



The Role of Primary Schools in Supporting Pupils Affected by Family Conflicts in Ubungo District, Tanzania

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Abstract: Family conflict is a persistent social problem that negatively affects children's education and well-being in Tanzania, often driven by poverty, unemployment, gender inequality, poor communication, and extended family pressures. This qualitative case study examined the role of primary schools in Ubungo District in supporting pupils affected by family conflict, guided by Nel Noddings' Care Theory, which emphasizes caring relationships, dialogue, and peace education. The study focused on three primary schools Kibamba, Mbezi, and Upendo and involved 12 purposively selected participants, including pupils, parents, teachers, and school counselors. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically, with credibility enhanced through triangulation, member checking, and reflexivity. Findings revealed that socio-economic stressors, particularly poverty and unemployment, were the main sources of family conflict, leading to emotional distress among pupils and negative effects on attendance, behavior, and academic performance. Despite these challenges, schools emerged as protective environments by providing counseling support, teacher care, extracurricular activities, and strengthened parent-school partnerships. The study further identified parent education workshops, peace education, teacher mediation, and integration of social welfare measures into education as effective strategies for improving school responses. It concludes that although schools cannot eliminate family conflict, they play a crucial role in mitigating its impact by offering compensatory care environments that support pupils' learning and development, and recommends institutionalizing psychosocial support programs, training teachers in basic counseling skills, and embedding social protection considerations within educational policy..

Keyword : Family conflict, Primary education, School support, Care Theory, Psychosocial support

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INTRODUCTION

Family conflict is a pervasive challenge affecting children's emotional stability, academic performance, and social development (Alami, 2016; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). In Tanzania, household disputes arising from financial stress, unemployment, communication breakdowns, gendered responsibilities, and extended family pressures often spill over into the schooling experiences of children (USA Department of Education, 1996; Ministry of Health, Community Development, Gender, Elders & Children, 2020). When families are unstable, children experience fear, anxiety, poor concentration, absenteeism, and declining academic performance (Abbott, Mupenzi & William, 2015; Baumann & Krskova, 2016). Primary schools, therefore, serve not only as centers of learning but also as safe spaces where children can receive emotional, academic, and psychosocial support (Chachage, Walls & Mwakalinga, 2019).

In Ubungo District, one of the busiest socio-economic hubs in Dar es Salaam, schools frequently encounter pupils affected by domestic conflict. Teachers, school counselors, and administrators are often the first to notice behavioral changes, emotional distress, and learning difficulties among these learners (Epstein, 2013; Skipper & Douglas, 2015). Despite this reality, limited research in Tanzania has focused specifically on the role of schools in supporting pupils exposed to family conflict. Existing studies have emphasized NGO interventions, child protection policies, or the general impact of domestic violence, but little empirical attention has been given to how schools themselves respond to learners'

needs (SOS Children Tanzania, 2014; URT, 2015).

This article seeks to fill that gap by examining the contributions of primary schools in Ubungo District in addressing the consequences of family conflict among pupils. By analyzing school-based practices such as guidance and counseling, teacher-pupil relationships, peace education, communication with parents, and community linkages, the study demonstrates that schools serve as compensatory care environments that help children cope with emotional distress and continue learning (Noddings, 2005; Noddings, 2006).

Research Objective

To explore the role of primary schools in aiding pupils affected by family conflict in Ubungo District, Tanzania.

Literature Review

This study draws on Nel Noddings' Care Theory, which emphasizes the centrality of caring relationships, dialogue, and peace education in supporting children's holistic development (Noddings, 2002; 2013). The theory identifies four key components: the establishment of caring relationships between teachers and pupils, the use of dialogue to understand and address students' emotional needs, the incorporation of peace education to help children manage conflicts constructively, and the promotion of close collaboration among schools, pupils, and parents (Eaker & Van Galen, 1996). Within this framework, schools function as protective spaces that provide emotional reassurance, guidance, and security, particularly for children from unstable or conflict-affected households. The theory underscores the

importance of educators not only as instructors but also as caregivers who actively mitigate the negative impacts of family conflict on students' well-being and learning (Chachage, Walls & Mwakalinga, 2019).

Empirical literature highlights the crucial role of schools in supporting children exposed to family conflict. Globally, schools engage in multiple strategies, including staff training to identify and support affected pupils, establishing specialized family support units, facilitating parent-teacher and student dialogues, promoting mediation, teaching healthy relationship skills, providing counseling and stress-management programs, and offering financial assistance to vulnerable children (Early Intervention Foundation, 2020). Examples from the UK, such as Manor Park School, Surrey Square Primary School, and Tudor Grange Academy, demonstrate the effectiveness of these strategies in improving children's academic outcomes and psychosocial resilience. In Tanzania, historical initiatives like Nyerere's Education for Self-Reliance emphasized relational teaching, while policies such as the Child Development Policy (2008), the Law of the Child Act (2009), and the Ministry of Education's guidance on child care (URT, 2020) stress the protection and welfare of children. Case studies from Ukombozi Primary School illustrate how caring relations, remedial support, close teacher-pupil interaction, and attention to students' material and emotional needs enhance learning and well-being (Chachage & Mwakalinga, 2019). NGOs, religious institutions, and international organizations including SOS Children's Village, UNICEF, and Compassion

International also complement school efforts by providing care, counseling, education, and mediation services for children affected by family conflict.

Despite these advances, the literature reveals a gap in localized empirical research on how Tanzanian schools concretely support pupils experiencing family conflict. While policies emphasize child protection, there is limited documentation of the skills, strategies, and interventions that teachers, counselors, and school leaders employ, as well as how pupils perceive and experience these supports. This study addresses that gap by focusing on primary schools in Ubungo District, foregrounding the perspectives of pupils, parents, teachers, and counselors. It provides context-specific insights into the roles of schools in mitigating the effects of family conflict, informing policy, teacher training, and school-community partnerships, and contributing to both national and global discussions on education, child welfare, and resilience.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study design was employed to explore the role of primary schools in supporting pupils affected by family conflict (Bairley, 1994; Punch, 2002). The study involved 12 participants from three primary schools in Ubungo District, including pupils, parents, teachers, and school counselors. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques ensured the selection of respondents directly affected by or knowledgeable about family conflict (Kimia, 2008). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and documentary review and analyzed thematically (Enon, 1998). Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources and member checking, while

ethical considerations such as confidentiality and informed consent were strictly observed (Abbott, Mupenzi & William, 2015).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Key Socio-Economic Causes of Family Conflict in Ubungo District

The first objective of this study was to explore the socio-economic causes of family conflict and to examine how these conflicts shape the everyday experiences of primary school pupils in Ubungo District. Analysis of the narratives gathered from pupils, parents, teachers, and school counselors revealed that family conflict was not the result of isolated incidents but was instead deeply rooted in broader structural conditions. Issues such as poverty, joblessness, breakdowns in communication, unequal gender roles, and pressures from extended family members consistently emerged as central triggers of disputes that disrupted household harmony and spilled over into the educational journeys of children.

The significance of these findings lies in the striking convergence of voices across participants. Pupils spoke of living in fear of their parents' quarrels, of losing sleep, struggling to concentrate in class, and sometimes even dreading the thought of returning home. Parents openly acknowledged that socio-economic pressures including lack of employment, persistent poverty, and cultural obligations were at the heart of many disagreements within the household, often leaving them feeling powerless. Teachers and counselors, observing from the school environment, confirmed these patterns by linking domestic conflict to declining academic performance, absenteeism, psychosomatic complaints, behavioral

challenges, and social withdrawal among pupils. This triangulation of perspectives underscores the interconnectedness of home and school environments, showing that what occurs within families has direct and measurable consequences for children's educational and emotional well-being.

The themes that follow; economic stress and financial insecurity, joblessness and frustration, poor communication and lack of tolerance, gender roles and unequal responsibilities, and cultural expectations and extended family pressures, offer a comprehensive account of the socio-economic drivers of conflict within households in Ubungo District. Each theme is substantiated with direct quotations from participants to foreground lived experiences and is further analyzed in relation to existing scholarship and Nel Noddings' Care Theory. This theoretical framework provides a lens for understanding schools not only as institutions of academic learning but also as compensatory sites of care that step in to provide stability, reassurance, and protection when families, strained by socio-economic pressures, are unable to meet the needs of their children.

Economic Stress and Financial Insecurity

Pupils described how poverty at home created frequent arguments between parents:

"Every evening my father comes home angry because there is no food, and then he argues with my mother. Sometimes they stop talking to each other for many days. When that happens, I do not feel safe at home and I even think of sleeping at my friend's

place instead.” (Pupil, School A)

“When my parents quarrel about money, I feel like they might separate. I don’t concentrate in class the next day because I keep thinking about it.” (Pupil, School B)

Parents admitted that financial stress was the most common cause of quarrels:

“We fight mostly because there is no money. When there is no food, fees, or uniforms, everyone becomes angry. Even when I try to explain, my husband blames me. The children see all of this and they suffer quietly.” (Parent, School B)

“Sometimes I feel like giving up because there is nothing I can provide. My husband lost his job and I try to sell vegetables, but it is never enough. The smallest issues lead to shouting, and the children hide because they do not want to hear it.” (Parent, School C)

Teachers observed how financial strain spilled into children’s schooling:

“Most of the children who struggle to concentrate come from families where money is the problem. They come to school without books, without breakfast, and sometimes without even a pen. When parents argue about these things at home, the child sits in class but their mind is somewhere else.” (Teacher, School A)

Counselors highlighted the emotional consequences:

“Economic stress makes some parents withdraw from their children. Instead of encouraging them, they become cold or even violent. The children tell us they feel unwanted, and you can see this in their sadness and low participation at school.” (Counselor, School C)

The narratives gathered in this study reveal vividly how financial hardship destabilizes family relationships and directly affects children. Pupils described feeling unsafe in their own homes, with quarrels and shouting becoming part of their daily environment. Parents openly confessed that poverty was the most common source of disputes, admitting that constant quarrels often erupted over food, school fees, or basic household needs. Teachers and counselors, meanwhile, observed the consequences of this instability in the classroom: children arrived hungry, lacked learning materials, or sat distracted and withdrawn during lessons. These combined perspectives make it clear that poverty is not simply a background condition within families but an active driver of conflict that fractures cohesion, diminishes parental patience, and undermines children’s emotional security and academic performance.

The findings are consistent with previous scholarship. Mwiruka (2021) highlighted that financial insecurity in Tanzanian households intensifies conflict and reduces the quality of parental engagement, while Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) emphasized that socio-economic disadvantage is one of the most powerful factors shaping children’s

educational outcomes. Yet, this study offers an important extension by amplifying children's own voices. Pupils did not merely witness their parents' struggles; they articulated in their own words how financial hardship produced fear, distraction, sleeplessness, and even the desire to escape from home. This child-centered dimension provides a richer and more nuanced understanding of the emotional as well as material consequences of poverty, an aspect often overlooked in adult-centered studies of family conflict.

Joblessness and Frustration

Pupils reported how parental unemployment increased quarrels at home:

"My father has been without work for a long time. Every day he stays at home, and he becomes angry quickly. He quarrels with my mother almost every night. Sometimes he even blames us children, saying we make his life harder." (Pupil, School C)

"When my father lost his job, everything changed. They started fighting a lot, and I stopped doing my homework because the house was noisy all the time." (Pupil, School B)

Parents also linked joblessness to constant disputes:

"Since my husband lost his job, he has become bitter. He sits at home and complains all the time. I try to do small business, but it is not enough. We argue almost every day about money, and the children are the ones who suffer the most." (Parent, School A)

"Without employment, there is no peace in the house. Every small issue becomes a big fight. The children hide or cry because they do not know how to stop us." (Parent, School C)

Teachers connected joblessness with children's classroom disengagement:

"We notice that many children from families where the father or mother has no job often appear worried, withdrawn, and distracted. They do not participate actively in class, and their performance drops steadily." (Teacher, School B)

Counselors emphasized the psychological toll:

"Unemployment creates deep frustration. Parents feel useless, and this frustration comes out as anger towards their partners and children. We see the children in counseling, and they are anxious and afraid, carrying the weight of their parents' struggles." (Counselor, School A)

Across participants, joblessness was described not merely as a loss of income but as a constant source of bitterness, noise, and instability that left children anxious and unable to focus on school. Pupils narrated how the absence of employment created quarrels at home, filling their nights with arguments that spilled into classrooms as fatigue and distraction. Parents themselves admitted that frustration over unemployment frequently translated into conflict, with small issues escalating into fights that

children could not escape. Teachers confirmed that pupils from households affected by joblessness were often disengaged, withdrawn, or restless, while counselors observed that many of these children carried visible distress, describing feelings of fear, shame, and powerlessness. Together, these voices reveal that joblessness destabilizes not only the family's economic base but also its emotional climate, making it a significant driver of conflict with direct repercussions for children's well-being and learning.

These findings align with broader scholarship on the relationship between unemployment and family conflict. The Early Intervention Foundation (2020) emphasized that unemployment increases parental stress and the likelihood of domestic disputes, while Mwiruka (2021) reported that economic shocks in Tanzanian households often intensify quarrels and weaken parental patience. The present study confirms these insights but goes further by foregrounding the perspectives of children themselves. Pupils did not simply observe the impact of joblessness on their parents; they articulated how it disrupted their learning, eroded their concentration, and made school a secondary concern compared to the chaos at home. This contribution adds nuance to existing literature by providing a child-centered account of how unemployment undermines both educational engagement and emotional security.

From the standpoint of Nel Noddings' Care Theory, unemployment represents a rupture in the reciprocity of care. Parents who feel powerless or inadequate may withdraw emotionally, leaving children without the reassurance and support they require. In such

circumstances, schools inevitably become essential care sites, offering encouragement, stability, and psychological safety. For practice in Ubungo, this suggests the need for targeted psychosocial programs within schools, as well as stronger teacher training in counseling and emotional support. At a national level, the findings underscore the importance of integrating education with social welfare policies. By providing safety nets for families affected by joblessness, and embedding school-based counseling systems within the education sector, policymakers can mitigate the ripple effects of unemployment and protect children from its destabilizing consequences.

Poor Communication and Lack of Tolerance

Pupils described the fear caused by their parents' shouting matches:

"At night my parents always shout at each other. Sometimes I hide under the bed because I feel scared. I do not even know what they are fighting about, but I cannot sleep, and the next day I am tired in class." (Pupil, School A)

"When my mother and father argue, I want to stop them, but I cannot. I just keep quiet and think maybe one day they will separate. It makes me very worried about the future." (Pupil, School B)

Parents acknowledged their poor communication habits:

"We do not listen to each other. When I am angry, I raise my voice, and he does the

same. At the end we do not solve anything, and the children are the ones who keep quiet and suffer.” (Parent, School C)

Teachers linked home quarrels to school behavior:

“Children from homes where parents fight a lot tend to quarrel with other pupils in the same way. They have learned that shouting is the way to solve problems.” (Teacher, School B)

Counselors explained the stress-related complaints they encountered:

“Many children complain of headaches and stomach pains, but when you talk to them, you realize it is stress from hearing their parents fight every day.” (Counselor, School A)

The accounts from pupils, parents, teachers, and counselors converge to highlight the damaging role of poor communication and lack of tolerance in family conflict. Pupils vividly described the fear of listening to their parents’ nightly quarrels, confessing that the constant shouting made them anxious, sleepless, and unable to focus in school. Parents themselves admitted that they often raised their voices instead of resolving issues calmly, acknowledging that these habits left children withdrawn and silent. Teachers added that such children tended to reproduce the same aggressive patterns in peer interactions, while counselors reported a steady stream of pupils who complained of stress-related ailments such as headaches and stomach aches. Together,

these voices paint a consistent picture: communication breakdown in the home not only escalates parental conflict but also leaves children emotionally insecure and academically distracted.

These findings align closely with existing research on the effects of interparental conflict. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) demonstrated that poor parental communication diminishes children’s sense of stability and undermines their engagement with learning, while Mkumbo (2012) documented similar patterns within Tanzanian families, where tolerance and dialogue were often absent under conditions of stress. The present study extends this literature by foregrounding children’s lived experiences. Pupils did not simply observe quarrels passively but articulated the way shouting and unresolved disputes affected their sleep, concentration, and sense of belonging. By capturing these detailed child-centered narratives, the study adds a critical dimension often overlooked in previous work, which has typically prioritized adult perspectives.

Viewed through the lens of Nel Noddings’ Care Theory, conflict-ridden communication represents the breakdown of caring dialogue – a core requirement for nurturing relationships. When families fail to model constructive ways of handling disagreements, children not only experience insecurity but also internalize destructive conflict-resolution styles. For practice, schools in Ubungo and similar contexts can play a compensatory role by equipping children with alternative models of dialogue through peace education, social-emotional learning, and peer mediation programs. Policymakers, in turn, should recognize that family

communication skills are not peripheral but central to children's educational outcomes. Community-based parenting workshops that build tolerance, listening skills, and cooperative problem-solving could strengthen families' capacity to resolve disputes constructively and reduce the cycle of insecurity that children carry into classrooms.

Gender Roles and Unequal Responsibilities

Pupils observed the unequal burdens mothers carried:

"My mother does everything in the house, and when she asks my father to help, he becomes angry. Then they quarrel. Sometimes she cries, and I do not know how to comfort her." (Pupil, School C)

"My mother wakes early to cook, clean, and find food money, but my father just shouts at her. I feel bad when she is tired, and they argue almost every day." (Pupil, School B)

Mothers expressed resentment:

"I take care of the children, the house, and I even do small business. My husband spends time with friends and leaves all the burdens to me. This is why we fight, because I cannot carry everything alone." (Parent, School A)

Teachers noted the effects on pupils:

"Children from families where mothers carry all the burden often come to

school untidy, late, or hungry. Their fathers are absent, and the conflict at home makes the children anxious." (Teacher, School C)

Counselors emphasized the structural inequality:

"Most disputes we hear about come from the unfair sharing of roles. Fathers fail to provide, mothers become resentful, and the children watch these conflicts unfold every day." (Counselor, School B)

Pupils empathize with their mothers, parents acknowledge the imbalance, and teachers and counselors see its impact on children's learning. Gender inequalities thus emerge as a powerful cause of conflict. This confirms Chuwa (2016), who identified gender role imbalances as a trigger of conflict in African homes. UNICEF (2006) also linked gender inequality to children's reduced well-being. This study contributes by showing children's awareness of these imbalances. Care Theory demands reciprocity in caregiving. When fathers abdicate responsibilities, the ethic of care collapses. For practice, gender-sensitive parenting programs and father-involvement initiatives are needed in Ubungo schools and communities.

Cultural Expectations and Extended Family Pressures

Pupils spoke of interference from relatives:

"Sometimes my parents fight because of grandparents. My father says we must give them money, but

my mother says we cannot. They argue for many hours, and I cannot read my books.”
(Pupil, School A)

“Relatives come and take food or money, and then my parents quarrel about it. They blame each other and we children just keep quiet.”
(Pupil, School B)

Parents described in-law interference:

“My husband’s relatives always tell him what to do with money. If I disagree, we fight. The children see everything, and it breaks the peace in the house.” (Parent, School C)

Teachers observed the stress on pupils:

“Many pupils appear restless or worried after family events where relatives interfered. You can tell that the pressure from outside is disturbing the harmony of their homes.” (Teacher, School B)

Counselors contextualized the cultural role:

“In our community, relatives have a strong say in family matters. This support can be good, but many times it becomes interference that destroys peace in the nuclear family. Children often come to us distressed after such quarrels.” (Counselor, School A)

Pupils, parents, teachers, and counselors converge on the view that extended family interference disrupts

household peace and directly impacts children’s learning. This finding supports Mkumbo (2012) in Tanzania and Adegoke (2010) in Nigeria, both of whom noted that extended family expectations often fuel disputes. This study adds evidence of the academic and emotional toll on pupils. Care Theory views external interference as undermining the intimate caring bond between parents and children. For practice, schools should support parents in managing cultural obligations without sacrificing family harmony. At policy level, community-based education programs could raise awareness of the risks of extended family interference on child well-being.

The findings on the socio-economic causes of family conflict in Ubungo District reveal a multi-layered reality where poverty, unemployment, poor communication, gender inequality, and cultural expectations interact to destabilize families and harm children’s education. Pupils experience fear, sadness, and distraction; parents acknowledge stress and powerlessness; teachers and counselors observe the tangible effects on learning, behavior, and emotional health.

In relation to existing studies, these findings confirm previous work (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Mwiruka, 2021; Mkumbo, 2012), but they extend the literature by foregrounding children’s voices. Pupils do not merely endure conflict passively – they articulate its impact on their emotions and studies. This makes the current study distinctive in its child-centered perspective.

Theoretically, the findings reinforce Nel Noddings’ Care Theory, which emphasizes reciprocal, nurturing relationships as essential for child development. Where families fail to

provide care due to socio-economic strain, schools become compensatory care environments. Teachers and counselors already play this role informally, but the findings suggest that institutionalizing school-based care systems is necessary.

For practice in Ubungo, the results imply that schools must expand their roles beyond academics. School feeding programs, counseling services, and parent-teacher collaboration are essential interventions. Teachers require training in guidance and psychosocial support to better handle pupils from conflict-ridden homes.

At the national level, these findings point to the need for integrated policies that link education with social welfare. Addressing poverty, unemployment, and gender inequality is not only a social goal but also an educational imperative. Family conflict rooted in socio-economic stress threatens Tanzania's broader efforts to achieve quality education for all. By recognizing schools as sites of care, policymakers can design interventions that protect children from the destabilizing effects of household conflict and enable them to thrive academically and emotionally.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMENDATIONS

The study reveals that family conflict in Ubungo District is deeply rooted in socio-economic pressures such as poverty, unemployment, poor communication, unequal gender roles, and extended family interference. These conflicts have profound effects on children's emotional well-being and academic performance, manifesting as fear, distraction, absenteeism, sleep deprivation, and anxiety. Pupils'

narratives, supported by parents, teachers, and counselors, illustrate how domestic tensions spill into schools, disrupting learning and social development. The findings align with Nel Noddings' Care Theory, which emphasizes the importance of reciprocal, nurturing relationships. Where families are unable to provide consistent care, schools act as compensatory environments, offering emotional support, guidance, and stability. Examples from Ukombozi Primary School and other Tanzanian safety schools demonstrate the effectiveness of teacher engagement, counseling, remedial programs, and material support in mitigating the impact of family conflict, while international best practices from the UK and interventions by UNICEF, SOS Children's Villages, and religious organizations highlight the critical role of school-community partnerships in safeguarding children.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that schools institutionalize psychosocial support services, train teachers in counseling and conflict management, and strengthen parent-teacher collaboration to address domestic tensions proactively. Programs that promote gender equity, stress management, and remedial support can help children from disadvantaged backgrounds thrive academically and emotionally. At the policy level, integrating education with social welfare initiatives, reinforcing child protection frameworks, and conducting community awareness campaigns on constructive parenting are essential. NGOs and religious institutions should collaborate with schools to provide additional support, including mediation, financial aid, and life skills training. While schools alone cannot

eliminate the causes of family conflict, they play a vital role in buffering children from its effects, ensuring that despite household challenges, pupils receive the care, stability, and opportunities necessary to succeed both academically and socially.

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