

## **Writing Difficulties in Primary Schools in Tanzania: A Focus on Standard Two Children's Experiences in Dodoma City**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper assessed the situation of writing difficulties among primary school children in Tanzania. Specifically, the study aimed at identifying children with susceptible writing difficulties (CSWD) and exploring specific mistakes they made in writing skills. Besides, it aimed at assessing the ways used by the teachers in supporting CSWD. It involved 280 standard two pupils and three (3) subject specific teachers from two public primary schools in Dodoma City. The primary schools were randomly selected, while standard two children and teachers were purposively selected. Data were collected through administering reading and writing tests, interview and classroom observation. A reading test was first administered to all children to screen those with severe reading problems. The results indicated that 78 (27.9%) out of 280 children were low achievers in reading test, while 53 (26.2%) out of the remaining 202 were identified as CSWD. It was also found that CSWD made different mistakes when writing both words and sentences. Data regarding writing mistakes suggest that majority of the CSWD faced problems in letter formation, word/letter spacing and spelling. Moreover, it was found that teachers supported CSWD to improve their writing ability through retention in the same classes and through remedial sessions. This study recommends that, appropriate and effective measures are required to enable CSWD to benefit from classroom teaching and complete the primary education level with the required writing skills.*

**Key words:** Writing difficulties, Low Achieving Children, Letter Deformation, Misspelling

## **1. Introduction, Problem Statement and Justification**

Writing is a necessary skill for school children as it is a predictor of academic success and a basic requirement contributing to lifelong learning and sustainable development (Graham & Perin, 2007). In the school context in particular, writing is a dominant form of communication used to communicate ideas in the teaching and learning process. This form of communication is valued by societal members due to its link with the academic achievement in the view that success in school depends more on writing skills of the learner in which paper and pencil assessments are conventionally adopted to measure the effectiveness of academic progress (Crouch & Jacubecy, 2007). This means that the mastery of writing skills is a necessary component in teaching and learning as well as other spheres of life.

The importance of writing skills in schools has been a major concern worldwide. The global rhetoric policies such as Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) highlight the issue of literacy skills in general and writing skills in particular. For example, the EFA strategy stipulates that every child should be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs. Such basic learning needs comprise of essential learning tools such as writing, oral expression, numeracy and problem solving (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2006). Moreover, MDGs aimed to achieve the Universal Primary Education (UPE) in which the focus was on increasing the enrolment of children in primary school and literacy rate in general and writing in particular. With these worldwide goals, writing is considered as a potential skill for attaining the optimum level of education in the global economy.

With the same sensitivity, the Tanzania's Education and Training Policies (ETP) of 1995 and 2014 recognize the importance of writing skills in school learning. It is well articulated in the ETP of 2014 that the government in collaboration with other stakeholders shall ensure that the curricula emphasize basic communication skills (reading, *writing* and arithmetic) at all levels of education and training (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training [MOEVT], 2014). The policy considers the basic and adult education as the main educational levels appropriate for training and equipping learners with writing skills.

Despite the importance of writing skills worldwide and Tanzania in particular, it has been noted that there is a number of primary school children facing problems in writing. It has been estimated that worldwide, 27% of the primary school children encounter problems of writing skill (World Statistic Institute, 2011). In spite of the worldwide data on writing problems, there are also country specific data on writing problems. In Australia for example, the Department of Education and Training (2009) reports that 3% of students in the first grade through fifth, in all schools, had writing problems. The National Centre for Educational Statistics [NCES] (2010) in Scotland notes that, 18.5% of the children had writing problems. Similarly, primary school children in Africa face writing problems like in other continents. For instance, the study by Mubanga (2010) in Zambia indicates that, 59.2% of 120 primary school children faced difficulties to write the word 'at' while 60% faced difficulties to write the word 'bag'. Mubanga (2010) adds that 96.7% faced difficulties in writing the sentence 'She was reading a book'.

Tanzania has been experiencing a similar situation on writing difficulties among the school children. For instance, Ngorosho and Lahtinen (2010) note that almost 30% of the grade two children tested in word writing did not write any word correctly. Likewise, HakiElimu (2008) reported that, 25% of the primary school pupils' Kiswahili dictations were rated poor. Due to the low level of literacy skills in primary schools, a large per cent of primary school leavers are not literate and critical writers. It is reported by UWEZO (2010) that a large number of children completed primary education without the reading and writing skills. Additionally, high repetition rate of children has been noted by Ngorosho (2011) as an indication that schooling children in primary schools have writing difficulties. Kalanje (2011) and Kumburu (2011) reveal that children in Tanzanian primary schools face writing difficulties. Kumburu (2011) specifically, identified that 32% of 301 children in standard one had reading and writing difficulties. Moreover, Kalanje (2011) identified that 27% of children in standard one had reading and writing difficulties. Given the prevalence of primary school children facing writing problems in different countries, it is important to know which specific mistakes the learners with writing difficulties commit.

Studies by (Ngorosho, 2011; Mubanga, 2010; HakiElimu, 2008; Msanjila, 2005; Malloy-Miller, Polatajko & Ansett, 1995; Hamstra-Bletz & Blote, 1993; Critchley & Critchley, 1978; Jordan, 1977) show different mistakes committed by learners when writing. These mistakes include: letter deformation, poor spacing within word and between words, improper use of capital and small letter, misspelling, inconsistent letter sizes, poor line quality and broken letters with scattered strokes.

It is true that significant studies have been done on writing difficulties to identify children with writing difficulties in English and some in Kiswahili. Yet, most of these studies have been carried out outside Tanzania. Although studies by Kalanje (2011), Kumburu (2011), Ngorosho (2011); HakiElimu (2008) and Msanjila (2005) are from Tanzania, they have not focused much on the mistakes primary school learners commit in writing Kiswahili. In particular, Msanjila's (2005) study shows six problems secondary school students commit in Tanzania when writing essay in Kiswahili. Therefore, this study examined writing difficulties among the primary school children in Tanzania. Specifically, the study sought to identify CSWD and explore specific mistakes these children make when writing in Kiswahili. In addition, it assessed teachers' support to CSWD.

## **2. Research Methodology**

To come up with the relevant information about writing difficulties in primary schools in Tanzania, the study employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches. It was conducted in Dodoma City where a total of 280 standard two pupils from two public primary schools participated in the study. This study also involved three (3) subject specific teachers who were teaching writing skills in standard one and/or two from the selected schools. The schools were randomly selected, while standard two children and teachers were purposively selected.

Data were collected through administering reading and writing tests, interview and classroom observation. The tests of reading and writing were developed to identify the CSWD. The reading test was administered first for the purpose of screening children with severe reading problems so as to exclude them from writing test as the study focused on the CSWD. The same test was also used for writing, which aimed at identifying CSWD and exploring specific mistakes they made when writing in Kiswahili language.

At the screening level, the test was used for reading text words and sentences and it was subsequently used for dictation of words and sentences during writing test. In order to identify the group of CSWD, the individual children's scores on reading test were counted and summed up. Based on the distribution of the summed up scores, a cut-off point was set by using the following empirical formula: Mean  $\pm$   $\frac{1}{2}$  Standard Deviation. From this formula, Mean +  $\frac{1}{2}$  Standard Deviation = High Achievers, Mean -  $\frac{1}{2}$  Standard Deviation = Low Achievers and in between High and Low were Average Achievers. The children who scored low in the reading test were excluded from the tested group. Subsequently, the remaining group was given

the writing test. Finally, those who scored low from the writing test were regarded as the CSWD.

The tests items were constructed on the basis of the primary school syllabus content which was used in all primary schools in Tanzania. The authorized standard one Kiswahili text books prepared and prescribed by the MoEVT (currently the Ministry of Education Science and Technology-MoEST) were used. Each test had a total of 14 items, ten words and four sentences. The content of the test included the words with vowels only, a vowel and syllable, and those with syllables only. In addition, the test involved the sentences with varying lengths that is; a two word sentence as short one and a five word sentence as long one.

Besides, the interview with teachers was conducted to seek information on the existence of CSWD and teachers' support to CSWD. Additionally, classroom observation was done so as to survey how teachers were teaching writing skills to standard two children.

Ethical issues were considered such as getting permission from relevant authorities, getting consent from parents prior to administering tests to the children, interviewing teachers and conducting classroom observation. Confidentiality was also adhered to before, during and after data collection. Finally, data from tests were analysed quantitatively using descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation) and the information from teachers' interviews and classroom observations during the writing lessons were analysed qualitatively for emerging themes.

### **3. Findings and Discussion**

The findings of the study were presented in line with the specific objectives which included three themes namely; identification of CSWD, writing mistakes committed by CSWD and teachers' support to CSWD. The discussion considered only a few findings that are important for the readers to get a comprehensive idea about the situation of writing difficulties among the primary school pupils in Tanzania.

#### **3.1 Identification of the CSWD**

The process of identifying standard two CSWD from the two schools was carried out in two phases sequentially. It started with administering the reading test first, to screen learners with severe reading difficulties, and then the writing test as shown

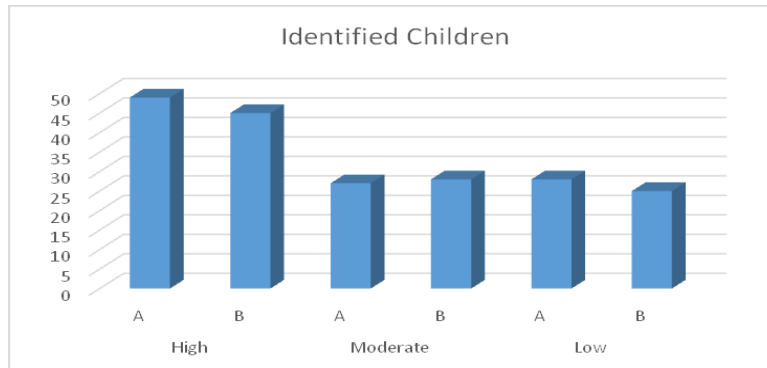
in Table 1. The Table presents the number of children tested from each school and the number of identified CSWD.

**Table 1: Identification of the CSWD**

Phase	Identification Tool	Number of Children Tested			Number of Children Identified		
		School A	School B	Total	School A	School B	Total
I	Reading Test	135	145	280	31	47	78
II	Writing Test	104	98	202	28	25	53

**Source:** Field Data (2014)

It is observed from Table 1 that, 280 children (135 and 145 children from school A and B respectively) were initially exposed to reading test. Out of 280 children, 78 (27.9%) children were excluded from the writing test as were found to have severe reading problems. Therefore, only 202 children (104 and 98 children from school A and B respectively) were allowed to do the writing test. Out of the 202 children who participated in the writing test, 94 children (49 from school A and 45 from school B) were identified as high achievers, 55 children (27 from school A and 28 from school B) were identified as moderate achievers and 53 (26.2%) children (28 (26.9%) from school A and 25 (25.5%) from school B) were identified as low achievers. The children who were identified as low achievers were regarded as the CSWD and these comprised of 30 girls and 23 boys. The age range of the identified children was between seven and 12 years. The obtained data show that majority of children from both schools scored high in the test as it is shown in Figure 1. The number of children in moderate and low groups seems to be almost the same.



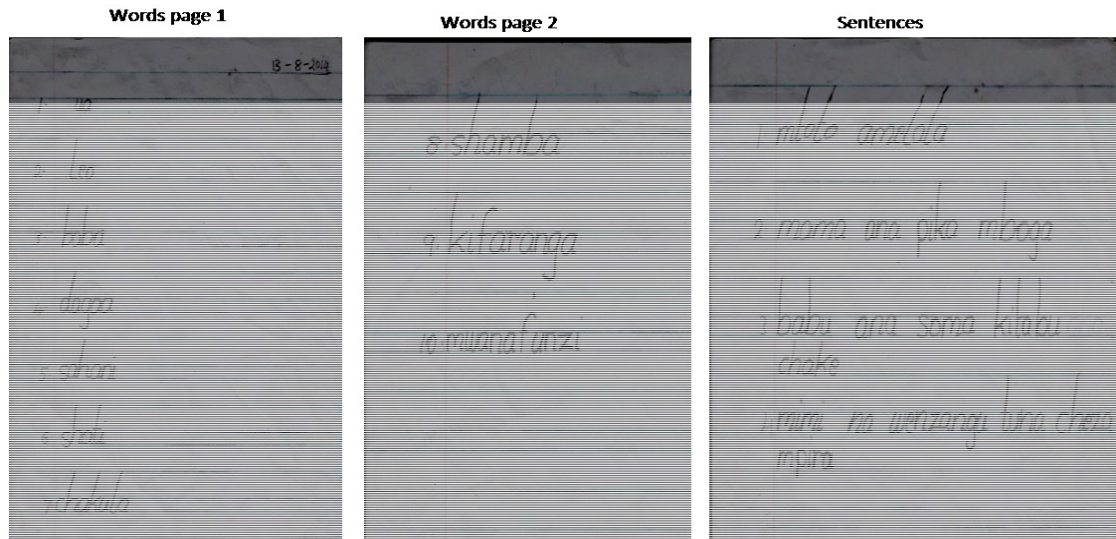
**Figure 1: Identified Children from Writing Test in High, Moderate and Low Achieving Groups**

**Source:** Field Data (2014)

The results of this study revealed that the prevalence of the low achievers in writing from school A and B is 26.9% and 25.5% respectively. This indicates that there was a substantial number of CSWD in both of the selected schools. In general, the data indicate that CSWD exist in schools and that it is possible for them to be identified through administering test/examination. However, identification of CSWD is not a common exercise done by teachers. Instead, most of the time, it is the examinations that are conducted for the curriculum requirement that is to assess pupils' progress or in order to promote them from one class to another. Therefore, there is a need for the teachers to identify CSWD and help them at the earliest stage rather than waiting until the end of the year.

### **3.2 Patterns of Writing Mistakes CSWD Committed**

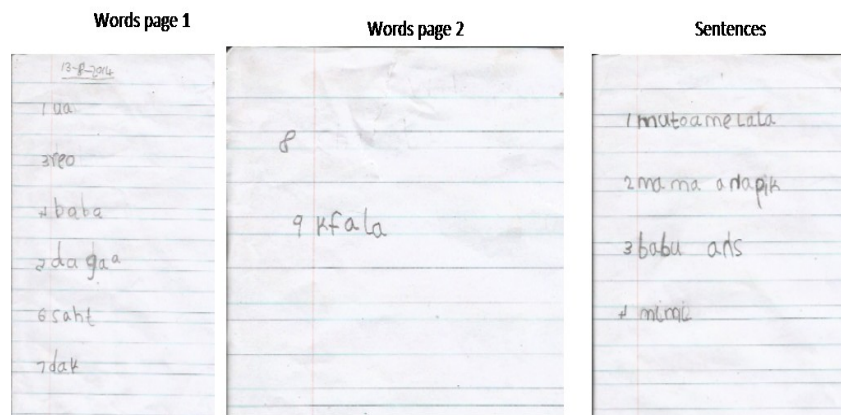
With regards to patterns of mistakes of writing difficulties from the dictated work to 202 children, the results showed that almost all the children experienced different mistakes regardless of their achievement in the test. Nevertheless, the extent of the mistakes differed from children who achieved high to the ones with low achievement. Figures 2, 3 and 4 show the sample of the written works of the children arranged from high, moderate and low achievers with their mistakes in each work. These works were chosen randomly from each group.



**Figure 2: Sample of the Written Work from High Achievers Group**

**Source:** Field Data (2014)

It is shown in Figure 2 that, the child was able to write from the dictation with minimal mistakes. The works show that the child had a problem of spacing specifically in sentence number two, three and four. In all the three sentences, there were unnecessary spaces between some words. From the second sentence, the word “anapika” (she is cooking) has been written as two words “ana pika”. Likewise, in sentence number three, the word “anasoma” (he is reading) has been written as two words “ana soma” and from the sentence number four, the word “tunacheza” (we are playing) has been written as “tuna cheza”. In spite of a few mistakes identified in this work, the child was identified as a high achiever.



**Figure 3: Sample of the Written Work from Low Achievers Group**

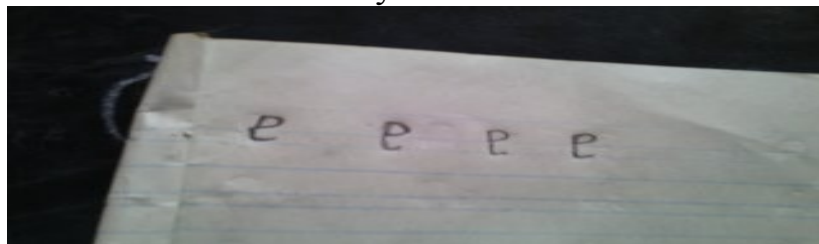
**Source:** Field Data (2014)

It is evident from Figure 3 that there were more patterns of errors in child's writings. And this study focused more on the children who scored low in the test. Figure 3 shows that the child failed to identify some of the words such as word number six, seven, eight, nine and ten. The child also failed to identify the sentences such as sentence number three and four. There is also word omission in sentence number two.

Moreover, the child had a problem of spacing letters and syllables in words for example, instead of writing the word "dagaa" (sardine) the child wrote "da ga a". There is also under spacing in the first sentence. Likewise, the child faced the problem of alignment such as in the word "dagaa". Apart from that, the child faced the problem of spelling substitution between "r and l" and the problem of letter formation as well as letter reversing such as letter "n" in sentence 2 and 3. Furthermore, it is observed in Figure 3 that the child reversed number 4 (four) and 5 (five). However, the observation of problems committed in numbers was not part of this study. It is also important to know that, although "case confusion" and "overwrite" are not seen in Figure 4 as the patterns of mistakes, they appeared in the works of other children in the low achiever group.

Overall, it was found that the identified CSWD committed different mistakes when writing. These identified mistakes included: failure to identify the dictated word or sentence, poor spacing within the word and between words, misspelling, case confusion, letter deformation, poor alignment, overwriting, mixed letter sizes, letter reversal and word omission.

Apart from the tests, it was observed that some children reversed letters and wrote the other letters in unusual way. For example, Figure 4 shows how the letter 'g' and letter 'n' were reversed and the way letter 'n' was written in unusual way.



**Figure 4: Reversed Letters 'g' and 'n' Together with an Unusual Way of Writing the Letter 'n' from the CSWD's Work**

**Source:** Field Data (2014)

Unlike tests and classroom observation, the interviewed teachers also reported from their class experiences that children used to commit different patterns of mistakes in writing. Such mistakes included squeezing words in a sentence as if they were one word, case confusion, misspelling and letter deformation.

These findings are consistent with the previous studies (Ngorosho, 2011; Mubanga, 2010; HakiElimu, 2008; Msanjila, 2005; Malloy-Miller, Polatajko & Ansett, 1995; Hamstra-Bietz & Blote, 1993; Critchley & Critchley, 1978; Jordan, 1977). Mubanga (2010), HakiElimu (2008), Malloy-Miller, Polatajko and Ansett (1995), Hamstra-Bietz and Blote (1993), and Critchley and Critchley (1978) found that children with writing difficulties had the problem of leaving space within the word and between words in a sentence. Moreover, Ngorosho (2011), Msanjila (2005), Critchley and Critchley (1978) and Jordan (1977) found that students used wrong spellings when writing. The common spelling problems identified by Msanjila (2005) were 'dhahabu' (gold) written as 'thahabu', 'hayupo' (absent) written as 'ayupo' and 'kalamu' (pencil) written as 'karamu'. Ngorosho (2011) found that the substitution of 'l' for 'r' and vice versa were common errors committed by learners. The study by Mubanga (2010) argued that the spelling problem may change the meaning of the word, making it either meaningless or assign it another meaning. For example, if 'l' in 'kula' (eat) is substituted by 'r' it changes the word to 'kura' (meaning results in a vote) (Ngorosho, 2011). This means that proofreading is very important after writing so as to reduce unnecessary mistakes.

Moreover, the case confusion was identified as one of the mistakes the CSWD committed in this study. The findings of this study are also consistent with HakiElimu (2008), Msanjila (2005), Critchley and Critchley (1978), and Jordan (1977) who also noted improper use of upper and lower case letters. The previous studies (Malloy-Miller, Polatajko & Ansett, 1995, Hamstra-Bietz & Blote, 1993; Critchley & Critchley, 1978; Jordan, 1977) point out that children with writing problems commit different errors including sudden change of letter sizes, letter deformation, inconsistent letter sizes, poor line quality and broken letters with scattered strokes when writing.

### **3.3 Reasons of Writing Difficulties among the Primary School Children**

Data on the reasons for poor writing ability were collected through the interview and observation methods. Through the interview with teachers, it was found that poor writing ability among primary school children was largely contributed to by

the following reasons: overcrowded classes, shortage of time per period, lack of teacher training programmes, shortage of textbooks and shortage of other teaching and learning resources. Besides, through the classroom observation, it was established that poor teaching/learning methods and shortage of teaching and learning resources were associated with poor writing ability in primary schools.

The findings from this study show that all three interviewed teachers reported about the overcrowded classes and shortage of time per period as one of the reasons behind poor writing ability of the primary school children.

In addition, 2 out of 3 interviewed teachers complained about lack of effective pre-service and inadequate in-service training programmes on writing skills. They claimed that there was no specific course offered in the pre-service training programme which would prepare teachers on how to perform the writing skills activities effectively. It was also pointed out that there was lack of adequate in-service training programme. Merely 1 teacher out of 3 reported that she had had an opportunity to attend an in-service training programme. This implies that most of the teachers who teach writing skills in lower levels are not competent in teaching such skills because they are not well trained and lack in-service training programme.

Furthermore, the acute shortage of textbooks was mentioned as one of the reasons behind poor writing ability of pupils. It was revealed that all the 3 (100%) interviewed teachers mentioned scarcity of textbooks. However, at one of the schools under the study, other textbooks were just stored in a box which was in the class. When the teacher was asked about the reasons for putting the textbooks in the box, the teacher said that those books were not in use because they were not enough for the pupils in the class. This shows that the availability of teaching and learning resources (textbooks) does not mean that they are used as it was revealed from that school. Therefore, it is possible that the teachers lacked the strategies for using the available books.

Moreover, it was revealed that teachers' guide books were available in both schools. However, one teacher from one of these schools explained that even though they had guide books, these books did not show the clear steps on how to teach writing skills. As a result, they were struggling on their own to assist children learn. However, teachers reported that some of the books written by TIE (for example, *Taasisi ya Elimu [TET]* (1997), *Kitabu cha Kufundishia Kusoma na Kuandika*, Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House) demonstrates accurately the

steps involved in teaching writing skills. Nevertheless, at the time of this study, teachers were not allowed to use such a book.

Likewise, classroom observation was conducted, whereby, one class was observed from each school. In both observed classes, teachers were teaching writing skills by the ‘talk and chalk’ method. From the observed classes, 6 and 5 children from school A and B respectively were selected to write on chalkboard what teachers had taught them during the teaching and learning process. For them, writing on the chalkboard was used as a means of determining whether children had understood what the teacher had taught or not. This was seen to be incorrect since in one class, the teacher pointed only the pupils who rose up their hands.

### **3.4 Teachers’ Support to CSWD**

Regarding the teachers’ support to CSWD, the study revealed that teachers used remedial classes and/or retention approach. One out of 3 teachers had used remedial classes in her school. This teacher reported to support those children who could not do well in the class for two or three days in a week. However, the teacher reported that despite the fact that some children attended the remedial classes, their improvement in writing was very slow. The report from this teacher means that some of the children who attended the remedial classes improved their writing ability while others did not. These findings concur with the study by Selvarajan and Vasanthagumar (2012) in Sri Lanka and Munene, Kimiti and Njoka (2017) in Kenya. Selvarajan and Vasanthagumar (2012) found that more than 90% of the students involved in the remedial programme improved their performance in Language and Mathematics. On the other hand, Munene, Kimiti and Njoka (2017) reported that majority of the respondents strongly agreed that remedial teaching programme improved pupils’ performance.

Moreover, 3 (100%) teachers reported to retain some children in the same class particularly after having identified them as children facing problems in writing. This decision was taken after discussing with the parents or guardians of the respective children. Furthermore, all the 3 interviewed teachers reported that the retention approach was a commonly adopted strategy in primary schools for the purpose of supporting children with low performance in general and poor writing ability in particular. It was learnt from teachers that few children improved their writing skills after being retained in the same class, while the majority could not make improvement even for two consecutive years. All the same, these children were allowed to join the next level without considering their inadequate writing

ability. Therefore, it is apparent that some children proceeded to the next level with the same difficulty in writing. However, there is conflicting research evidence regarding effectiveness of grade retention as a way of helping children to improve achievement. While Smith's (2004) study demonstrates that grade retention does not, in fact, improve achievement, Cannon and Lipscomb (2011) found that students retained in the first or second grade can extensively improve their grade-level skills during their repeated year.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In conclusion, this study has revealed that there are children with susceptible writing difficulties in primary schools in Dodoma City. These children commit different mistakes when writing both words and sentences. It appears that out of ten writing mistakes, three are very critical including: letter deformation, poor word/letter spacing and misspelling. Although teachers are generally aware of the presence of children with susceptible writing difficulties, they lack the necessary conducive environment to support the learners in improving the necessary writing skills. It was noted that classes were too large, shortage of time per period, lack of training, shortage of teaching and learning materials, and use of chalk and talk method in teaching writing skills to be causes of poor writing ability to some pupils. However, teachers supported CSWD to improve their writing ability through retention in the same classes and through remedial sessions. The methods used were not so effective in supporting these children. Therefore, authors of this paper recommend that, the appropriate and effective measures be designed to help the CSWD benefit from classroom teaching so as to exit the primary education level with the required writing skills.

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