

Role of parents in improving the learning of their children in primary schools

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to study the role played by parents in improving the learning of their children in school work in primary schools. All heads, VEC/PTA members and teachers in schools are included in this study. This is particularly true with the community-managed education, which often promotes increased community ownership of schools. However, these expected parental contributions do not always materialise in homes, schools and communities. Research and experience demonstrates the haphazardness with which these roles are fulfilled and the inconsistency of parental engagement both in schools and the overall education process. The study revealed that there are many barriers to effective parental involvement in school activities such as lack of education by parents. The study recommends that heads of schools should always involve parents before making decisions that require the inputs from the parents. There should also be staff development workshops for teachers and parents where parental involvement in the education of their children would be the main topic. Today education of the children is joint efforts from parents, teachers and members of society.

Keywords: Role, parents, improvement, learning, primary schools

Introduction

Parents play a crucial role in nurturing their children's educational aspirations. They provide financial support, facilitate attendance and encourage achievement. For teachers, parents can serve as educational allies by assisting them in developing pupils' full academic potential and monitoring the quality of teaching and teaching strategies. Parents can not only play an important role in building relationships between schools and communities but also, in the current policy context of decentralisation, serve as decision-makers.

There appears to be discord between how parents understand and perceive their roles in schools compared to how other stakeholders interpret these very roles. Often, the policy dialogue around parental responsibilities fails to include parent representatives in the discussions, extends beyond what can be reasonably expected of parents or limits parental involvement to financial contributions. These types of contributions have historically not automatically led to increasing parental involvement in decision-making/school governance. There is also anecdotal evidence that even where parents have been given greater decision-making powers, few are fully aware of their potential to influence their children's schools and systems. There are also some contexts where too much responsibility has been handed over to parents, leading to situations of conflict where other stakeholders are absolved of any meaningful role in education. The influence of this varied involvement on children's learning is not easy to monitor, research and understand. Context to the current state of research and understanding of parental engagement, especially in developing countries, implies that there is an urgent need to better understand parental perspectives of schooling in different contexts, particularly in terms of what they think education can do for their children based on their own educational experience. It would appear that these very factors are closely linked to why primary completion and achievement rates remain so low.

The impact of parental engagement

While research supports the notion that parental engagement may positively impact student academic attainment, there is an important distinction between involving parents in schooling and engaging parents in learning; it is the latter that has shown to have the greatest positive impact. While involving parents in school activities may have an important community and social function, the key to facilitating positive change in a child's academic attainment is the engagement of parents in learning outcomes in the home. International research has shown that parental engagement has a positive impact on many indicators of student achievement, including:

- a. higher grades and test scores,
- b. enrolment in higher level programs and advanced classes,
- c. higher successful completion of classes,
- d. lower drop-out rates,
- e. higher graduation rates, and
- f. a greater likelihood of commencing postsecondary education

Beyond educational achievement, parental engagement is associated with various indicators of student development. These include:

- a. more regular school attendance,
- b. better social skills,
- c. improved behaviour,
- d. better adaptation to school,
- e. increased social capital,
- f. a greater sense of personal competence and efficacy for learning,
- g. 9 greater engagement in school work, and
- h. a stronger belief in the importance of education.

In one of the very few studies which have used economic modelling to examine the impact of parental engagement, has a large effect on student achievement compared with school resources (e.g. per pupil spending on teaching). The

magnitude of this effect was equivalent to more than \$1,000 in per-pupil spending per annum, and improved academic outcomes to levels equivalent to those of students whose parents had received an additional four to six years of education.

Parental involvement in school affairs is a strategy that has been used to assist schools to achieve their aims and to build a collaborative relationship between parents and teachers (Corner, 2004) ^[4]. Teachers and parents are natural partners because they are both concerned with the good of the children (Tshabalala, 2012) ^[23]. As Mafa and Makuba (2013) ^[15] State, problems concerning behavior and school related outcomes are easier dealt with if parents and teachers work together and there is a positive correlation between parental attitudes and their children's attitudes. Although parents are legally empowered to be fully involved in the development of their schools and improving learning programmes of their children, the actual involvement of parents in the schools still leaves a lot to be desired. This study therefore sought to investigate the major obstacles to meaningful parental involvement in school business.

Here we sought to find answers to the following research questions:

- a. How are parents involved in the academic work of their children?
- b. Are teachers happy about parents taking part in school activities?
- c. What are the obstacles that block full parental participation in school activities?

Review of Related Literature

The array of activities undertaken by parents in support of education in the North and South are structured around two dominant perceptions of parental participation. One strand of work separates the roles and function of the family, school and community and the other strand views these three areas as 'spheres of influence' on children's learning and development based on work of other scholars. The extent to which parents participate in their children's education at home, in school and within the wider community is further influenced by individual and institutional beliefs and practices.

Parental involvement in school affairs is a strategy that has been used to assist schools achieves their aims and objectives. Many countries, both developed and under developed have used this strategy which helps to improve children's performance in various disciplines in schools (Casper, 2003) ^[3]. Teaching and learning is the main objective of the school and all other activities are geared towards teaching and learning, hence parental involvement would naturally extend to this area (Casper, 2003) ^[3]. Some schools used parents' skills and energy to teach their children and others invited the parents to talk to them about their children's work (Ferrera and Ferrera, 2012) ^[8].

It therefore becomes necessary to bring the world into the school and the school into the world, which means that the school cannot exist in isolation without parents within the community (Sirvani, 2007) ^[22]. Parents' interest in their children's learning was important because if parents understand their children's education they are most likely to support efforts towards provision of a quality academic experience (Graham- Clay, 2005) ^[11]. Parent who are informed

understand goals and methods of the teacher and they can work to enhance their children's learning (Corner, 2004) ^[4].

In spite of the positive efforts of parental involvement in academic achievement, Sheldon (2009) ^[21] claims that many teachers and administrators still see themselves as individual leaders of their classrooms and schools and thus little attention is paid to partnerships and collaborations with parents.

The more the school reaches out, the more involved parents become. School leadership is therefore instrumental in establishing and developing a partnership between homes and the school, for instance by creating opportunities for joint activities for all concerned and thus lead the efforts of the grassroots towards a partnership (Grahamclay, 2005) ^[11]. Lindle (1989) ^[14]. Reports that, according to surveyed parents, they want teachers to treat them as equals and with respect; and parents do not appreciate professional and cold approach from teachers. On the other hand, teachers who cultivate a personal touch in their communication style improve school/home relationships and likewise, teachers need to express a value for parents' wisdom and authority about their children (Richardson, 2009) ^[19]. Parents' own negative school experiences may also affect the building of a positive relationship with their child's teacher, and indeed parents may lack the understanding of how to interact with the educational system effectively (Casper, 2003) ^[3].

Effective teachers recognize the importance of maintaining a strong positive relationship with their students' parent (Ferrara and Ferrara, 2012) ^[8]. In order to maintain a successful partnership, however mutual collaboration is required and it may also be effective for schools to conduct regular orientation sessions with parents where teachers assist parents in how they can give their children more effective support with their education (Servani, 2007) ^[22]. These sessions may bridge the gap between school personnel and parents and improve communications.

The school activities in which parents are usually involved

the activities in which teachers involve parents apart from supervising reading and homework, it is worth mentioning that parents are involved during general meetings (which are usually one per term), prize giving ceremonies, and consultation or visiting days, which are held once towards the end of every term. In some schools, children will be present when teachers will be discussing their performance. Parents are free to seek clarification and ask for suggestions on the way forward in instances where their children will be having challenges. The parent will have a full view of what is taking place in the education of his/her child. Most of the activities in which schools involve parents were within Epstein's six types of parent involvement practices.

Barriers to parental involvement

Notwithstanding the benefits accruing from parental involvement, a number of barriers were experienced in attempts to involve parents. The frequently mentioned barriers were that: Some parents lacked knowledge and were uncooperative. The problem was that when called to come to school to discuss their children's challenges, they hardly responded positively. Parents may be called to attend to problems of their children and may not come or even refuse to come. Sour relationship between teachers and parents is a barrier that causes parents not to be free to come to school.

Most participants noted that such parents hardly attended consultation days. Teachers also realised that children of such parents struggled with their school work and most of them had disciplinary problems. However, sour relationships between some teachers and parents are a cause for concern. In our view, some teachers may look down upon parents, especially those from the low socio-economic strata. Perhaps future research should also take into cognisance how parents view their level of participation in their children's education. This barrier was associated with working parents, cross-border traders and farming parents. During consultation days, parents are asked about the time they are free to come for consultation in working hours of the schools. Despite this flexibility, attendance is usually low. It is also worth noting that on consultation days, there is an element of sending maids to come and consult on the performance of pupils and parents will have no time to take note of what is transpiring at the school and all the challenges faced by the pupil. It was also noted that some parents or guardians may fail to attend school functions due to economic problems; in that they may fail to raise the bus fare to visit the school, especially where the school is not in the neighbourhood. It was generally felt that at times parents or guardians fail to attend school functions because of communication challenges. In our view, those parents who will have genuinely wanted to attend, may fail to if their children forget or deliberately forget to give them the circular. In this age of technology, we strongly feel that those schools which are not yet doing so should tap into this resource and improve communication between schools and parents.

In our opinion, these barriers are a big cause for concern. If allowed to persist unaddressed, a host of benefits that are likely to accrue to education stakeholders will be lost. For example, if the medical history of a child with special needs is not brought to the attention of the teacher because of bad blood between the teacher and the child's parents, the teacher will not know that the child has special needs. As a result, the teacher may not adapt the curriculum, teaching strategy and assessment procedure in order to accommodate the child in question.

Suggestions

Using the print media may be used to notify the school functions such as consultation, prize giving and general meetings to the parents and guardians. This could be used to complement circulars and newsletters. In addition, teachers could also remind their pupils to relay the message to their parents and guardians through the word of mouth. In this age of technology, schools should use emails and cell phones to communicate with their children's parents. All the schools need, is a database where contact details of pupils' parents are kept. This database needs to be updated regularly to ensure that when the need arises to communicate, the intended person will receive the information. Parents should be given the schools' year planners at the beginning of each school term. The planners should indicate dates when special events requiring parents' and guardians' presence will be held. However, owing to the forgetful nature of the human mind, schools should remind parents and guardians when the events dates draw nearer. Sensitising parents about the need to participate in the education of their children is strongly felt because they are oblivious of the impact their participation has

on their children's education. Therefore, they proposed that schools, schools heads, deputies, senior teachers, teachers and School Development Committees should sensitise parents on the need to participate. Participants felt that this could be achieved through meetings, emailing, sending messages through cell phones and the schools' newsletters. Parents resent being looked down upon and need to be respected and be shown that their contributions are valued. Therefore, the consensus among participants was that more parent participation could be enhanced by the creation of an open climate in the schools. Communication should not always be from school to parents, schools need to listen to the parents' concerns, fears, suggestions and aspirations. Have policies that compel parents to be involved actively. The number of strategies will make wonder why with such information teachers still complain of low parental turnout during certain occasions in the schools. The situation obtaining in schools is that teaching is the teachers' key result area. Communicating with parents falls under the jurisdiction of the school administration. Unless asked to give suggestions by school heads on how to address the challenge of low parental attendance, teachers may keep the suggestions to themselves. There is need for collective responsibility where teachers, school heads and deputy heads should collaborate and ensure that parents are involved in the education of their children in meaningful ways.

Discussion

It is revealed that both parents and teachers believe that they should be equal partners in education. This is in line with observations by Lindle (1989) ^[14]. Who states that parents want teachers to treat them as equals and with respect; and parents do not appreciate professional and cold approach from teachers. Teachers, therefore, should cultivate a personal touch in their communication style and they need to express a value for parents' wisdom and authority about their children.

It is also revealed that parents were not actively taking part in school activities in the majority of instances in spite of them being equals with teachers in the education of their children. There could be a number of factors at play that cause this apathy from parents.

As Glascow and Whitney (2009) ^[10] Postulate, the extent of parental involvement depends among other things on how frequently the school approaches parents; and the more the school reaches out, the more involved parents become.

Parents are also unaware of their legal obligations to participate in school activities. In most cases parents thought that their role was to pay fees, send children to school and contribute funds for specific projects. As Corner (2004) ^[4] states, parents who are informed about their legal obligations understand goals and methods of the teacher and they can work to enhance their children's learning. It therefore becomes necessary to bring to the attention of the parents all the legal instruments to their involvement in education matters of their children. The more the parents are enlightened about their legal expectations, the more likely they will be part of the school system.

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