Extended Family Support, Social-Emotional Development, and Early Mathematics Learning among ECD Learners: A Case Study of H Primary School, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how extended family support contributes to the social-emotional development and early mathematics learning of Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners at H Primary School in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. Grounded in African kinship traditions and Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Curriculum, the study addressed the limited empirical evidence on how extended family networks influence both emotional growth and foundational numeracy in urban primary schools. A qualitative case study design was adopted. Fourteen purposively selected participants ten ECD teachers, one school head, one deputy head, and two administrators shared insights through semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations. Data were analyzed thematically. Findings indicated that extended family members supported development through caregiving, emotional guidance, and academic assistance. This included ethno-mathematical socialization through cultural play, storytelling, and early counting. Learners with sustained family support showed enhanced emotional stability, confidence, and cooperation. Crucially, this social-emotional foundation directly boosted early mathematics learning, improving student participation and problem-solving during counting, sorting, and mathematical play. However, support was constrained by urbanization, labor migration, changing family structures, and time limitations. The study concludes that extended family networks remain a vital resource for fostering social-emotional readiness and mathematical engagement. It recommends strengthening school-family partnerships and integrating extended family networks into early childhood education policy to support holistic numeracy and emotional growth.

Keywords: Extended family support, Social-emotional development, Early Childhood Development, Early Mathematics learning, Heritage-Based Curriculum, Family-school collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

According to Berk (2018) and Santrock (2021), Early Childhood Development (ECD) is widely recognized as a foundational stage in human development during which children acquire essential emotional, social, cognitive, and behavioural competencies. Among these developmental domains, social-emotional development is particularly important because it enables children to regulate emotions, build positive relationships, cooperate with peers, and respond appropriately to classroom expectations (UNICEF, 2020). These competencies significantly influence school readiness, active participation in learning, and long-term psychosocial well-being, as demonstrated by Evans et al. (2013) and Berry et al. (2016).

Although much early childhood research has emphasized the roles of parents and teachers, Rogoff (2003) argues that children's development is embedded within broader cultural and caregiving systems. Similarly, Serpell and Marfo (2014) maintain that children's learning is shaped by interactions with multiple family and community members. In many African societies, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older siblings traditionally participate in caregiving, moral instruction, and emotional support, making child-rearing a shared social responsibility rather than the exclusive responsibility of parents (Nsamenang, 2015). Mangena (2020) further observes that African indigenous knowledge systems promote collective responsibility for nurturing children's holistic development.

This collective approach to child development aligns closely with Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Curriculum, which emphasizes holistic learning through indigenous knowledge, cultural values, and active community participation (Nyoni, 2025). The curriculum recognizes families and communities as important partners in

children's education. However, the traditional structure of extended family support has increasingly been influenced by urbanisation, labour migration, formal employment demands, and the emergence of nuclear family arrangements, particularly in urban settings (Zulu, 2022). Shoko (2025) similarly notes that these socio-economic transformations have altered family relationships and reduced opportunities for traditional communal caregiving.

These societal changes raise important questions regarding the extent to which extended family support continues to influence the social-emotional development of ECD learners within contemporary school environments. H Primary School in Bulawayo was selected as the study site because teachers had observed several social-emotional challenges among some ECD learners, including emotional outbursts, withdrawal, limited peer interaction, and difficulties with self-regulation. Such observations suggest the need to investigate whether variations in extended family support may contribute to these developmental outcomes. Consequently, this study sought to examine the role of extended family support in promoting the social-emotional development of ECD learners at H Primary School.

Mathematics-infused early learning enhancement

The study further acknowledges that social-emotional competencies, including self-regulation, confidence, resilience, and cooperative engagement, provide an important foundation for children's participation in early mathematics learning. Martikainen et al. (2024) explain that children who can regulate their emotions and persist with challenging tasks are better able to engage in mathematical activities such as counting, sorting, comparing, pattern recognition, and problem-solving. Likewise, Rogoff (2003) contends that meaningful learning occurs through socially mediated interactions in which children communicate ideas, take turns, negotiate solutions, and learn collaboratively. Therefore, extended family support that strengthens children's social-emotional competence may also enhance their readiness to participate successfully in mathematics-rich play and classroom learning experiences.

Research Gap

Existing international scholarship has consistently demonstrated that supportive caregiving environments play a significant role in promoting children's holistic development during the early years. For example, Berry et al. (2016) and UNICEF (2020) emphasize the importance of parental involvement, teacher support, and nurturing home environments in fostering children's social-emotional well-being and school readiness. However, relatively little attention has been devoted to examining the distinctive contribution of extended family members such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older siblings to children's social-emotional development within formal school contexts. Shava (2024) and Ncube (2019) further observe that empirical studies focusing specifically on extended family support in school-based settings remain limited.

Within the African context, Nsamenang (2015) argues that child-rearing has traditionally been embedded in communal systems where responsibility for children's development is shared among members of the extended family. While this perspective is widely acknowledged in the literature, many African studies remain predominantly descriptive, highlighting the cultural significance of communal caregiving without critically examining how these support systems operate amid contemporary socio-economic transformations. Urbanisation, labour migration, changing household structures, and competing work demands have increasingly reshaped traditional family relationships, thereby influencing the availability and nature of extended family support (Zulu, 2022). Consequently, there is limited evidence regarding how these changing dynamics affect children's social-emotional development in present-day urban communities.

The Zimbabwean literature reflects a similar pattern. Although studies have explored parental involvement, home-based socialisation, and general family participation in children's education, comparatively little empirical research has investigated the influence of extended family support within school environments (Shoko, 2025). Furthermore, existing studies have seldom explored how teachers and school administrators perceive the contribution of extended family members to learners' emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, confidence, empathy, and classroom behaviour during the ECD phase.

Another notable gap concerns the geographical and contextual focus of previous studies. Much of the available Zimbabwean and regional research has been conducted in rural or peri-urban communities where communal family structures remain relatively intact. In contrast, urban low-density suburbs are increasingly characterised by nuclear family arrangements, residential mobility, labour migration, and reduced day-to-day interaction with extended relatives (Zulu, 2022). As a result, little is known about how extended family support functions within these urban settings or how such support influences the social-emotional development of ECD learners attending urban primary schools.

An additional gap exists in relation to early mathematics learning. Although growing evidence indicates that social-emotional competencies, including self-regulation, persistence, confidence, cooperation, and effective communication, support children's engagement in early mathematical activities, few studies have examined how extended family support indirectly contributes to the development of these mathematical dispositions (Martikainen et al., 2024). Rogoff (2003) similarly contends that children's learning develops through socially mediated interactions, suggesting that supportive family environments may enhance both social-emotional competence and readiness for mathematical thinking. Nevertheless, this relationship has received limited empirical attention within Zimbabwean ECD research.

This study sought to address these identified gaps by generating context-specific evidence from H Primary School in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. Rather than focusing broadly on family support, the study examined the specific forms, perceived contributions, and challenges of extended family involvement in promoting the social-emotional development of ECD learners. In addition, it explored how these social-emotional competencies create a supportive foundation for early mathematics learning, thereby contributing to both child development scholarship and mathematics-infused early childhood education.

Statement of the Problem

Social-emotional development forms the foundation for children's successful learning, positive relationships, emotional regulation, and school readiness during the Early Childhood Development (ECD) years (Berk, 2018). Research consistently demonstrates that children who develop strong social-emotional competencies are more likely to participate effectively in classroom activities, exhibit positive behaviour, develop resilience, and achieve improved academic outcomes, including early numeracy and mathematics learning (Denham, 2006; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Martikainen et al., 2024). Within African societies, these competencies have traditionally been nurtured through collective caregiving systems involving parents and extended family members such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older siblings (Nsamenang, 2015; Serpell & Marfo, 2014).

In Zimbabwe, the Heritage-Based Curriculum recognizes the importance of family and community participation in promoting holistic child development (Nyoni, 2025). However, rapid urbanization, labour migration, economic challenges, and changing family structures have increasingly altered traditional extended family support systems (Shava, 2024; Zulu, 2022). As a result, many young children may experience reduced opportunities to benefit from the emotional guidance, cultural socialization, and caregiving traditionally provided by extended family networks.

Although several international and African studies acknowledge the contribution of family support to children's development (Epstein, 2018; UNICEF, 2020), relatively few empirical studies have specifically examined how extended family support influences the social-emotional development of ECD learners within urban Zimbabwean primary schools. Furthermore, little attention has been given to how social-emotional competencies nurtured by extended family support contribute to children's readiness for early mathematics learning through activities such as counting, pattern recognition, problem-solving, cooperative learning, and mathematical play (Rogoff, 2003; Martikainen et al., 2024).

This knowledge gap limits educators' and policymakers' understanding of how schools can effectively engage extended family networks to strengthen both learners' social-emotional well-being and early mathematical development. Therefore, this study sought to investigate the role of extended family support in the social-emotional development of ECD learners at H Primary School in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, and to explore how

these social-emotional competencies enhance children's readiness for early mathematics learning.

Objectives of the study

The following objectives guided the study:

1. To identify the forms of extended family support provided to ECD learners at H Primary School.
2. To examine how extended family support influences the social-emotional development and early mathematics learning of ECD learners.
3. To explore teachers' and school administrators' perceptions of the role of extended family support in fostering social-emotional readiness for early mathematics learning.
4. To establish challenges affecting the involvement of extended family members in supporting ECD learners' holistic development.

Research questions

The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What forms of extended family support are provided to ECD learners at H Primary School?
2. How does extended family support influence the social-emotional development and early mathematics learning of ECD learners?
3. How do teachers and school administrators perceive the role of extended family support in fostering social-emotional readiness for early mathematics learning?
4. What challenges affect the involvement of extended family members in supporting ECD learners' holistic development?

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, as interpreted by Rogoff (2003). The two theories complement one another by explaining how children's social-emotional development is influenced by both their immediate social environments and the cultural interactions through which learning occurs. Together, they provide an appropriate theoretical lens for understanding the contribution of extended family support to the development of Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner (1979) conceptualizes child development as the product of dynamic interactions between the developing child and multiple interconnected environmental systems. These systems comprise the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, each contributing uniquely to children's developmental outcomes.

Within the context of this study, the family and the school constitute the child's immediate microsystem, where daily interactions directly influence emotional regulation, behaviour, confidence, and social competence. Extended family members, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older siblings, form an integral part of this immediate environment through their caregiving responsibilities, emotional support, behavioural guidance, and cultural instruction. Their everyday interactions with young children, therefore, have the potential to shape children's social-emotional development in meaningful ways.

Equally important is the mesosystem, which refers to the relationships among children's immediate environments. Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that children's development is strengthened when home and school maintain positive and supportive connections. In this regard, effective collaboration between teachers, parents, and extended family members creates a consistent developmental environment that reinforces desirable emotional and social behaviours. Conversely, weak communication or limited involvement of extended family members may reduce the continuity of support available to young learners.

The exosystem and macrosystem further explain how broader societal conditions influence children's development indirectly. Factors such as labour migration, urbanisation, employment patterns, housing arrangements, and cultural expectations shape the capacity of extended family members to participate in children's upbringing (Zulu, 2022). These contextual influences are particularly relevant in contemporary Zimbabwe, where socio-economic transformations have altered traditional patterns of communal child-rearing while simultaneously increasing the need for shared caregiving responsibilities.

Accordingly, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how extended family support operates within multiple interacting environments to influence the social-emotional development of ECD learners.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

Complementing Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory emphasizes that children's learning and development occur primarily through meaningful social interactions with more knowledgeable others within culturally organised environments. Rogoff (2003) explains that learning is mediated through participation in everyday social activities, where experienced members of the community guide children's cognitive, emotional, and behavioural development.

Within African societies, grandparents and other extended family members frequently serve as mediators, transmitting cultural knowledge, moral values, language, traditions, and appropriate patterns of social behaviour. Through storytelling, conversations, play, discipline, demonstrations, and emotional reassurance, children gradually internalise socially acceptable behaviours and develop the emotional competencies necessary for successful participation in family and school life (Nsamenang, 2015). Mangena (2020) similarly observes that indigenous African child-rearing practices rely heavily on intergenerational learning, where children acquire social responsibility through continuous interaction with relatives and the wider community.

The theory also underscores the importance of guided participation and collaborative learning. According to Rogoff (2003), children construct knowledge through shared experiences rather than through isolated individual learning. This perspective is particularly relevant to the present study because extended family members often provide opportunities for young children to observe, imitate, practise, and receive encouragement while engaging in everyday activities that promote emotional resilience, empathy, cooperation, and self-regulation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach because it sought to explore participants' perceptions, experiences, and interpretations regarding the role of extended family support in the social-emotional development of Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners. Creswell and Creswell (2023) argue that qualitative research is particularly appropriate for investigating complex social phenomena within their natural settings, where participants' perspectives provide rich and contextualised insights. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) similarly contend that qualitative inquiry enables researchers to develop an in-depth understanding of human experiences that cannot easily be quantified.

Guided by this approach, the study employed a case study research design. According to Yin (2018), a case study facilitates intensive investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly distinguishable. The design was therefore considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to explore how extended family support influenced the social-emotional development of ECD learners within the specific context of H Primary School in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. By focusing on a single school, the study generated rich, context-specific evidence concerning family-school interactions, learner behaviour, and the perceived contribution of extended family members to children's development.

Study Site

The study was conducted at H Primary School, an urban low-density primary school located in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. The school was purposively selected because it implements Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Curriculum, which emphasises holistic child development through active collaboration among schools, families, and communities (Nyoni, 2025). Furthermore, the school provided an appropriate context for investigating how extended family support functions within an urban environment where changing socio-economic conditions have increasingly influenced traditional caregiving arrangements.

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised school personnel directly involved in the education and welfare of ECD learners. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify participants who possessed relevant knowledge and experience regarding children's behaviour, family involvement, and classroom interactions. Patton (2015) explains that purposive sampling enables researchers to select information-rich participants capable of providing detailed insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

The final sample consisted of fourteen participants, comprising ten ECD teachers, one school head, one deputy head, and two school administrators. These participants were selected because of their continuous interaction with ECD learners and their professional responsibility for monitoring learners' social-emotional development, behaviour, and family engagement. Their diverse institutional roles also enabled the study to capture both classroom-level and school leadership perspectives.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations, allowing for methodological triangulation and a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection because they provided sufficient flexibility for participants to express their experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews. Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) note that this method enables researchers to probe participants' responses and obtain deeper insights into their perceptions and interpretations.

The interview guide comprised questions relating to participants' professional backgrounds, forms of extended family support observed among ECD learners, perceived influence on children's social-emotional development, challenges affecting extended family involvement, and recommendations for strengthening school-family partnerships. This structure ensured close alignment between the interview questions, the research objectives, and the study's conceptual framework.

Non-Participant Classroom Observations

To complement interview data, non-participant classroom observations were conducted during normal teaching and learning activities. Creswell and Poth (2018) argue that observation enables researchers to document naturally occurring behaviours, thereby reducing reliance on participants' self-reported perceptions. Yin (2018) similarly recommends observation as an important source of evidence within qualitative case studies.

Observation focused on behavioural indicators associated with social-emotional development, including emotional regulation, confidence, cooperation, empathy, peer interaction, classroom participation, withdrawal, and responsiveness to teacher guidance. Observing these behaviours within authentic classroom settings enabled the researcher to compare participants' reported experiences with actual learner behaviour.

Mathematics-Infused Early Learning Enhancement

Although the primary focus of this investigation was the social-emotional development of ECD learners, classroom observations were extended to include selected play-based mathematics activities. The intention was not to evaluate mathematics achievement but rather to examine whether learners' social-emotional competencies influenced their participation in early mathematical experiences.

Observed activities included counting games, object sorting, matching, comparing quantities, sequencing, pattern construction, and cooperative problem-solving exercises routinely incorporated into the ECD curriculum. During these activities, particular attention was given to learners' confidence, persistence, emotional regulation, communication, willingness to attempt unfamiliar tasks, responses to mistakes, and cooperative engagement with peers. Martikainen et al. (2024) argue that such social-emotional competencies constitute important foundations for successful engagement in early mathematics learning. Likewise, Rogoff (2003) maintains that children's cognitive development is strengthened through socially mediated participation in meaningful activities.

Teachers were additionally invited during interviews to reflect on whether they perceived any relationship between family support, children's emotional behaviour, and participation in mathematics-related classroom activities. These responses provided supplementary evidence regarding the indirect contribution of extended family support to early mathematics learning while preserving the study's principal emphasis on social-emotional development.

Data Collection Procedure

Before commencing data collection, permission to conduct the study was obtained from the relevant educational authorities and the school administration. Participants received a detailed explanation of the purpose of the study, and voluntary informed consent was obtained before participation. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasise that informed consent enhances ethical integrity by ensuring that participants understand the nature and purpose of the research.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually at times convenient to participants within the school environment. Responses were documented through comprehensive field notes to ensure accurate representation of participants' views. Classroom observations were undertaken during routine teaching and learning sessions to minimise disruption and preserve the authenticity of learners' behaviour.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, a widely accepted method for identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that thematic analysis provides a systematic framework for generating themes that capture participants' shared experiences and perceptions.

The analysis involved repeated reading of interview transcripts and observation notes to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated and subsequently grouped into broader categories representing recurring patterns. These categories were refined into themes that addressed the research objectives and reflected participants' experiences regarding extended family support and children's social-emotional development. Throughout the analytical process, the emerging findings were interpreted in relation to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, thereby strengthening the conceptual coherence of the study.

Trustworthiness

The study employed several strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation, whereby evidence obtained from interviews was corroborated through classroom observations (Patton, 2015). Dependability was promoted by maintaining a

comprehensive audit trail documenting the research procedures, data collection process, and analytical decisions. Confirmability was enhanced through systematic coding and careful interpretation of participants' accounts to minimise researcher bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Finally, transferability was facilitated by providing detailed descriptions of the study setting, participants, and research procedures, thereby enabling readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar educational contexts (Yin, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles guided every stage of the research process. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were safeguarded through the use of pseudonyms and coded identifiers, while all information collected was used exclusively for academic purposes. Particular care was exercised during classroom observations involving young children to ensure that their dignity, privacy, and well-being were protected throughout the study. These procedures were consistent with established ethical principles governing qualitative educational research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

FINDINGS

Demographic Profile of Participants

The study involved fourteen purposively selected participants comprising ten Early Childhood Development (ECD) teachers, one school head, one deputy head, and two school administrators. Participants possessed varying years of professional experience in early childhood education, enabling them to provide informed perspectives regarding learners' behaviour, family involvement, and classroom experiences. Their diverse professional responsibilities enriched the data by offering both classroom-based and institutional viewpoints on the role of extended family support in children's social-emotional development.

Forms of Extended Family Support

Analysis of the interview data revealed that extended family members contributed to children's development through five interrelated forms of support: caregiving and daily supervision, emotional support, moral guidance, academic assistance, and cultural socialisation.

Caregiving and Daily Supervision

Participants consistently reported that grandparents were frequently responsible for children's day-to-day care, particularly when parents were unavailable because of employment commitments or labour migration. Besides escorting children to and from school, grandparents often ensured that learners arrived prepared for classroom activities and maintained regular attendance. Several teachers observed that children receiving consistent supervision from relatives generally appeared more settled and adapted more easily to school routines. These findings correspond with the observations of Zulu (2022), who argues that extended family members continue to provide essential caregiving functions despite changing family structures. Ncube (2019) similarly identifies grandparents as important caregivers within Zimbabwean families.

Emotional Support

Emotional reassurance emerged as another prominent form of extended family support. According to many participants, children who enjoyed warm relationships with grandparents, older siblings, or other relatives demonstrated greater emotional security and resilience. Teachers described such learners as being more willing to express themselves appropriately, interact positively with classmates, and recover more quickly from emotionally challenging situations. One participant explained that children who received encouragement from extended family members "appeared happier, more confident, and less fearful of participating in classroom activities." These observations are consistent with UNICEF (2020), which highlights responsive caregiving as a critical determinant of children's emotional well-being. Likewise, Evans et al. (2013) contend that multiple supportive relationships strengthen children's capacity to cope with everyday challenges.

Moral Guidance and Behavioural Development

Participants further indicated that extended family members played an important role in nurturing children's moral development. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older relatives were frequently described as reinforcing values such as respect, patience, honesty, responsibility, and discipline through daily interactions and guidance. According to several teachers, learners who benefited from such support generally demonstrated greater respect for teachers, followed classroom rules more consistently, and interacted more positively with their peers. Nsamenang (2015) argues that African child-rearing traditions promote the transmission of moral values through communal participation, while Mangena (2020) similarly emphasises the importance of indigenous family structures in shaping children's social behaviour.

Academic Assistance

Although emotional and behavioural support dominated participants' responses, many respondents also highlighted the academic contribution of extended family members. Older siblings, grandparents, and other relatives reportedly assisted children with homework, reading activities, revision exercises, and preparation for school. Teachers perceived these forms of support as contributing indirectly to children's confidence and classroom participation by enabling learners to arrive better prepared for learning activities. Serpell and Marfo (2014) similarly note that extended family members often complement formal schooling by providing additional learning opportunities within the home environment.

Cultural Socialisation

Participants also emphasised the role of extended family members in transmitting cultural values and indigenous knowledge. Storytelling, traditional songs, everyday conversations, and participation in family activities were frequently mentioned as opportunities through which children learned respect, empathy, cooperation, and social responsibility. Several respondents regarded these cultural experiences as strengthening learners' interpersonal relationships and emotional maturity. These findings reinforce Rogoff's (2003) view that children's learning is embedded within meaningful cultural interactions and support Nsamenang's (2015) argument that socialisation in African communities is fundamentally collective and intergenerational.

Influence of Extended Family Support on Social-Emotional Development

Participants overwhelmingly perceived extended family support as having a positive influence on learners' social-emotional development. Across interviews, teachers consistently associated supportive family relationships with improved emotional regulation, confidence, empathy, cooperation, and positive classroom behaviour.

Berk (2018) argues that emotionally supportive relationships enable young children to develop confidence and resilience, and participants' experiences reflected this proposition. Teachers frequently observed that learners who received regular encouragement from grandparents and other relatives demonstrated greater self-confidence when interacting with peers and adults. These learners were more likely to participate voluntarily in classroom discussions, respond positively to teacher guidance, and recover quickly after experiencing disappointment or frustration.

Similarly, participants reported that children receiving strong extended family support generally displayed better emotional regulation than those with limited family involvement. Several respondents explained that emotionally secure learners were less likely to exhibit aggressive behaviour, emotional outbursts, or prolonged withdrawal following interpersonal conflicts. Instead, they demonstrated greater patience, empathy, and willingness to resolve disagreements peacefully. Evans et al. (2013) likewise conclude that supportive caregiving relationships promote children's emotional adjustment and positive social interactions.

Teachers further observed that learners supported by extended family members cooperated more effectively during group activities and showed greater respect for school rules and authority figures. According to

participants, values reinforced within supportive family environments were often reflected in children's classroom behaviour, suggesting that extended family support functioned as an important protective factor within the school environment. Santrock (2021) similarly maintains that consistent guidance across home and school contexts strengthens children's behavioural development and social competence.

Social-Emotional Competence and Participation in Early Mathematics Activities

Although the study did not seek to measure mathematics achievement directly, classroom observations revealed important relationships between learners' social-emotional competencies and their participation in play-based mathematics activities.

Teachers consistently observed that learners who appeared emotionally secure demonstrated greater confidence when engaging in counting games, object sorting, matching exercises, sequencing tasks, and pattern construction activities. These children were generally more willing to attempt unfamiliar tasks independently and showed greater persistence when confronted with mistakes or challenging problems. One participant remarked that "children who receive encouragement from home rarely give up after getting an answer wrong; instead, they try again or ask for help."

Observational data further indicated that learners with stronger social skills collaborated more effectively during cooperative mathematics activities. They shared learning materials willingly, waited patiently for their turns, listened attentively to classmates, and contributed constructively to group problem-solving exercises. Several teachers attributed these behaviours to values acquired within supportive family environments, particularly through guidance received from grandparents and older relatives. Rogoff (2003) similarly argues that learning is socially mediated through collaborative participation, while Martikainen et al. (2024) demonstrate that emotional regulation and persistence significantly enhance children's engagement in early mathematical learning.

Conversely, participants noted that learners who experienced emotional withdrawal, frustration, or difficulties with self-regulation were more likely to disengage from mathematics activities when challenges arose. Teachers observed that these learners occasionally abandoned counting or sorting tasks prematurely or became distracted during collaborative exercises. Importantly, respondents believed that these difficulties reflected learners' emotional readiness rather than limitations in mathematical ability. This observation supports UNICEF's (2020) assertion that social-emotional competence provides an essential foundation for successful learning across curriculum areas.

Collectively, these findings suggest that the influence of extended family support extends beyond children's emotional and social well-being. By fostering confidence, persistence, cooperation, and emotional resilience, supportive family relationships appear to create conditions that enable young learners to participate more successfully in early mathematics learning experiences.

Perceived Importance of Extended Family Support

Participants unanimously regarded extended family support as an essential complement to parental involvement. Teachers and school administrators agreed that grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older siblings frequently provided continuity of care when parents were unavailable because of work or other responsibilities. Epstein (2018) argues that children's educational success is strengthened when multiple family members participate in their learning, and participants' experiences strongly reflected this perspective.

Nevertheless, respondents acknowledged that formal school structures generally focused on parental involvement while giving comparatively limited recognition to extended family members. Several participants suggested that schools could strengthen learner support by intentionally engaging grandparents and other relatives in selected educational activities. This finding highlights an important opportunity for schools implementing Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Curriculum to broaden family-school partnerships beyond the traditional parent-centred model.

Challenges Affecting Extended Family Involvement

Despite recognising the significant contribution of extended family members, participants identified several factors that constrained their involvement in children's lives.

Urbanisation, labour migration, and employment demands were consistently identified as major barriers limiting regular interaction between children and their relatives. Participants explained that many grandparents and extended family members now reside in different towns or rural communities, reducing opportunities for daily caregiving and emotional support. These observations support Zulu's (2022) argument that socio-economic change has transformed traditional African family structures.

Participants also referred to changing housing patterns, particularly the increasing prevalence of nuclear households within urban areas, as reducing opportunities for communal child-rearing. In addition, respondents expressed concern about the gradual decline of traditional practices such as storytelling, shared family activities, and communal caregiving, all of which were regarded as important mechanisms for transmitting cultural values and emotional support. Shava (2024) similarly contends that contemporary social change has weakened many traditional family support systems.

Finally, participants observed that school-family engagement initiatives tended to prioritise parents while overlooking the contributions of grandparents and other extended family members. Consequently, opportunities to strengthen broader family-school partnerships remained underutilised despite the recognised developmental benefits of extended family support.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of extended family support in the social-emotional development of Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners at H Primary School in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, while exploring its implications for early mathematics learning. The findings demonstrate that extended family support continues to play a significant role in promoting children's emotional security, confidence, behavioural adjustment, cooperation, and classroom participation despite the socio-economic changes affecting contemporary family life. These findings not only reinforce existing scholarship but also extend current understanding by providing school-based evidence from an urban Zimbabwean context.

The study revealed that extended family members contribute to children's development through caregiving, emotional reassurance, moral guidance, academic support, and cultural socialisation. This finding supports Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, which explains that children's development is shaped through continuous interactions within their immediate environments. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older siblings formed part of the learners' microsystem by providing consistent emotional and practical support that influenced their daily experiences. The findings further illustrate the importance of the mesosystem, as positive relationships between families and schools appeared to reinforce children's social-emotional adjustment and classroom behaviour. Epstein (2018) similarly argues that children's educational experiences are strengthened when families and schools function as complementary developmental partners.

The findings also provide empirical support for Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. Rogoff (2003) argues that children's learning occurs through meaningful interaction with more knowledgeable members of their communities. Participants described extended family members as mediators of children's development through storytelling, guidance, emotional encouragement, discipline, and everyday conversations. These interactions enabled children to internalise social norms, emotional regulation strategies, and culturally appropriate behaviours that later became evident within classroom settings. Nsamenang (2015) similarly contends that African child-rearing traditions promote children's development through collective participation rather than through the exclusive responsibility of biological parents.

An important contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that the influence of extended family support extends beyond cultural identity and family cohesion to observable school behaviours. Participants consistently associated supportive family environments with learners' confidence, empathy, cooperation,

resilience, and emotional self-regulation. These observations correspond with Berk's (2018) assertion that emotionally supportive caregiving promotes children's social competence and psychological well-being. Likewise, Evans et al. (2013) argue that children who experience multiple supportive relationships are better able to cope with emotional challenges and adapt successfully to school environments.

Although previous African studies have acknowledged the cultural importance of communal child-rearing (Mangena, 2020; Serpell & Marfo, 2014), many have remained largely descriptive, offering limited evidence regarding how these family relationships influence learners' observable classroom behaviour. The present study extends this literature by demonstrating how teachers and school administrators perceive the practical outcomes of extended family involvement within everyday educational settings. Rather than discussing communal caregiving solely as a cultural ideal, the findings illustrate its continued educational relevance through improved learner confidence, behavioural regulation, peer interaction, and classroom participation.

At the same time, the study demonstrates that extended family support is undergoing considerable transformation. Participants consistently identified urbanisation, labour migration, changing housing arrangements, and increasing employment commitments as factors limiting regular interaction between children and their extended relatives. These findings corroborate Zulu's (2022) observation that socio-economic change has altered traditional African family structures without eliminating them. Similarly, Shava (2024) argues that extended family networks continue to exist but increasingly operate under conditions characterised by geographical separation and competing economic responsibilities. Consequently, the findings suggest that contemporary extended family support should be understood as evolving rather than disappearing.

The study further highlights an important policy-practice gap within early childhood education. Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Curriculum promotes holistic child development through meaningful collaboration among schools, families, and communities (Nyoni, 2025). However, participants observed that school engagement practices remain predominantly parent-centred, providing relatively few opportunities for grandparents and other extended family members to participate formally in children's education. This finding suggests that the philosophy underpinning the Heritage-Based Curriculum has not yet been fully translated into school-level practice. Schools may therefore need to broaden their understanding of family involvement by recognising wider kinship networks as valuable educational partners rather than focusing exclusively on parents.

A distinctive contribution of this study is its integration of social-emotional development with early mathematics learning. Although mathematics achievement was not measured directly, both interview and observational data suggested that learners who benefited from consistent extended family support displayed greater confidence, persistence, cooperation, and emotional regulation during play-based mathematics activities. Teachers observed that these learners were more willing to attempt counting, sorting, matching, sequencing, and patterning tasks, persisted after making mistakes, and collaborated more effectively with their peers during problem-solving activities.

These findings reinforce the work of Martikainen et al. (2024), who argue that social-emotional competence constitutes an important foundation for early mathematical thinking. Emotional regulation enables children to sustain attention, manage frustration, and persevere when confronted with challenging tasks, while confidence encourages active participation and risk-taking during learning. Rogoff's (2003) sociocultural perspective further explains that mathematical understanding develops through collaborative interaction, dialogue, and guided participation with more knowledgeable others. Consequently, the present study suggests that extended family support contributes indirectly to mathematics learning by strengthening the social-emotional competencies upon which successful mathematical engagement depends.

Importantly, the mathematics enhancement emerging from this study should not be interpreted as replacing the central focus on social-emotional development. Rather, the findings indicate that positive social-emotional development functions as a mediating mechanism through which supportive family environments facilitate children's readiness to engage in early mathematical experiences. This represents a novel contribution to the Zimbabwean ECD literature, where previous studies have generally examined social-emotional development and mathematics learning as separate areas of inquiry. By demonstrating their interrelationship, the study

broadens understanding of holistic child development within the context of Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Curriculum.

Overall, the findings affirm that extended family support remains an important developmental resource within urban Zimbabwe despite significant social and economic transformation. They further demonstrate that strengthening relationships among schools, parents, and wider family networks has the potential to enhance not only children's emotional and social well-being but also their readiness to participate confidently in mathematics-rich learning experiences. These findings, therefore, contribute both to the international discourse on family involvement in early childhood education and to policy discussions concerning the implementation of holistic, heritage-based educational practices in Zimbabwe.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of extended family support in the social-emotional development of Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners at H Primary School in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, while exploring its implications for early mathematics learning. The findings demonstrate that extended family members remain important contributors to children's holistic development through caregiving, emotional reassurance, moral guidance, academic support, and cultural socialisation. Although family structures continue to evolve in response to urbanisation, labour migration, and changing socio-economic conditions, the study confirms that extended family support remains a valuable developmental resource within contemporary urban communities.

The findings further indicate that children who receive consistent support from grandparents, aunts, uncles, older siblings, and other relatives are more likely to demonstrate emotional regulation, confidence, empathy, cooperation, resilience, and positive classroom behaviour. These social-emotional competencies were perceived by participants to enhance learners' readiness to participate actively in classroom activities and to interact constructively with both teachers and peers. The study therefore reinforces Bronfenbrenner's (1979) proposition that children's development is shaped through interactions within interconnected ecological systems, while simultaneously supporting Rogoff's (2003) sociocultural perspective that learning is mediated through meaningful relationships with knowledgeable members of the community.

A significant contribution of this study lies in its provision of empirical, school-based evidence from an urban Zimbabwean context, where research on extended family support has remained limited. Whereas previous studies have largely discussed communal caregiving from cultural or household perspectives, this investigation demonstrates how teachers and school administrators perceive the influence of extended family support on learners' observable social-emotional behaviours within the classroom. Consequently, the study extends existing scholarship by illustrating the continuing educational relevance of extended family networks despite contemporary social transformation.

The study also contributes to emerging scholarship linking social-emotional development with early mathematics learning. Although mathematics achievement was not directly assessed, the findings suggest that children who experience supportive family relationships demonstrate greater confidence, persistence, emotional regulation, and cooperation during play-based mathematics activities. These observations indicate that social-emotional competence functions as an important foundation for early mathematical engagement. Thus, strengthening extended family support may indirectly promote children's readiness for mathematics learning by creating emotionally supportive environments that encourage participation, problem-solving, and collaborative learning.

Overall, the study concludes that effective implementation of Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Curriculum requires schools to recognise the broader family ecology surrounding young learners. Extending school-family partnerships beyond parents to include grandparents and other significant relatives offers opportunities to strengthen children's holistic development and improve their educational experiences during the formative years of schooling.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

Recommendations for Schools

Schools should broaden their family engagement programmes to include grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other significant caregivers rather than focusing exclusively on parents. Such inclusive approaches would strengthen collaboration between schools and extended family members while promoting continuity between home and school experiences. Schools may also organise family-oriented workshops and interactive learning activities that encourage wider family participation in children's social-emotional development and early learning.

Recommendations for Teachers

Teachers should recognise extended family members as valuable educational partners and actively involve them in supporting learners' development. Regular communication with grandparents and other caregivers, where appropriate, may enhance understanding of children's emotional needs and strengthen collaborative strategies for promoting positive behaviour, confidence, and classroom participation. Teachers should also continue using play-based learning approaches that integrate social-emotional development with early numeracy experiences, recognising that emotional readiness supports children's engagement in mathematical thinking.

Recommendations for Parents and Extended Family Members

Parents and extended family members should work collaboratively to provide consistent emotional support, moral guidance, and culturally meaningful learning experiences for young children. Grandparents and other relatives should be encouraged to participate actively in storytelling, shared play, everyday conversations, and practical activities that nurture children's confidence, resilience, communication skills, and problem-solving abilities. These interactions not only strengthen social-emotional development but also create natural opportunities for introducing foundational mathematical concepts through counting, sorting, comparing, measuring, sequencing, and pattern recognition during everyday family routines.

Recommendations for Policy Makers

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should strengthen the implementation of the Heritage-Based Curriculum by developing policies and guidelines that explicitly recognise the educational contribution of extended family members. Professional development programmes for teachers should also include strategies for engaging wider family networks as partners in children's holistic development. Such policy initiatives would align educational practice more closely with indigenous African child-rearing traditions while responding to the realities of contemporary family structures.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should extend this research by employing mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to examine the relationship between extended family support, social-emotional development, and children's academic outcomes over time. Comparative studies involving rural, peri-urban, and urban schools would also provide a broader understanding of how changing family structures influence learner development across different contexts. Furthermore, future researchers should investigate more directly the relationship between social-emotional competence and mathematics achievement by incorporating standardised measures of early numeracy alongside assessments of children's emotional and social development. Such studies would deepen understanding of the mechanisms through which supportive family environments contribute to both children's well-being and academic success.

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