

FACTORS AFFECTING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE SCHOOLING OF CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Parental involvement (PI) in the education of children is not a recent phenomenon. PI has become an established feature of education policies across the developed world. The study set to establish factors that may make parents choose not to participate in education process or unable to become more involved. The study was grounded in Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence theory. A qualitative case study was employed. Purposive sampling was used to select (4) schools and (40) participants in Masvingo district. Findings revealed that the economic status and level of education of parents have a significant effect on children's education. It also emerged that parents are more likely to be involved when teachers' perceptions about role of parents are positive. The study established that PI is also influenced by age of children. The study recommends that parents be helped to appreciate the benefits of parental involvement in the learning of their children. Workshops should be established to develop the relationship between parents and their children.

Keywords: Parent, education, parental involvement, school, community.

INTRODUCTION

Parents, who have been considered as one of the stakeholders of the school community, play tremendous roles in children's education. Among the many tenets of the educational reform efforts is the idea that (PI) is an essential element in children's academic achievement and social adjustment (Jeynes, 2012).

Parental involvement according to Miksic (2015) can be broadly defined as the ways in which parents support their children's education in word and deed. Parents can be involved in the school setting or at home. Prominent aspects of PI at home include discussion of school activities, parental aspirations and expectations, checking homework, parenting style, home roles and supervision. At school prominent aspects of PI include contacting school personnel, attending parents, teacher organisations (PTO), and volunteering at school (Shote, Hansen, Underwood and Razzoole, 2011 as well as Dearing, McCartney and Weiss, 2006).

Student achievement is most commonly defined by report cards and grades, enrolment in advanced classes, attendance and staying in school, and improved behaviour (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). Research has shown that there is correlation between PI and academic achievement. Sheldon and Epstein (2005) conducted a study to determine if a correlation existed between PI and children's performance on Mathematics achievement tests in 18 schools in Ohio, Maryland, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, Kansas and California. They established that learning-at-home-activities linked consistently with improvement on Maths achievement tests. Children who worked with their parents at home on Mathematics homework achieved better Mathematics grades (Bartel, 2010).

Schools are developing programs aimed at reaching out to parents in hopes of improving the relationship that exists between school and families of learners. Parents are already involved as primary teachers of their children as soon as they are born, and it makes sense to continue involving them in the formal education of their children (Liu and Liu, 2000). They are the children's first teachers and have a life-long influence on children's values and aspirations. In the United States of America evidence of PI in education exists both at home and within the school. According to Echaune, Ndiku and Sang (2015) The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 recognizes parents' involvement and empowerment in determining the quality of teaching and learning processes in schools.

Echaune et al (2015) assert that in most African countries such as Uganda, South Africa, and Kenya policies that support PI are also noted. According to these authors in Kenya the Basic Education Act of Kenya 2013 was enacted requiring school Boards of Management to assess school needs with full participation of parents. Nyarko (2011) investigated the effects of PI in schools on academic performance in Ghana and the results revealed a positive significance correlation between PI and academic achievement.

In Zimbabwe Chindanya (2011) carried out a study on PI in primary schools of Zaka district and the results revealed its many benefits. Some of the benefits of PI raised included promotion of pupils' motivation, teacher motivation, improved school attendance and good behaviour.

The idea that PI engenders student academic achievement is appealing to the point that society in general and educators in particular have considered PI an important ingredient for the remedy of many ills in education today. There are however some factors that constrain parents' ability to become actively in their children's education. It is crucial to uncover factors contributing to the gaps in educational achievement for all children.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Some parents are not taking an involved approach to their children's education. They are not in regular contact with their children's teachers. This study set to investigate the factors that hinder parents' active involvement in their children's education.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The following research question gave direction and provided continued focus during the study:

What are the factors affecting parents' involvement in the education of their children.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by Epstein's overlapping spheres of Influence Model. The most commonly accepted contemporary framework for viewing PI was inspired by the ecological model of Bronfenbrenner 1979. The theory of overlapping spheres encompasses part of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (Harris, 2014 and Kavanagh, 2013). Epstein developed a model which describes the overlapping spheres of influence on the developing child representing family, school and community with the child at the centre (refer to Figure 1).



Figure 1: Epstein's Overlapping Spheres of Influence
Source (Epstein, 2001)

The circles represent the influence of the family, school and community. The common element that all circles share is the child who is the primary link between each arena. The overlapping spheres of influence model recognizes that there are some activities that families, schools and community conduct separately and that there are others they conduct jointly to influence the growth and learning of the child (Epstein, 2001). The mutual supportive efforts of the three spheres produce the greatest and most positive effects on child development. When teachers make parents part of their regular teaching practice they create greater overlap and when parents increase their involvement in children's school work they also create greater overlap.

Thus, as said by Harris (2014) the theory provides a general framework from which to understand PI. Schools, families and community must cooperate in order to have the greatest impact on the children for which they share responsibility.

METHODOLOGY

This section deals with the following issues: research approach, design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness and ethical considerations. As the purpose of the study was to explore a phenomenon by gathering first-hand information as perceived by participants a qualitative case study design was employed. The qualitative approach as echoed by Magwa and Magwa (2015) is concerned with understanding social phenomena from participants. The study focused on understanding factors that affect PI in children's school work.

The target population of the study comprised teachers, parents and learners. In qualitative research as contended by Hancock, Windridge and Ockleford (2007) the sample size is typically small. Given this view on sample size purposive sampling was used to select 8 parents, 12 learners and 20 teachers. The aim of purposive sampling is to select participants who are knowledgeable with regard to phenomenon under investigation (Magwa and Magwa, 2015)

A mixture of data collection methods namely interviews and questionnaires were adopted to obtain meaningful, accurate rich data. A pilot study to improve the quality of the instruments and enhance validity of the study was undertaken prior to main data collection.

Data was analysed using thematic content analysis (Marvasti, 2004). Relevant themes, categories and sub-categories were generalised from the data to allow presentation, synthesis and discussion of results. Reporting of data took the form of thick descriptions and verbatim quotations

Trustworthiness of Research Findings

Qualitative research addresses issues of trustworthiness such as credibility, dependability, conformability and transferability (Shank, 2006 and Trochim, 2006). To ensure credibility the researchers spent a long time in the field conducting interviews and distributing questionnaires in order to gain their perspectives on factors affecting PI. Triangulation was used to ensure dependability. Conformability, that is the degree to which results of research can be confirmed by others was obtained by ensuring the findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of participants rather than preferences of the researchers.

Ethical considerations were met through seeking consent from participants, employing principles of anonymity. Keeping identity of participants confidential offered privacy to the participants (Magwa and Magwa, 2015). Pseudo names were used to protect identity of participants

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There are factors that constrain parents' ability to become actively involved in their children's school work. Three factors namely parent-related, school-related and child-related factors were established by the study.

Parent-related Factors

The study established that a number of factors leading to lack of PI in education were parent-related factors. One of the parent related factor noted by the study was parents' socio economic status which include parents' level of education, occupation status and income. With low levels of literacy parents were said to lack the knowledge and skills needed to help their children with school work. On the other hand, it was said that parents who are educated are more likely to be involved in their children's work than illiterate parents. The excerpt below from one teacher is a clear indication that levels of parents literacy affect PI:

If parents have low education they have challenges in assisting their children with school work. Such parents even when they attend some school activities they are hesitant to take part in decision making because they feel they have nothing valuable to offer. Parents who are well educated communicate high academic aspirations for their children.

These findings are in line with literature that asserts that level of education parents have achieved determines if parents will be actively involved in children's work (Donoghue, 2014) Parents with low self-efficacy are more likely to avoid contact with schools (Berck, 2010). They may be less involved because they do not feel self-confident to contact school staff. Lee and Bowen (2006) in their study found that parents with higher college degree have more

attendance in the meetings organised at school, talk more about educational issues. Parents are more involved in their children's work because they know the learning requirements and can set high expectations for their children

An overwhelming majority of participants expressed the view that parent's occupation status and income have a bearing on PI in children's school work. It was said that high socio-economic status parents are more involved in their children's school work than parents from low socio-economic status.

The fact that parents' socio-economic status influences PI was also noted by Hornby (2011). Hornby states that parents from poor socio backgrounds are less involved, less informed as well as more likely to have problems associated with language, transport, communication and child care. The words of one teacher reflect the sentiments of most of the participants:

Parents who belong to high socio-economic backgrounds are more involved in their children's work because they can provide for learning materials as compared to parents from low economic status. Parents with lower incomes often work long hours such that they have less time to get involved in their children's work.

Thus as echoed by Donoghue (2014) in terms of time work, conflicts seem to pose a greater barrier for less affluent families than more affluent. Low socio-economic affects effective PI.

School-related Factors

This study also found that the school plays a role in determining parental involvement in the education of children. Parents, teachers and learners were of the view that parents' decisions to become involved in their children's education are influenced by school. The attitudes of teachers were a school-related factor noted by the study. The teachers' attitudes especially to poor parents may send messages that they have nothing of educational value to give to their children as voiced by one parent:

Some teachers think that parents take a limited role in the education of their children. They are less professional thus they do not treat them as equal partners in the educational process.

Literature asserts that parents get involved if they comprehend that teachers expect them to get involved (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Deal and Peterson 2009). Teachers need to take into account the way they relate to their learners' parents, and address the attitudes that hinder the success of parental involvement in schools. Parents may feel school staff does not trust them or that there is a judgmental attitude towards them by staff (Griffin and Galassi, 2010).

It was also established that ineffective communication between school and home leads to poor PI. If parents are not informed about their involvement and school's expectations for them they cannot effectively participate in school activities. Concurring with afore mentioned Gorman (2004) suggests that the school open channels for effective communication with parents during meetings and visits. Parents are likely to feel better parents if they are given necessary support in an inviting environment. They will be comfortable, free and willing to share the necessary information with teachers.

The manner in which schools communicate with parents is extremely important since the efforts of improving PI cannot succeed without effective communication with parent

community (Deal and Peterson, 2000). In addition, it was found that ineffective communication may complicate the ability of parents to be involved. Many parents want to become involved but lack the open communication lines required from school or are not encouraged.

Student Related Factors

Another concern that affects effective involvement of parents as noted by the participants is the students themselves. It was said that some students especially at high school level resist parental involvement. The following quotation portrays the feelings of most participants with regard to this concern:

Some high school students feel that parents do not have the knowledge to assist them with school work. Others also especially from low socio-economic backgrounds feel ashamed of their parents' poverty. These students can deliberately fail to inform their parents of events in the school where parents are to participate.

In agreement with the above findings Hornby and Lafaele (2010) assert that age of children determines the involvement of parents in the education process. As children approach middle and high school they feel that some of the responsibility such as homework should shift from parents to themselves. Additionally, Griffin and Galassi, (2010) point out that some students feel that their parents lack the knowledge and skills utilised by school staff. They doubt the abilities of parents. They are less keen about parents' involvement in their education. Thus students as echoed by Donoghue (2011) also contribute to parents not getting involved in children's work.

CONCLUSION

Parental involvement is a complex array of behaviours, attitudes and activities that occur both within school setting but mainly in the home. The strength of PI enables children to achieve academically. PI is thought to be a powerful predictor of academic grades and aspirations for the future (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010). The higher the educational level of parents and the economic status the higher the level of PI. Schools can pose serious handicaps to PI in children's education. Parents are more likely to be involved when they feel that they are welcomed by the teacher and that their views are of value. It is widely acknowledged that PI decreases as children grow older. PI is greater for younger children partly because younger children are more positive about their parents going into school. The home, child and school form a trio that creates a special climate that is desirable for effective education (Maphanga, 2006).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Teachers need to shift their mind-sets with regard to how best they can involve parents in school activities and also need to change their attitudes towards parental involvement.
- Workshops should be established to develop the relationship between parents and their children.
- As partners in education parents must be empowered and acknowledged as equal partners and also as people with certain expertise and important skills.

- There is need for schools to ensure that necessary measures are taken to ensure that parents are encouraged to take part in educating their children and developing their literacy skills.

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