



Examining Teacher Support and Instructional Practices in Preschool Management: Evidence from Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

This study explored teacher support and instructional practices within preschool management in Tanzania and their implications for early childhood education quality. Guided by Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory, the study employed a qualitative multiple-case design involving eight purposively selected participants (three headteachers and five preschool teachers) from three preschools. The sample size was determined based on the principle of information richness and thematic saturation rather than statistical representation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that teacher support was limited and largely dependent on external initiatives, while instructional supervision focused primarily on administrative compliance rather than pedagogical improvement. Although teachers demonstrated knowledge of child-centered and play-based approaches, their implementation was constrained by overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching resources, and limited professional development opportunities. Interpreted through Vygotsky's theory, these findings suggest that insufficient professional scaffolding from school leadership reduced teachers' capacity to implement developmentally appropriate instructional practices. The study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that preschool management functions as the organizational mechanism linking teacher support and instructional practices within resource-constrained settings. The findings highlight the need to strengthen instructional leadership, institutionalize school-based teacher development, and increase investment in learning resources to improve preschool education quality.

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is widely recognized as a level of education where the foundations for lifelong learning and development are established, significantly influencing the outcomes of children's cognitive, social, and emotional abilities. A growing body of empirical research reveals that high-quality preschool education is strongly associated with improved school readiness, academic achievement, and long-term socio-economic benefits (Yoshikawa et al., 2018; Black et al., 2021). As a result, global education agendas increasingly emphasize not only access to early childhood education but also teaching quality and learning processes within preschool settings.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Tanzania, substantial progress has been made in expanding preschool education access. However, the quality of early childhood educational remains uneven, with persistent challenges related to teacher preparedness, instructional quality, and learning environments (Wolf et al., 2019; Mkumbo, 2021). In Tanzania, preschool education has been integrated into the formal education system, yet many preschools continue to face structural constraints such as large sized classes with limited teaching resources, and insufficiently trained teachers, particularly in rural areas (Mtahabwa & Rao, 2010; Mkumbo, 2021). These challenges raise concerns about the effectiveness of teaching practices and their alignment with developmentally appropriate pedagogies.

According to the Tanzania Education Sector Performance Report (2023), preschool enrolment has increased substantially over the past decade. However, challenges remain regarding teacher availability, teacher qualifications, and classroom conditions. In many public preschools, teacher-child ratios



exceed recommended standards, particularly in rural areas, while shortages of learning materials and qualified teachers continue to affect instructional quality (UNESCO, 2023).

A central factor influencing the preschool educational quality is the level of teacher support within school systems. Recent studies indicate that sustained teacher support significantly improves instructional quality and student learning outcomes (Egert et al., 2018; Pitriani, 2024). Furthermore, teachers who receive consistent pedagogical guidance are more likely to adopt innovative and child-centered teaching strategies (Jensen et al., 2021). In contrast, limited support systems often lead to low teacher motivation and reliance on traditional, less effective teaching methods.

Instructional practices in early childhood education are expected to reflect child-centered, play-based, and interactive approaches that actively engage learners. Grounded in constructivist theory Piaget (1952), argue that active exploration of the environment enhances children to construct their knowledge, while Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes the significance of scaffolding and social interaction in facilitating learning within the Zone of Proximal Development.

Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory provides an important lens for understanding the relationship between teacher support, instructional practices, and preschool management. The theory suggests that children's learning is facilitated through social interaction and appropriate scaffolding provided by more knowledgeable others. In preschool settings, teachers serve as key agents of scaffolding; however, their ability to provide effective support to children is influenced by the professional support, supervision, and resources available within the school environment. Consequently, preschool management plays an important role in creating the institutional conditions that enable teachers to implement developmentally appropriate instructional practices. This theoretical perspective supports the examination of preschool management, teacher support, and instructional practices as interconnected dimensions influencing educational quality.

These theoretical perspectives are widely supported by contemporary research, which shows that interactive pedagogies such as play-based learning, storytelling, and collaborative activities enhance cognitive and socio-emotional development for children (Zosh et al., 2018). However, evidence from low-income and middle-income countries suggests that many preschool classrooms still rely on teacher-centered approaches due to limited training and inadequate instructional resources (Wolf et al., 2019; Sitorus et al., 2025). While these pedagogical principles are widely advocated in early childhood education, it remains unclear to what extent they are reflected in preschool classrooms in Tanzania, where teachers often work under conditions of limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, and restricted professional support.

Preschool management plays a pivotal role in shaping both teacher support mechanisms and instructional practices. Effective school leadership involves strategic planning, supervision, resource allocation, and fostering a supportive professional environment for teachers. Research highlights that strong instructional leadership positively influences teaching quality by promoting professional development, monitoring classroom practices, and ensuring the availability of teaching resources (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Pitriani, 2024). In preschool settings, leadership is particularly important in guiding teachers toward developmentally appropriate practices and maintaining quality standards. In many Tanzanian preschools, management capacity is constrained by limited funding, insufficient training for school leaders, and weak institutional support systems (Mkumbo, 2021). However, management can be viewed as a connecting mechanism that influences how teacher support is provided and how instructional practices are implemented in the classroom. Therefore, examining preschool management together with teacher support and instructional practices is essential for understanding their inter-relationships and their collective impact on the quality of early childhood education.

Although previous studies have consistently demonstrate that teacher support improves pedagogical competence and instructional quality (Egert et al., 2018; Pitriani, 2024), these studies generally conceptualize support as an independent professional development intervention rather than examining the organizational conditions that enable such support. Similarly, research on instructional practices has largely focused on classroom-level teaching behaviors and child outcomes (Wolf et al., 2019; Zosh et al., 2018), while leadership studies have concentrated on school effectiveness and organizational performance (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). As a result, limited attention has been given to understanding how preschool management functions as an enabling mechanism that simultaneously



shapes teacher support and instructional practices. This separation has left an important gap in understanding how management processes influence the quality of teaching and learning in preschool settings.

While substantial evidence exists regarding the relationship between leadership, teacher support, and instructional quality, much of this research has been conducted in high-income countries or relatively well-resourced educational contexts (Egert et al., 2018; Jensen et al., 2021; Pitriani, 2024). Studies from Sub-Saharan Africa have primarily focused on access to early childhood education, teacher shortages, and infrastructure challenges rather than examining the interaction among preschool management, teacher support, and instructional practices (Mtahabwa & Rao, 2010; Mkumbo, 2021). Similar challenges have also been reported in other African contexts, including Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa, where shortages of qualified teachers and limited institutional support continue to affect instructional quality (Kabiru et al., 2016; Richter et al., 2019). Consequently, limited evidence exists regarding how these relationships operate in resource-constrained preschool environments in countries such as Tanzania, where shortages of qualified teachers, instructional materials, and professional support systems continue to affect educational quality.

Research on teacher support, instructional quality, and educational leadership has predominantly relied on quantitative methods, including surveys, standardized observations, and impact evaluations (Egert et al., 2018; Wolf et al., 2019; Pitriani, 2024). While these approaches have generated valuable evidence regarding relationships among variables, they provide limited insight into how teachers and headteachers experience management practices in their daily professional contexts. Relatively few qualitative studies have explored the lived experiences and perspectives of preschool teachers and headteachers regarding how management practices influence teacher support and classroom instruction, particularly within Tanzanian preschool settings. Therefore, a qualitative approach is necessary to provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which preschool management shapes teaching and learning processes.

Taken together, the literature indicates important empirical, contextual, and methodological gaps regarding the interaction between preschool management, teacher support, and instructional practices in Tanzanian preschools. Addressing these gaps is necessary for advancing both theoretical understanding and practical efforts to improve early childhood education quality in resource-constrained contexts.

To address these gaps, this study seeks to examine teacher support and instructional practices within preschool management in Tanzania. Specifically, the study aims to answer the following questions: (1) What forms of teacher support are provided to preschool teachers within preschool management systems in Tanzania? (2) How are instructional practices implemented in Tanzanian preschool classrooms? (3) How does preschool management influence teacher support and instructional practices in Tanzanian preschools? and (4) What challenges affect teacher support, instructional practices, and preschool management in Tanzanian preschools?

Based on the reviewed literature and Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory, this study conceptualizes preschool management as the central organizational mechanism that connects teacher support systems and instructional practices within preschool settings. The framework assumes that effective preschool management, enacted through instructional, pedagogical, managerial, and distributed leadership, creates organizational conditions that enable teachers to receive continuous professional support through mentoring, supervision, professional development, collaboration, and access to instructional resources. Such support strengthens teachers' pedagogical competence and enhances their capacity to implement child-centered instructional practices, including play-based learning, storytelling, singing, group activities, and continuous classroom assessment, thereby contributing to the quality of early childhood education.

Grounded in Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory, the framework further assumes that scaffolding operates at multiple interconnected levels. School leaders provide professional scaffolding for teachers through instructional leadership, supervision, and mentoring, while teachers subsequently scaffold children's learning through meaningful social interaction, guided participation, and developmentally appropriate instructional practices. At the same time, structural challenges, including inadequate funding, shortages of teaching and learning materials, overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, and limited institutional support, may constrain the effectiveness of preschool management, teacher support



systems, and instructional practices. Consequently, the quality of preschool education is understood as the result of interactions among organizational leadership, teacher development, instructional practices, and contextual conditions. The conceptual framework guiding this study is presented in Figure 1.

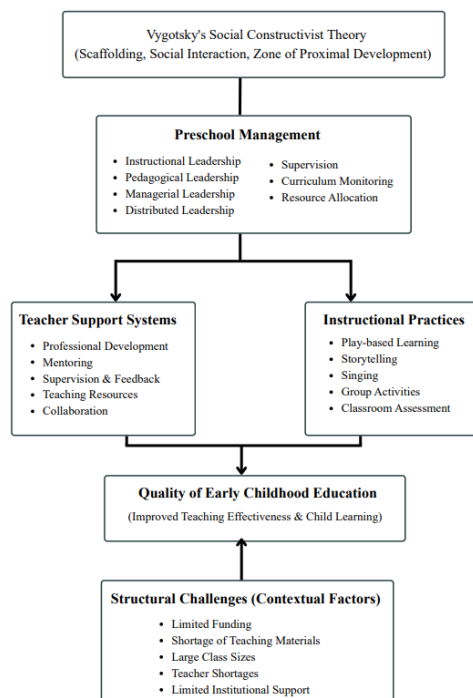


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Guiding the Study

The novelty of this study lies in its integrated examination of preschool management, teacher support, and instructional practices within a single analytical framework in the Tanzanian preschool context. Unlike previous studies that have examined teacher support, instructional quality, or educational leadership as separate areas of inquiry, this study investigates the interaction among these three dimensions. Furthermore, whereas existing research has largely focused on well-resourced educational systems, this study provides evidence from Tanzanian preschools operating under resource constraints. By doing so, the study offers new insights into how management practices influence both teacher support and classroom instruction.

Theoretically, the study extends the application of Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory beyond classroom interactions by highlighting how institutional and managerial conditions influence teachers' capacity to provide effective learning scaffolds for young children. Empirically, it contributes context-specific evidence from Tanzania, a setting that remains underrepresented in the international early childhood education literature.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a multiple-case study design to explore teacher support and instructional practices within preschool management in Tanzania. A multiple-case study was considered appropriate because it examined similar phenomena across three preschool settings, allowing for comparison and a richer understanding of the influence of preschool management on teacher support and instructional practices (Yin, 2018). The qualitative approach was selected because it enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions, experiences, and practices within their natural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through the examination of multiple cases, the study sought to identify both common patterns and contextual variations across preschool settings.

Research Setting and Participants

The study employed a multiple-case design involving three purposively selected preschools in



Tanzania. The schools were selected because they reflected the characteristics commonly found in Tanzanian preschools, offered preschool education services, and had headteachers and preschool teachers with relevant experience who were willing to participate. Using multiple sites enabled comparison across different preschool contexts while providing diverse perspectives on teacher support, instructional practices, and preschool management.

A total of eight participants, comprising three headteachers and five preschool teachers, were selected through purposive sampling because they had direct experience with preschool leadership and classroom practices (Patton, 2015). The sample size was guided by the principle of information richness and thematic saturation rather than statistical representation. Data collection ceased after the eighth interview, when no substantially new codes or themes emerged, indicating sufficient information had been obtained to address the research questions (Guest et al., 2006). Table 1 presents the demographic and professional characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Participant	Position	Gender	Teaching/Management Experience
HT1	Headteacher	Male	12 years
HT2	Headteacher	Female	10 years
HT3	Headteacher	Male	15 years
PT1	Preschool Teacher	Male	8 years
PT2	Preschool Teacher	Female	6 years
PT3	Preschool Teacher	Male	7 years
PT4	Preschool Teacher	Female	5 years
PT5	Preschool Teacher	Female	9 years

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured online interviews conducted via WhatsApp voice and video calls. This approach provided flexibility while enabling in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives. The interview protocol was developed based on the study objectives, research questions, and relevant literature on teacher support, instructional practices, and preschool management. The interview guide covered teacher support systems, instructional practices, management roles, and challenges affecting teaching and learning. Sample questions included: “*What forms of support do teachers receive in this preschool?*”, “*How are teaching and learning activities conducted in your classroom?*”, and “*How does school management influence teaching practices?*”

Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. The use of WhatsApp facilitated access to participants across different locations, reduced geographical constraints, and provided a flexible and cost-effective means of data collection. However, occasional internet connectivity issues and limited observation of non-verbal cues were recognized as limitations. These were minimized through follow-up questions during interviews and careful review of interview recordings during transcription and analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, supported by NVivo 12 Pro software. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed repeatedly to achieve data familiarization before being imported into NVivo 12 Pro for systematic data management and analysis. Initial codes were generated inductively from participants' responses and then grouped into broader categories and potential themes. The themes were iteratively reviewed, refined, defined, and named by comparing coded extracts with the complete dataset to ensure coherence and alignment with the research objectives. Finally, the themes were organized into a coherent narrative addressing the research questions, supported by representative participant quotations. Although NVivo 12 Pro facilitated systematic data organization, retrieval, and theme development, the interpretation of codes and themes remained the responsibility of the researchers.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study adopted the criteria proposed by Lincoln



and Guba (1985), including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants and member checking. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and study procedures. Dependability was established by maintaining a transparent and systematic research process. Confirmability was enhanced through the use of direct participant quotations and the maintenance of coding records and analytical memos to minimize researcher bias and ensure that findings were grounded in the data.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly taken into account throughout the study. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and pseudonyms were used instead of real names. Additionally, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. All data collected were securely stored and used solely for research purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, resulting in four major themes and related subthemes concerning teacher support systems, instructional practices, preschool management, and challenges affecting preschool education in Tanzania. Table 2 summarizes the identified themes, subthemes, and their prevalence across participants. The findings are presented with representative quotations and analytical interpretations, highlighting similarities and differences between teachers' and headteachers' perspectives where relevant.

Table 2. Summary of Themes, Subthemes, and Prevalence

Theme	Subtheme	Participants Mentioning (n=8)	Dominance
Teacher Support Systems	1. Professional Development and Training	7	High
	2. Supervision and Feedback Practices	6	Moderate
	3. Availability of Teaching and Learning Materials	8	High
Instructional Practices in Preschool Classrooms	1. Teaching Methods Used in Classrooms	8	High
	2. Learner Engagement and Play-Based Learning	7	High
	3. Supporting Diverse Learning Needs	6	Moderate
Management Influence on Teaching and Learning	1. Supervision and Curriculum Monitoring	7	High
	2. Resource Provision and Teacher Support	8	High
Challenges Affecting Preschool Education	1. Funding Constraints	8	High
	2. Overcrowded Classrooms	7	High
	3. Shortage of Teaching and Learning Materials	8	High
	4. Limited Training Opportunities	7	High

Teacher Support Systems

Teacher support emerged as one of the dominant themes across the interviews. Both teachers and headteachers emphasized that professional development, supervision, and the availability of teaching and learning materials were essential for improving instructional practice. However, participants consistently described these support systems as limited, irregular, and largely dependent on external assistance. Three subthemes emerged: professional development and training, supervision and feedback practices, and availability of teaching and learning materials.



First, professional development and training. Participants consistently reported that opportunities for professional development were limited and irregular. Teachers explained that professional development training was largely organized by government agencies or non-governmental organizations rather than through school-based initiatives, limiting opportunities for continuous pedagogical improvement. As one teacher explained like this.

"In the time I have worked here, I have only attended one formal training which was organized outside the school. We are not regularly updated on new teaching methods, yet early childhood education requires teachers to continue improving their skills because children learn differently". (PT2)

Headteachers acknowledged the importance of continuous teacher development but attributed the lack of regular training to financial constraints and limited institutional resources.

"We would like to organize more workshops for our teachers, but financial constraints make it difficult. Most of the time, we depend on external support from NGOs or government programs" (HT2).

Both participant groups recognized the importance of continuous professional learning but differed in their explanations. Teachers emphasized its influence on classroom practice, whereas headteachers highlighted institutional and financial barriers. These findings indicate that professional development is not systematically embedded within preschool management but depends largely on external support. Second, supervision and feedback practices. Teachers described supervision as irregular and primarily administrative, with feedback focusing more on lesson completion and classroom management than instructional improvement.

"The headteacher observes our teaching maybe once or twice a term, but the feedback is usually general, like telling us to improve classroom management or complete lessons on time. We are not always guided on specific teaching techniques" (PT3).

Headteachers similarly acknowledged that administrative responsibilities limited their ability to provide regular instructional mentoring.

"We monitor teachers by visiting classrooms and checking lesson plans, but because of many responsibilities, it is not always possible to provide detailed support to every teacher" (HT3).

Although supervision structures were present, participants generally perceived them as mechanisms for accountability rather than professional learning. The findings suggest that instructional supervision remains underdeveloped, limiting opportunities for reflective practice and pedagogical improvement. Third, availability of teaching and learning materials. Limited teaching and learning materials emerged as one of the most frequently reported challenges affecting instructional practice. Teachers explained that shortages of books, charts, manipulatives, and play materials reduced opportunities for interactive and child-centered learning.

"We do not have enough books, charts, or play materials. I often create teaching aids using local materials, but it takes a lot of time and sometimes the materials are not enough for all children" (PT4).

To address these shortages, many teachers demonstrated creativity by producing instructional materials from locally available resources such as bottle tops, sticks, stones, recycled paper, handmade charts, and other locally sourced objects for counting, storytelling, language activities, and play-based learning. Although these innovations partially compensated for resource shortages, participants empha-



sized that they required considerable additional effort and could not replace adequate institutional provision of teaching materials. These findings suggest that teacher innovation supports classroom instruction but cannot substitute for sustained investment in educational resources.

Instructional Practices in Preschool Classrooms

Instructional practices emerged as a central theme across participants' accounts. Both teachers and headteachers emphasized the importance of child-centered teaching, although they acknowledged that classroom realities often constrained its implementation. Three subthemes were identified: teaching methods, learner engagement through play-based learning, and supporting diverse learning needs. First, teaching methods used in classrooms

Participants reported using storytelling, songs, demonstrations, questioning, group activities, and play-based learning to promote children's participation. However, overcrowded classrooms and limited resources frequently required teachers to combine these approaches with teacher-directed instruction. As one teacher explained below.

I use storytelling, singing, demonstrations, and sometimes group activities because young children enjoy active learning. But when the class becomes too large or noisy, I end up explaining and asking children to repeat after me so that I can control the class. (PT1)

"We know that children learn better through participation and play, but large class sizes make it difficult to involve every child actively during lessons" (PT4).

Both teachers and headteachers recognized that storytelling, singing, and group activities supported language development, social interaction, and children's engagement. Nevertheless, these learner-centered approaches were often adapted or replaced by teacher-centered instruction to maintain classroom management and complete planned lessons. These findings indicate that teachers possessed knowledge of developmentally appropriate pedagogy but adjusted their instructional strategies in response to contextual constraints. Second, learner engagement through play-based learning. Participants consistently viewed play-based learning as an effective strategy for increasing children's participation and motivation. Teachers described using songs, games, storytelling, outdoor activities, and role play whenever classroom conditions allowed. One teacher explained

"We use play-based learning during outdoor activities or when we have enough materials, such as counting objects or role play. But inside the classroom, there is not enough space for children to move freely" (PT3).

"Children participate more when we use songs, games, and activities. However, managing participation becomes difficult when there are many children in one classroom" (PT5).

Both teachers and headteachers agreed that learner engagement improved when interactive activities were used. However, shortages of learning materials, limited classroom space, and large class sizes reduced opportunities to implement play-based learning consistently. The findings therefore suggest that learner engagement depends not only on teachers' pedagogical competence but also on the availability of adequate institutional support and learning resources. Third, supporting diverse learning needs

Participants acknowledged that children differ in their learning pace and require individualized support. Teachers reported providing additional explanations, repeating activities, and adapting learning tasks according to children's abilities, although these practices were constrained by overcrowded classrooms. As one teacher explained

"Some children understand quickly while others need more support. I try to help slower learners, but because there are many children in the class, it becomes difficult to give everyone enough attention" (PT1).



Participants also described relying primarily on informal classroom assessment to monitor children's progress. One teacher stated

"We assess children by observing participation, asking questions, and giving simple activities. There are no formal assessment tools, so we mostly depend on classroom observation" (PT5).

Although assessment was not an initial focus of the study, it emerged naturally as part of teachers' efforts to respond to children's diverse learning needs. Teachers primarily used formative assessment through classroom observation and participation rather than standardized assessment tools, reflecting the close relationship between assessment and instructional practice in preschool classrooms. Overall, the findings indicate that participants valued child-centered instructional approaches but were often constrained by structural conditions, including overcrowded classrooms, limited learning materials, and insufficient institutional support. Consequently, teachers demonstrated considerable adaptability by balancing learner-centered pedagogy with classroom management demands.

Management Influence on Teaching and Learning

Preschool management emerged as a cross-cutting theme linking teacher support and instructional practices. Both teachers and headteachers viewed management as central to organizing supervision, coordinating resources, and supporting classroom teaching. However, teachers emphasized the influence of management on their daily instructional work, whereas headteachers focused on their leadership responsibilities and institutional constraints. Two subthemes emerged: supervision and curriculum monitoring, and resource provision and teacher support. First, supervision and curriculum monitoring

Participants described supervision as a regular management practice involving classroom observations, lesson plan reviews, and curriculum monitoring. Teachers appreciated classroom visits but noted that feedback primarily emphasized administrative compliance rather than instructional improvement. One teacher explained like this.

"The headteacher usually checks our lesson plans and visits the classroom to observe our teaching. After the observation, we sometimes receive feedback on areas that need improvement" (PT5).

"Supervision helps us stay focused on our teaching responsibilities, but most of the time it focuses on checking records and lesson plans rather than discussing teaching methods" (PT1).

"I regularly monitor lesson plans and classroom activities to ensure that teachers follow the curriculum and provide quality learning experiences" (HT1).

"We ensure that teachers follow the syllabus and complete lessons on time because this helps maintain educational standards, although improving teaching methods is still a challenge" (HT2).

Both teachers and headteachers regarded supervision as essential for maintaining educational quality. However, their perspectives differed. Headteachers viewed supervision primarily as a mechanism for curriculum implementation and accountability, whereas teachers expected more constructive feedback and professional guidance. These findings suggest that supervision remains largely compliance-oriented and has yet to fully function as a process of instructional mentoring and professional learning. Second, resource provision and teacher support. Participants consistently identified resource provision as a key management responsibility affecting classroom instruction. Teachers acknowledged management's efforts to provide teaching materials and support but emphasized that resource shortages continued to constrain effective teaching. One teacher explained like this.



“The school management tries to support us by providing some teaching materials, but the resources are still insufficient for all classroom activities” (PT4). Another teacher noted: “Management encourages us and provides guidance, but more training opportunities and learning materials are needed” (PT3).

“We try to provide teachers with the materials they need, but limited funding makes it difficult to meet all classroom requirements” (HT3).

Both participant groups agreed that financial limitations reduced schools' ability to provide adequate learning materials and continuous professional support. While headteachers emphasized budget constraints and competing institutional priorities, teachers highlighted how insufficient resources affected classroom implementation. These findings indicate that management influences instructional quality not only through supervision but also through its capacity to create supportive teaching conditions through resource allocation and professional support.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that preschool management functions as a connecting mechanism between teacher support and instructional practices. Decisions regarding supervision, professional development, and resource allocation directly shaped teachers' capacity to implement child-centered learning. Consequently, improvements in instructional quality depend not only on teachers' competencies but also on supportive leadership and adequate institutional resources.

Challenges Affecting Preschool Education

Participants consistently emphasized that several structural challenges cut across teacher support, instructional practices, and preschool management. Rather than operating independently, these challenges interacted to influence the overall quality of preschool education. Four interrelated challenges emerged: limited funding, shortages of teaching and learning materials, overcrowded classrooms, and limited professional development opportunities. Table 3 summarizes how each challenge affected teacher support, instructional practices, and management functions.

Table 3. Cross-Cutting Challenges Affecting Preschool Education

Challenge	Impact on Teacher Support	Impact on Instructional Practices	Impact on Management
Limited Funding	Restricts training and support programs	Limits acquisition of learning materials	Reduces capacity to support teachers and improve facilities
Shortage of Teaching Materials	Limits instructional preparation	Reduces interactive and play-based learning	Creates resource allocation difficulties
Overcrowded Classrooms	Increases teacher workload	Limits individualized instruction and learner engagement	Complicates supervision and monitoring
Limited Professional Development	Restricts pedagogical improvement	Encourages reliance on traditional teaching methods	Weakens instructional innovations

First, limited funding. Both teachers and headteachers identified limited funding as the underlying challenge affecting most aspects of preschool education. One teacher explained like this.

“Many of the activities we would like to conduct require materials that the school cannot always afford. Sometimes we have to simplify lessons or use whatever resources are available” (PT3).

“Limited funding affects almost every aspect of the preschool. It becomes difficult to purchase teaching materials, organize teacher training, or improve classroom facilities” (HT2).

Participants agreed that financial limitations reduced preschools' ability to provide adequate learning resources, organize professional development, and improve the teaching environment.

Second, shortage of teaching and learning materials. Teachers consistently reported inadequate access



to books, charts, and learning aids, requiring them to improvise instructional materials from locally available resources. As one teacher explained like this.

“We do not always have enough books, charts, or learning aids. As a result, I often create materials myself using locally available resources” (PT1).

“The demand for teaching materials is higher than what the school can provide. We try our best to supply resources, but budget limitations make it challenging” (HT1).

Although teachers demonstrated creativity, participants agreed that locally produced materials could not fully compensate for persistent resource shortages.

Third, overcrowded classrooms. Participants consistently reported that large class sizes reduced opportunities for individualized instruction and effective classroom management. One teacher stated like this.

“When there are many children in one classroom, it becomes difficult to give individual attention to each child and monitor their learning progress” (PT5).

“Large class sizes affect the quality of instruction and make supervision more challenging because teachers have to manage many learners at the same time” (HT3).

Both groups agreed that overcrowding limited learner participation while increasing teachers' workload and management demands. Fourth, limited professional development opportunities. Teachers and headteachers viewed limited professional development as a major barrier to instructional improvement. One teacher explained like this.

“Training opportunities are not frequent. I would like to learn new teaching methods, but such opportunities are limited” (PT1).

“We recognize the importance of professional development, but organizing regular training is difficult because of financial and logistical constraints” (HT1).

Participants agreed that insufficient training opportunities reduced teachers' ability to update their pedagogical knowledge and implement innovative instructional practices. Overall, the findings demonstrate that these challenges are interconnected rather than isolated. Funding limitations contribute to shortages of teaching materials and professional development opportunities, while overcrowded classrooms intensify teachers' workload and constrain learner-centered instruction. Together, these structural conditions shape the effectiveness of preschool management, teacher support systems, and instructional practices, highlighting that improvements in preschool quality require systemic rather than teacher-focused interventions alone.

This study examined teacher support and instructional practices within preschool management in Tanzania using Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory as the guiding framework. The findings indicate that preschool education quality is shaped not by any single factor alone but by the interaction among teacher support, instructional practices, preschool management, and broader structural conditions. Rather than operating independently, these elements form an interconnected system in which leadership influences teacher development, teacher support affects instructional practices, and contextual constraints shape the extent to which child-centered learning can be implemented. This systems perspective extends previous research that has largely examined teacher support, instructional practices, and educational leadership as separate domains. Instead, the findings demonstrate that preschool quality emerges through the interaction of these dimensions within the organizational and structural realities of resource-constrained schools.



First finding is teacher support systems. One important finding is that teacher support was limited, irregular, and largely dependent on external organizations instead of being systematically embedded within school management. Although teachers valued professional development, mentoring, and instructional supervision, opportunities for continuous learning were infrequent because of financial and institutional constraints. Viewed through Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivist Theory, teacher learning is itself a social process. Just as children develop through scaffolding provided by more knowledgeable others, teachers also require professional scaffolding through mentoring, collaborative reflection, and instructional feedback. When these opportunities are limited, teachers have fewer chances to strengthen their pedagogical competence and refine child-centered teaching practices.

These findings support previous studies showing that continuous professional development improves instructional quality (Egert et al., 2018; Pitriani, 2024). However, unlike evidence from well-resourced educational systems where professional learning is institutionalized within schools, teacher support in Tanzanian preschools remained fragmented and externally driven. This difference is likely explained by limited financial resources, insufficient leadership capacity, and weaker institutional support systems. Consequently, teacher learning depends less on continuous organizational processes and more on sporadic external interventions. Similar institutional constraints have been reported in other Sub-Saharan African contexts (Kabiru et al., 2016; Mkumbo, 2021). The findings therefore suggest that teacher support should be viewed not simply as periodic external training but as a continuous organizational process embedded within instructional leadership, collaborative learning, and reflective school practice.

Second, instructional practices within resource-constrained classrooms. The findings further indicate that teachers possessed substantial knowledge of child-centered instructional approaches, including storytelling, songs, play-based learning, demonstrations, and collaborative activities. Nevertheless, implementation was constrained by overcrowded classrooms, limited instructional resources, and heavy workloads. Consequently, teachers frequently combined learner-centered activities with teacher-directed instruction.

Rather than indicating inadequate pedagogical competence, this adaptation appears to represent teachers' professional response to difficult classroom conditions. This interpretation challenges deficit-oriented assumptions that traditional teaching primarily reflects teachers' limited knowledge. Instead, instructional decisions appear to result from interactions between teachers' competence and the institutional conditions in which they work.

This interpretation aligns with Vygotsky's emphasis on social interaction and scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development. Child-centered learning requires opportunities for dialogue, observation, collaboration, and individualized support within children's Zone of Proximal Development. However, overcrowded classrooms and insufficient learning materials substantially reduce teachers' ability to provide such scaffolding effectively.

The findings are consistent with studies showing that teachers in low-resource settings often rely on direct instruction despite understanding learner-centered pedagogy (Wolf et al., 2019; Sitorus et al., 2025). However, unlike some previous research that portrays teacher-centered instruction as evidence of poor teaching quality, this study found that teachers continued incorporating storytelling, songs, games, and locally produced materials whenever possible. This demonstrates professional resilience and suggests that instructional quality depends as much on institutional support as on teachers' pedagogical knowledge.

Third, preschool management as instructional leadership. The findings also demonstrate that preschool management functions as the organizational mechanism connecting teacher support and instructional practices. Although supervision was regularly conducted, it focused primarily on curriculum implementation, attendance, and administrative accountability rather than instructional mentoring and professional learning.

From the perspective of instructional leadership, effective school leaders improve learning indirectly by strengthening teachers' instructional competence through classroom observation, constructive feedback, mentoring, and collaborative professional development (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Within Vygotsky's framework, these leadership practices represent professional scaffolding that enables teachers to expand their pedagogical knowledge through guided interaction.



However, the present findings suggest that headteachers' capacity to provide instructional leadership was constrained by competing managerial responsibilities, including financial management, reporting requirements, and school administration. Consequently, instructional supervision frequently became compliance-oriented rather than developmental.

These finding both supports and extends previous leadership research. While Hallinger and Heck (2010) argued that instructional leadership improves teaching primarily through teacher development, the present study demonstrates that leadership effectiveness is also conditioned by organizational capacity and resource availability. Leadership alone may therefore be insufficient unless accompanied by adequate institutional support. The findings further suggest that strengthening preschool quality requires balancing managerial, instructional, pedagogical, and distributed leadership through mentoring, peer learning, and collaborative professional learning communities.

These findings suggest that leadership development programs should move beyond administrative training to include instructional coaching, mentoring skills, classroom observation, reflective supervision, and the establishment of professional learning communities. Such reforms would enable headteachers to function as instructional leaders rather than primarily administrative managers, thereby strengthening continuous teacher learning and improving classroom practice.

Fourth, structural conditions as systemic constraints. Another significant finding is that inadequate funding, shortages of instructional materials, overcrowded classrooms, and limited professional development simultaneously affected teacher support, instructional practices, and preschool management. Rather than representing isolated challenges, these structural conditions interacted to influence the overall quality of preschool education.

These findings reflect broader educational conditions in Tanzania and other Sub-Saharan African countries, where rapid expansion of preschool education has often outpaced investments in teacher preparation, infrastructure, and instructional resources (Kabiru et al., 2016; Mkumbo, 2021; Richter et al., 2019). Consequently, many challenges observed in this study appear to be systemic rather than school-specific. This finding suggests that efforts focusing solely on teacher training are unlikely to produce sustainable improvements unless broader institutional constraints are addressed simultaneously.

Vygotsky's theory further helps explain these relationships. Effective scaffolding requires supportive environments that enable meaningful interaction between teachers and children. Similarly, teachers require organizational scaffolding through leadership, mentoring, and institutional support. When these supports are constrained by inadequate resources, opportunities for both teacher learning and children's development become limited. The findings therefore extend Social Constructivist Theory by illustrating that scaffolding operates across multiple organizational levels rather than solely within classroom interactions.

Despite these challenges, teachers demonstrated considerable professional agency by adapting locally available materials, modifying instructional strategies, and collaborating with colleagues and parents. While these adaptive practices illustrate resilience, they cannot substitute for sustained institutional investment in preschool education. This finding reinforces the argument that preschool quality should be understood as an organizational and systemic issue rather than solely a matter of teacher competence.

Theoretically, this study extends Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory by demonstrating that scaffolding functions across multiple organizational levels. While Vygotsky originally emphasized interactions between teachers and children, the present findings indicate that school leaders also scaffold teachers' professional learning through supervision, mentoring, collaborative reflection, and instructional leadership. The study therefore broadens the application of Social Constructivist Theory from classroom learning to organizational learning within preschool institutions.

The study further contributes to instructional leadership literature by conceptualizing preschool management as the organizational mechanism linking teacher support with instructional practices. Rather than treating leadership as an independent determinant of school effectiveness, the findings demonstrate that leadership shapes teaching indirectly by influencing teachers' professional learning, resource availability, and opportunities for collaborative practice.

These findings suggest that policymakers should strengthen instructional leadership preparation, institutionalize school-based professional development, expand mentoring and professional learning



communities, and increase investment in teaching resources and classroom infrastructure. Policies focusing exclusively on teacher training are unlikely to produce sustainable improvements unless leadership capacity and organizational support are strengthened simultaneously. Overall, this study contributes to the early childhood education literature by providing context-specific evidence from Tanzanian preschools and demonstrating that sustainable improvements in preschool quality depend on the alignment of instructional leadership, teacher support, child-centered instructional practices, and supportive institutional conditions. This integrated perspective offers a foundation for future research and policy aimed at strengthening preschool education in resource-constrained contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study explored teacher support and instructional practices within preschool management in Tanzania through a qualitative multiple-case study guided by Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory. The findings demonstrate that the quality of preschool education is shaped by the interaction among teacher support, instructional practices, preschool management, and broader structural conditions. Although teachers demonstrated awareness of child-centered approaches, their classroom practices were often constrained by limited professional support, inadequate instructional resources, overcrowded classrooms, and management practices that prioritized administrative accountability over instructional improvement. These findings suggest that improving preschool education requires a systems approach in which leadership, teacher development, and institutional support function as interconnected components.

The study makes three main contributions. Theoretically, it extends Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory by showing that scaffolding operates not only between teachers and children but also through instructional leadership that supports teachers' professional learning. Empirically, it provides context-specific qualitative evidence from Tanzanian preschools, a setting that remains underrepresented in the international early childhood education literature. Practically, the findings highlight the need to strengthen instructional and pedagogical leadership, institutionalize continuous school-based professional development, and improve the provision of teaching resources and supportive learning environments. This study has several limitations. It was conducted in three preschools with a small number of participants and relied solely on online semi-structured interviews. The findings therefore may not represent all preschool contexts in Tanzania. In addition, the study focused only on teachers' and headteachers' perspectives without incorporating classroom observations or the views of other stakeholders. Future research should examine preschool management across more diverse settings using larger samples and mixed-methods or longitudinal designs. Incorporating classroom observations and the perspectives of parents, education officers, and policymakers would provide a more comprehensive understanding of preschool quality. Further research should also evaluate instructional leadership models, school-based mentoring, and professional learning communities to identify effective strategies for improving early childhood education in resource-constrained contexts.

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