops together with the parents
- To assess the relationship between the school-parent engagement in stimulation activities and the available documents.

Questions

- What is the influence of School-Parents engagement on stimulation activities?
- What types of stimulation activities does the school develop together with the parents?

Hypothesis

- Relationship between the school-parent engagement in stimulation activities and the available documents.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

School-Community Ecological Systems Model

The study was underpinned by the ecological systems theory: The ecological systems theory, which of recently has been renamed "bioecological systems theory" focuses on a child's growth and development within the setting of the system of relationships that form his/her overall environment (Ryan, 2001). The interactions between factors within the child's proximity, the family/community, and the societal landscape supports the child's holistic growth and development. Urie Bronfenbrenner an American psychologist, born in 1917 and lived up to 2005 (Härkönen, 2001); applied a general systems theory to human development in the 1970s. Bronfenbrenner (1979), in his ecological systems theory puts emphasis on the quality and context of the child's total environment. The ecological systems theory focusses on the phenomenon of human growth and development. It comprises the human ecosystems that entails physical factors such as the climate, space, home and school; and the social environment including the family, culture, and the larger society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 2000; Gordon & Browne, 2017). The ecological systems theory observed that children's development is initially influenced by their microsystem which represents the first level with which the child interacts closely. For example, the classroom, playground, recreation centres, the home, religious institutions and the neighbourhood.

Besides that, there is a mesosystem which represents the second level. Bronfenbrenner (1979) identified it as an interrelationship between two or more environments in which the child develops or actively participates. These include any organisation such as the day care centre, school, health centre, and kindergarten, among others. More so, there are other systems, including, the ecosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Each of them represents the broader cultural, political, social, and economic systems. For instance, the government's policies, cultural values, and standards indirectly affect children's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The theory stresses the importance of studying a child in the context of multiple environments that explain his/her overall growth and development. In Bronfenbrenner's view, stakeholders within the child's immediacy have a significant role to play and they need to work together to make sure that services reach the child. The diagram below summarises what it ought to be in the ecological systems theory.

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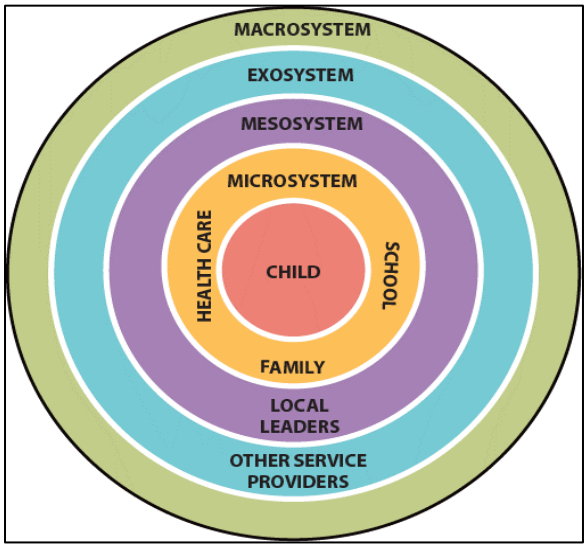
Figure 1: Applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory



Source: Adopted from Bronfenbrenner, (1979)

METHODOLOGY

A review of school-parent engagement on stimulation activities for children in Pre-primary schools specifically the three-to-six-year age group was undertaken to enable a detailed scrutiny of pertinent features of the study.

A descriptive cross-sectional survey design was applied with the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods in data collection and analysis. The design was suitable for collecting data about people and their preferences, thoughts, attitudes, and behaviour which supported the generalisation of the data in a systematic way (Bhattacherjee, 2012; Creswell, 2014). Qualitative and quantitative methods were used in the process of data collection. The descriptive cross-sectional survey design was used to collect, examine and analyse the data at the same time. It was used to provide a snapshot on the current state of parent involvement, the type of stimulation activities being conducted, and the factors influencing parental involvement into school activities.

The sampling strategy was used to select a representative sample of participants from the schools and amongst other stakeholder that work with the school on the provision of learning and child stimulation activities. This was randomly done using the random sampling technique. For the teachers, those that had a qualification of teaching were considered. The researcher collected data using questionnaires, observations and focus group discussions to gather information about parents' engagement in stimulation activities in schools. The data collection tools included items that assessed the frequency and types of activities parents engage in with their children, their perceptions of the significance of stimulation activities, and the barriers that are mitigating their participation.

A descriptive analysis was conducted to summarize and describe the findings. This involved calculating the frequencies and percentages and identification of themes. The descriptive findings were interpreted to gain insights into the level and nature of parent engagement in stimulation activities in schools. The engagement levels were compared across levels of the different demographic groups and the level of school. For instance, the parents' level of education, socioeconomic status to inform the kind of results and the disparities or differences in the engagement and involvement pattern.

The study included an analysis of the various records in the pre-primary schools to establish whether school-parent engagements are used to enhance the implementation of stimulation activities in schools. Such documents included the visitors' books, ECD Policies and Guidelines, Learning Framework, work plans, attendance lists for the parents' attending meetings at school, minutes for the various meetings, and correspondences. Mills (2007) identified document analysis to be credible in supporting the researcher in getting a broad picture of what had already been done in relation to the study. During the document analysis process, the research developed a guiding document which was used to identify the documents that give a description of the involvement and engagement of the various stakeholders in the implementation of integrated ECCE services at the Pre-Primary school. Since the study was a survey that aimed at generalised findings, the researcher used the questionnaire

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methods to collect large amounts of data. The observation method was used during the process of collecting data from the observable components of the study. This was on both documents and activities that inform the study.

According to Tetui et al. (2021), the projected population of Kira Municipality is over 400,000 residents whereby 47.8% are male while 52.2% are female. Since the study focused on children in pre-primary, the target population consisted of stakeholders that deliver services to children between the age of 3-5 years. Both within the Pre-primary schools and the community. These included; headteachers of pre-primary schools, and Centre Management Committee (CMC) chairpersons among others, all from Kira Municipality, Wakiso District. The total population of such stakeholders was 340. Using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) technique, out of 348 participants, a sample of 252 members was targeted. The sample size was determined to ensure that the sample size was representative of the sample population. Purposive and simple random sampling was used. *Table 1* gives a summary of the sample size and sampling technique of the study.

Table 1: A summary of the sample size and sampling technique of the study

Category	Population	Sample
Headteachers of Pre-primary schools	150	108
Chairperson of CMC	150	108
LC Chairpersons	40	36
Total	340	252

The research instruments were to help in achieving the objectives of the study. These included; a document analysis guide, observation checklist, focus group discussion guides, and questionnaires.

In addition, various instruments were used to compare the responses given by different stakeholders and participants for validity and credibility (Hendricks, 2009). The author identified that credibility could be established through triangulation, a process that allowed the use of multiple forms of data collection and analysis. Being a qualitative and quantitative study, the two were used to collect data. During the study, document analysis guides were used to collect data from the available documents in the pre-primary schools. Mills (2007) identified document analysis to be credible in getting a broad picture of what had been done in relation to the study. Interview guides were used to collect qualitative data from key informants. This was both text and audio recorded. Interviews supported in getting in-depth information and clarification on the ongoing activities.

Questionnaires were one of the instruments used for data collection. The questions were designed in a way that allowed respondents to read, understand, and easily respond to them in a meaningful manner. They consisted of a set of questions planned to capture responses from the targeted population in a standardised way on matters concerning School-parent engagement in stimulation activities. Observation checklists were used to verify what was going on at the Pre-primary school in relation to the study; for instance, photos and pictures from the health centres and other sources plus activities that were going on within the school. Similarly, schools keep photos as evidence of what has taken place within the school. These were used as evidence for the activities that had taken place during the study process. Hendricks (2009) emphasised that observations could be used to identify evidence for the findings.

Study variables were measured using item scales developed by previous scholars with modifications to fit the context of the study. This was because these item scales were developed in advanced countries. To ensure validity and reliability, the questionnaires were developed and presented to the supervisors for approval. The approved tools were presented to practitioners for expectorating as relevant or irrelevant question

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items so as to establish the content validity index. A content validity index above 75% was accepted. Reliability was tested using Coro bash to test the internal consistency of the instruments. After faculty approval, instruments were tested the researcher worked on the corrections with the supervisor and also tested the instruments. After this the researcher took the proposal for ethical clearance to the internal review board (IRB), followed by the approval from Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST). Besides that, the researcher used the IRB and UNCST approvals to get the faculty introductory letters to the field. Then the researcher carried out pre-visits to all the participants to enable them to fill out the consent forms.

Finally, the process of data collection proceeded. The qualitative data was coded, cleaned, and organised into themes that answered the research questions to which they were addressed. Having organised the data, the researcher used thematic content analysis to analyse the qualitative data. Quantitative data was sorted and entered into SPSS data from which the descriptive analysis was employed to arrive at inferences as per the set-out objectives. Consent from the Ministry of Education and Sports; and the Ministry of Science and Technology was obtained. Clarification on the purpose of the study was made to both the District Local Government and the site head teachers of the Pre-Primary schools where the research was conducted, including the various institutions within the community. Confidentiality was treated with respect. Neither names nor addresses were included in the report or exposed to the public instead pseudonyms have been used as agreed. Consent documents were provided to participants as an assurance of their rights. The researcher declared to the participants that they were not restricted to the study if they felt uncomfortable and that the study did not intend to harm them.

FINDINGS

School-Parents Engagement and Stimulation Activities

The study revealed that school-parent engagement promotes children's stimulation and early learning through the provision of numerous stimulation activities. Though it was not effectively done in the schools, the majority of the respondents agreed that if parents are fully engaged and doing what is expected of them; it would contribute to an increase in stimulation resources. Besides that, children's learning and stimulation would be better.

The data was collected through the use of observations, focus group discussions and document analysis. During the observations, a lot of concentration was put on the kind of stimulation activities that were given to learners in the class and outside class. The approach used and the stakeholders that were engaged during the process. When a parent came into the school, the researcher was keen at finding out what exactly the parent had come to do. It was observed that teachers were providing the stimulation activities to children by themselves, parents only came in to clear school dues, drop a child, submit homework or participate in a class meeting. This kind of observation was made in almost all the schools. To verify the observations, focus group discussions were carried out with the various stakeholders that had been highlighted to provide support on the stimulation of children.

During the focus group discussions, headteachers, teachers, selected parents and the centre management chairperson were engaged. The information shared revealed that, much as they knew the importance of collaborating with parents, and parents working together with the school, they hadn't been putting a lot of attention to it. Most of the schools revealed that the parents had no time to stay around the school for long. Even when they claimed that parents come for meetings, the minutes and attendance lists revealed that not all the parents participate in school meetings.

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Using the document analysis guide, minutes, attendance lists, school workplans, teachers' schemes of work, reports and lesson plans were analysed. The findings revealed that much as schools blamed parents for not being involved into their children's learning and stimulation activities, even the workplans of the schools had not included it. The attendance lists for meetings reflected that a number of the parents were not participating in the meetings organised at school. All the data was recorded and analysed to come up with the final results.

After collection of data, the responses were tabulated in numerical form showing percentages of those who had evidence of stimulation activities in schools and those who didn't have it. The presented data was analysed using descriptive statistics and presented in bar graph figures.

Table 2: Evidence for physical infrastructure/activities for stimulation activities

ITEM	Total No. of Schools	No. With	% With	No. Without	%Without
Evidence of Stimulation Materials	108	41	37.9%	67	62%
Work Plan with evidence of stimulation activities	108	22	20.3%	86	79.6%
Evidence Parents/Community Participation	108	25	23.1%	83	76.8%
Evidence of MOU / Contracts with Parents	108	09	8.3%	99	91.6%

Source: Primary Data

Table 1 above presents the comparison of the scores between the schools that had evidence of stimulation activities and those that didn't. 62% of the participating schools didn't have stimulation materials whereas 37.9% had stimulation materials. 79.6% had no evidence of planned stimulation activities on parent community participation whereas only 20.3% had evidence of planned stimulation activities. 76.8% of the schools were not either involving the community or the parents; while 23.1% were involving them. On the existence of formal engagement contracts with parents, only 8.3% had evidence of contracts while 91.6% had no formal contracts with parents engaged in child stimulation.

Table 3: Evidence of Documentation for Supporting Stimulation Activities

ITEM	Total No. of Schools	No. With	% With	No. Without	% Without
Learning Framework	108	64	59.2%	44	40.7%
Work Plan Document	108	12	11.1%	96	88.9%
Minutes	108	41	37.9%	67	62%
Readers	108	37	34.2%	71	65.7%
Records of Visits	108	32	29.6%	76	70.4%

Source: Primary Data

In *Table 3*, the scores on school-parent engagement in stimulation activities were, 59.2% of the schools that had learning frameworks and were using them to plan stimulation activities, whereas 40.7% did not have and were not using the learning framework. 11.1% of the participants had work plans with evidence of stimulation activities planned for, while 88.9% had no work plans and there was no evidence of planned stimulation activities. Availability of minutes for meetings that showed evidence of school-parent engagement in stimulation activities, there were 37.9% showed that they had discussed parent-school engagement in stimulation activities, whereas 62.1% had not discussed any parent-school engagement in the stimulation of children. When it came to readers as part of evidence for stimulation activities, 34.2% of the schools had

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readers while 65.7% had no readers as part of stimulation materials. Finally, there was evidence in the visitors' records in which the study was to find out if parents were visiting the schools for purposes of engaging in stimulation activities. The data showed that 29.6% of the parents who visited the schools were specifically coming to play a role in child stimulation whereas 70.4% of the parents who visited the Pre-primary schools were for other purposes that are not related to child stimulation.

DISCUSSION

School-Parents Engagement and Stimulation Activities

During the first years of life, there is an occurrence of rapid growth and development in all domains, creating a robust foundation for learning future skills (Baker-Henningham et al., 2010). This implies that since parents are the first centre of reference when their children are born, they understand them better than anyone else especially when they are very close to them. Research has observed that parents are the first teachers of their children (Manzon et al., 2015). As children grow and develop, they need support from all the stakeholders in spite of where they are or depending on the required service. Young children need a stimulating environment right from birth to enable them to acquire various skills in preparation for their lifelong learning. Wasserman and Zambo (2013) identified the importance of the parents and the school to work together. This would help in mitigating the effects of the child's early home and school experiences on brain growth and development for the rest of his/her lifetime. But also develop stimulation activities to stimulate children's cognitive and non-cognitive development. Cuartas et al. (2023) recognised parents' engagement in stimulation activities to be strong in promoting children's development in multiple domains such as emergent literacy, numeracy, and motor skills development. On top of the development of stimulation materials, activities such as reading books, storytelling, singing songs, counting, playing simple games, matching numbers, letters, and words among others, can be provided by schools together with the parents. However, notwithstanding the strong indication of its advantages, parental engagement doesn't solve all the challenges in schools (Martin et al., 1999).

Whereas a similar study was undertaken in Ghana and discovered that in spite of the great benefits of parental engagement in early childhood settings/schools, there were variances (Bartoli et al., 2022), the responses were different, for instance, families differed in status, while schools didn't have structured policies to guide them. According to the results of this study, "School-parent engagement in developing child-stimulation materials was not prominent. The responses from the majority of the participants reflected that as much as they knew about the policies and observed parent engagement to be important, the parents had no time to develop stimulation materials together with the school. The parents that somehow collaborated with the school, only went there to either pay school fees, pick a child from school, or attend a meeting. However, the headteachers appreciated the need for parents to work together while developing stimulation materials so that children can be able to interact with the materials both at school and at home.

In addition, some teachers observed that this can widen the scope of children's learning. This was observed when the headteacher from school A stated, "How I wish our parents could get such information, it would help us a lot. They will even be able to provide the materials". Besides that, in spite of the significant role of parent-school stimulation materials, the findings reflected that there was limited parental engagement in the development of stimulation materials. This was observed when the headteacher of school B stated,

> *If this approach is used, there are very few schools doing it. If not, none. How I wish parents would be part of us when developing such materials. This would help our children even to learn better. Because they will be seeing their parents developing the materials".*

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Therefore, the fact that the human brain develops up to 90% during the first five years of development (Wasserman et al., 2013) it is imperative that parents and the school work in collaboration to support early learning and stimulation. This would help children to become independent, resilient, and appreciate the reason for every transition. Christenson and Reschly (2010) identified a number of theoretical views on children's development and put emphasis on the importance of parental engagement in stimulating their children's learning. This could majorly be done through parent-child collaboration and interaction. Stimulating early learners' senses enables them to reach developmental milestones faster, as well as aids them in the development of motor skills. Parents being the first teachers and first centre of response, schools need to bring them closer even when developing stimulating materials to enhance the learning and stimulation of children both at home and school.

Evidence shows that encouraging parents or caregivers to play and interact with children during their first years of development in a stimulating way through the use of a variety of materials, improves their cognitive development. Such programmes increase the time and resources parents invest in their children's growth and development. Nevertheless, open questions remain on how such programmes can be effectively delivered at a large scale. There are a number of stimulating activities that the school and parents can provide to the learners. Such activities include; talking to the child, praising them whenever they do something good and giving them lots of love, counting with them, engaging them in play, reading a storybook or picture book, playing games that involve the use of their hands and singing with the children and playing music. However, in spite of the importance of school parent stimulation activities to enhance children's learning and early stimulation, this wasn't significantly observed or seen in Pre-primary schools. During the focus group discussions, one of the head teachers stated;

> *"These parents here, hmm! They claim that they don't have time, as long as they bring the children to school, they think that is enough most especially here in Kira Municipality, the people are money minded".*

Yet early childhood stimulation enhances children's critical thinking skills, communication skills, confidence building, and connections with their peers. Evidence from researchers shows that encouraging parents and caregivers to play and interact with their children at the earliest stages in an exciting way, advances their cognitive development, and children with malnutrition or low socioeconomic status benefit most from such interventions which focus on strengthening stimulation activities both at home and school (Manzon et al., 2015). This implies that the Pre-Primary community should encourage the parents to be strongly involved in the stimulation and learning of their children. Apart from learning and stimulation, children will be able to acquire emergent life skills and values at the earliest stage.

STUDY CONCLUSION

The study concluded that school-parent engagement contributes to the provision of stimulation activities, these included but were not limited to stimulation materials, such as readers, ropes, flashcards, picture books, jig-saws, and many others; stimulation activities, for instance, talking to the child, praising the child whenever he/she does something good, count with them, engaging them in play, reading a storybook or picture books, playing games, drawing pictures, colouring or painting pictures, singing with them, playing simple games such as little piggy, patty cake, puppets, and many others that capture their attention. However, this was not significantly observed in the schools.

Recommendations of the Study

The government through the Ministry of Education and Sports; and other line Ministries, should distribute and disseminate legal frameworks, policies, and all operational standards for awareness creation. This would help the various stakeholders and practitioners to

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understand their roles and responsibilities. Besides that, they will get to know what is required of them. In addition, there is a need to organise refresher courses for teachers to enhance their capacity in the provision of integrated services. Need for continuous updates on current situations rather than keeping them in archives. Besides that, it is significant to strengthen coordination and working relationships with all the various stakeholders with whom the government works in the provision of stimulation interventions. This would enable the identification of areas that have gaps and those that need support. There is a need for services to be distributed evenly to all the areas of Kira Municipality and beyond. Finally, schools should be encouraged to closely engage parents and other community members to support the holistic growth and development of children in Pre-primary schools.

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