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THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY AND PARENTS IN THE SCHOOL READINESS PROGRAMME; TEACHING AND LEARNING AT PRIMARY SCHOOL VIEWS AND PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS AND PARENTS

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ABSTRACT

One of the major characteristic of quality education is the extent to which parents and the community are involved in the education of their children. Such involvement helps to address issues of the relevance of the curriculum to community needs. It is on the basis of this philosophy that almost all institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe offer programmes that have a practicum component. At that level, the community becomes involved in the development of the student. The development of a child is in many facets which include social development, emotional development, intellectual development, skills development and physical development among other tenets of development. Such responsibilities cannot be left to education institutions alone. The study focuses on the extent to which the community and parents have played their roles in the teaching and learning programme at primary school. The study focuses on the school readiness programme at infant school level and how the community and parents have promoted teaching and learning in the primary school as a whole in five primary schools in Harare. The purpose of the study was to establish the extent to which the community and parents have been involved in the teaching and learning apart from the traditional roles of paying tuition fees and levies. The major question is whether such involvement has always yielded the desired results. The study used the mixed research methodology and the descriptive survey design. The study used convenient sampling to come up with six primary schools in Harare. From the schools, 30 teachers and 30 parents were randomly selected, thus giving a total sample of 60 respondents. Data was collected through the use of structured questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. The study concluded that community and parental involvement tended to focus more on attending meetings, consultation days, speech days and such other related functions with little involvement in the direct teaching and learning of the child. The study recommends a paradigm shift in terms of how the community and parents can be directly involved in the teaching and learning of their children.

Key words: Community; Parents; Involvement; Participation; Quality; Teaching and Learning.

1. INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

In Zimbabwe, schools can be classified into at least five categories. These are trustee schools, government schools, council schools, church-related schools and private schools run by individuals. In all cases the schools have to be registered with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in order for them to operate legally. In these categories, communities and parents play different



roles in the education of their children. The roles they play include provision of social, material and financial support to the schools. In Zimbabwe the involvement of communities and parents was through the Parents-Teachers' Associations and Old Students Associations. However, the enactment of Statutory Instrument 87 of 1992 saw the establishment of School Development Committees (SDCs) in non-government schools. This was followed by Statutory 70 of 1993 which established School Development Associations (SDAs) in government schools. These were attempts to involve parents and communities in the education of their children. However, their involvement tended to be limited to school governance issues. The two statutory instruments spell out the functions of the SDCs and the SDAs. In general, the statutes had similar functions, the major difference being that one was for non-government schools and the other was for government schools. What stood out in the functions of both the SDCs and SDAs were the roles of parents in terms of supporting schools in the form of paying levies and school development programmes. Parents through the SDCs and SDAs made decisions on levies and also elected members to these committees.

However, in modern approaches to education, the role of the parents and community goes beyond provision of levies and supporting resources. Parents and communities now have to be involved in the effective improvement of the health and psychological development of children in different circumstances through the provision of appropriate care at home and at school. They also have to be involved in the teaching and learning of their children and the school readiness programme. Parental involvement in the school readiness programme, teaching and learning helps children to develop in different skills. It has been noted that such involvement has contributed to the development in different forms. These cover physical and motor skills, language development, cognitive development and related activities that contribute to the emotional development, social development and moral development of children. Bruce (2003) observes that children's achievements are to a large extent influenced by the extent to which parents are involved in children's education at school. Such involvement contributes to developing a relationship between the parents' interests and pupils' educational achievements. Such involvement helps in developing the interest of parents and a sense of belonging as they are most likely to appreciate the role of the school in the community. Parental interest in children's education is considered as one of the strongest factors associated with achievement in school as the strengthening of parental encouragement contributes to better performance in schools (Hill, 1988).

1.1 Statement of the problem

Quality education remains an area of global concern. One of the indicators of quality education is the participation and involvement of parents and the community in school activities. The involvement of parents and the community in the teaching and learning of children was envisaged as a strategy to enhance the quality of education in schools. The statement of the problem can therefore be expressed in question form: To what extent have parents been involved in the school readiness programme, teaching and learning of their children?

1.2 Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to assess the extent to which parents are involved in the school readiness programme, teaching and learning of children in schools.

1.3 Research questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- To what extent has parental involvement in children's learning improved children's performance in school?
- To what extent are parents involved in their children's learning at primary school?
- How do teachers perceive parental involvement in their children's learning?
- What are the benefits of involving parents in children's learning?
- What factors hinder parental involvement in children's learning?



1.4 Significance of the study

The study contributes knowledge on the extent to which parents can be involved in the teaching and learning of their children at primary school. It also provides information on different factors that inhibit total involvement of parents in the school readiness programme, teaching and learning. The findings are therefore important to parents, teachers, school heads and the ministry of education and policy makers in education.

1.5 Delimitations of the study

The study focuses on six primary schools in the Mbare/Hatfield district of Harare, Zimbabwe. The study examines how parents are involved in the school readiness programme at Early Childhood Development (ECD) level. It also examines the extent to which parents participate in the teaching and learning of their children in school. The study was based on the views and perceptions of selected teachers and parents in the six primary schools.

1.6 Limitations of the study

The study used the mixed research methodology and a very small sample which was purposively selected. As such the findings cannot be generalised. They relate specifically to the six schools studied.

Conceptual/Theoretical Perspectives: Parental involvement in school readiness, teaching and learning of children

The involvement of parents has always been envisaged to increase academic achievement and contributing to a decrease in school dropouts. Lee and Bowen (2006) observe that involving parents in the education of their children entails appreciating their culture and values. Such understanding is important as it also transcends to understanding children within the classroom set-up. Wright and Willis (2004) concur with the view expressed by Lee and Bowen (2006) as they note that parental involvement is very much related to student development and achievement. Another key component of parental involvement relates to the benefits that accrue to the school and the child as a result of the involvement of parents in children's education. These include the extent to which parents can be involved in modelling of behaviours; reinforcing school values; and the improvement of home-based instruction. Within the same context the school benefits from interacting with the parents and community in terms of understanding children's backgrounds and family value systems. Such understanding helps the school to provide guidance to the learner and the parents. Lee and Brown (2006) noted that parental involvement in their children's learning positively correlated with student academic performance and a reduction in the gap between high and low performing learners. Such involvement also supports diversity which has now become a common characteristic in schools.

However, there are a number of factors that impact negatively on the involvement of parents in children's learning at school level. The argument for the involvement of parents in the teaching and learning of their children is premised on number of assumptions. First, it is assumed that parents have acquired enough education that enables them to help their children at the same time be able to assess the teacher in the classroom. Second, the economic condition of the parent could have an impact on the contributions the parent can make towards providing resources that support children's learning. Another reality that can make parental involvement difficult is the nature of classrooms in developing countries, which are at times overcrowded and lacking in resources. In that regard having parents attend lessons with their children may create an extra burden on the school in terms of space and other related resources.

Another problem related to parental involvement is the challenges of defining the parameters of such involvement. There is no agreement on the extent to which parents can be involved with the teaching and learning of their children. One school of thought supports the idea that parents have to attend lessons with their children on specific days during the academic year. Another school of thought is of the view that such involvement could be tantamount to interference with the teacher's work. As such, for them parental involvement has to be limited to assisting the child with homework and other related school work, teacher invitations, and payment of fees and levies. Lack of a clear definition of how parents have to support learning has contributed to some of the challenges related to parental involvement and student achievement. Another challenge is that at times parents have little knowledge of the education programme of the school, regardless of their level of education. Suggestions by Green (2005) are an attempt to define the activities that can be assigned to parents as a way to involve them in their children's learning. These activities include giving homework that requires



interacting with someone at home; training of parents on how they can help their children in different areas of learning; parents attending and observing lessons; providing access to computer lab times at the school where parents and the child can work on language development; and provide resources that can be utilised by both the parents and children (Green, 2005).

Suggestions by Green (2005) seem to focus mainly on the partnership model of parental involvement. Swap (1993) argued that the Partnership Model is based on the assumption that there should teamwork among parents, teachers and the community. Such partnership contributes towards the provision of resources that are used in the schools. The Partnership Model places emphasis on cooperation between parents and the school in all areas and this cooperation contributes to the transformation of the school.

The school readiness programme and the role of parents and community

The school readiness programme focuses on ensuring that a child has developed the necessary skills that assist in learning. Such development is concerned with domains of learning such as language and literacy, physical development, social studies, mathematics and science, expressive arts and personal development. It helps the child to demonstrate the required skills that will be of assistance in formal school. The school readiness programme therefore emphasizes the need to develop different skills in the mentioned domains. The development and assessment of such skills cannot be left to teachers alone. Parents and the community have an important role to play in the school readiness programme. The programme helps children to prepare for school, at the same time it provides child care that gives parents time to work or attend to other programmes. The school readiness programme therefore enhances the child's development and well-being in many areas. These include physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning and cognition and general knowledge. Through the programme the child is able to demonstrate certain skills. The school readiness programme also has the advantage of enhancing the children's language, reading and social skills.

The school readiness programme is concerned with the development and achievement of such domains as social and emotional development of the child. The Washington State (2012) notes that social and emotional development are significantly associated with children's overall success in school and in life, and interaction with parents, guardians, primary caregivers develops relationships that are central to the children's well being. The involvement of the community in the form of parents and guardians in the school readiness programme provides a sense of stability and belonging on the part of both the parent and the child. Parents and guardians by virtue of their responsibilities are naturally involved in the children's development programmes. The school readiness programme is therefore a development programme. During these early years of development the involvement of communities through the school readiness programme unites parents and guardians as partners and this helps children to achieve social and emotional well-being. In that regard, the involvement of the community in the school readiness programmes becomes an investment as teachers and parents work closely to assess the developmental achievements of the children and prepare them for school and for life.

The school readiness programme is in reality a parenting programme. It is therefore important to involve the community in parenting their own children. Such parenting is necessary as it promotes children's school readiness. The participation of the community helps children in emotional development. The presence of the parents and observation of their children as they play will help the parents understand their children's emotional and social development needs. Parents need to understand children's emotional growth, and their ability to recognize and express their own feelings, and how they should respond to the emotions of others. Parents have a role to play in helping children to learn to accept, understand, and manage their emotions, at the same time encouraging acceptance and appreciation of family culture (The Washington State, 2012).

In addition to this, the involvement of parents can help in the building of vocabulary, promote their understanding of numbers, colours, shapes, and contribute to the building of self-confidence. The participation of the community in the school readiness programme provides a learning environment for the parents and guardians which will benefit the children when they are at home. The school and home efforts will complement each other in identifying and developing skills that link the child's kindergarten work with school work. Inclusion of parents therefore strengthens children's social, emotional and cognitive skills. In other words engaging communities helps to teach parents and guardians how to provide verbal interaction that promotes language and literacy development, at the same time exposing them to routines children need to succeed at school and in life.

Apart from contributing to the different domains of personal development, involvement of the community creates ownership of the school and centre. The community can readily identify the needs of the school or centre. This makes the community aware of the needs of the school. This can help in the provision of resources. Involvement therefore develops a sense of belonging, and ownership.



The ECD programme is a comprehensive one. It incorporates other departments and ministries, other than the Ministry of Primary and Secondary education. These departments and ministries contribute towards the School Readiness programme. These include local authorities who have to provide suitable sites and other necessities such as water and health facilities. The Ministry of Health and Child welfare has immunisation programmes that promote the health of children at ECD level. This is important as postulated by the Maturationist perspective; young children will acquire knowledge naturally and automatically as they grow physically and become older, provided that they are healthy (Scott, 2003). The Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education trains teachers for the ECD programme, through teachers colleges and universities. These teachers are involved in the implementation of the School Readiness programme. Other ministries involved as a community initiative are the Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs, the Ministry of Gender and Women's Affairs and the Ministry of Home Affairs. The Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs provides child friendly courts and lawyers for abused children. It also provides counselling services. The Ministry of Gender and Women's Affairs helps the community to be gender sensitive, so as not to discriminate on the basis of gender on issues related to education for example. On the other hand for children to attend school they should have birth certificates, which are important for the organisation of age appropriate activities at school. These are provided by the Ministry of Home Affairs. However, the involvement of parents and the community goes beyond preparing children for entering mainstream school.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used the mixed methodology as some of the research questions required quantitative answers and others required responses of a qualitative nature in order to gain a deeper understanding of the role of parents and community in the school readiness programme, teaching and learning in schools. The study also made use of the descriptive survey design and data was collected from primary sources such as teachers and parents in the schools through structured questionnaires, open-ended questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. Data was analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively based on the themes that emerged from research questions and responses to the face-to-face interviews and open-ended questionnaires.

Sample and sampling procedures

The sites which comprised six primary schools were conveniently sampled. The researcher used random sampling to come up with a sample of 30 teachers and 30 parents. An average of five teachers and five parents were selected from each of the six primary schools in Mbare/Hatfield District of Harare.

3. FINDINGS

The findings of the study are presented under the following themes that emerged from the research questions and the responses to questionnaires and face-to-face interviews:

- The nature of parental involvement in the teaching and learning of their children;
- Benefits of parental involvement in teaching and learning of children;
- Perceptions on parental involvement; and
- Factors that hinder parental involvement in teaching and learning at school.

The sample of teachers comprised five (17%) males and twenty five (83%) females. The sample for parents comprised six (20%) males and twenty four (80%) females. On qualification, the teachers' qualifications ranged from Diplomas in Education to Bachelor of Education degrees. As for parents, they had varied academic qualifications. These ranged from Zimbabwe Junior Certificate (33%), O'Level (50%), A' level (10%) and only 7% of the parents had degree qualifications. While all parents endeavour to do their best for their children to do well in school, there are a number of factors that inhibit the extent to which they can participate in the teaching and learning of their children. As noted by Halpern (2005) parents' level of education is part of the human capital and as such parents with a higher level of formal education are most likely to provide a home environment that encourage and support learning.



3.1 The nature of parental involvement in teaching and learning

Parents were asked to indicate areas that they were involved in school activities. The major areas that the parents were involved were payment of fees, attending school functions, supporting school development projects, assisting children with home work and buying school requirements. Parents were also asked to indicate if they had ever attended lessons while teachers were teaching. This is one area where all parents noted that they had not attended such lessons. This was supported by the responses by teachers who all said that they had not invited parents to their lessons. In fact they all noted that their schools did not have such policies. Both parents and teachers noted that the only areas parents were involved in children's work were homework, sporting activities, speech and prize giving days and consultation days. When asked to explain the nature of involvement in homework and consultation days, 80% of the parents noted that they monitored children's work and acknowledged their involvement by signing the homework and they did this daily. However, 20% of the parents noted that they at times assigned siblings to assist with homework, because they were either too busy with their own work or they were not conversant with the content being asked especially at upper primary level. Homework plays a critical role in teaching and learning. As noted by Hill (2001), not all learning can take place at school, and as such the home can be used to consolidate what has been learnt at school. However, for homework to be effective assistance at home has to be given by people have been inducted on how best children can be assisted at home. Failure to provide such a capacitating programme may be disastrous as children may be exposed to wrong approaches and concepts. On the other hand there is need to train teachers on the extent to which they can involve parents in teaching and learning of children. This may result in giving the teachers extra responsibilities of "unteaching" what has been wrongly taught at home.

However, one area that parents were involved in teaching was sport. Some teachers indicated that they hired sports trainers from the community and others volunteered to share their skills. These areas included soccer, tennis, swimming and rugby.

3.2 Benefits of parental involvement in teaching and learning of children

Some of the benefits noted by parents and teachers were a change of attitude and an understanding of the challenges impeding on the child's learning after school consultation days. Consultation days were also credited with promoting shared responsibilities between parents and teachers. Some parents indicated that they came into contact with their children's teachers for the first time during consultation and such contact changed their views and perceptions about the teacher. The main benefits that emerged from the responses by teachers and parents include the following: motivation; behaviour modification; development of self-confidence in learners; an improvement of relations between the teacher and parent; identification of strengths and weaknesses; and a sense of belonging on the part of the parents. The benefits that accrue are three-pronged, thus benefits that relate to the learners; those that benefit the school; and those that benefit parents. Such benefits have a direct bearing on the performance of the learner.

Teachers and parents agreed that learners with supporting parents tended to perform better than those that did not receive support from home. This appeared to support the view expressed by Stewart (1988) who argued that parental involvement had a significant impact on the performance of the learner. Involvement of parents also improves school efficiency. Other benefits noted were improvement in communication and an improvement in home-school relationships. On achievement, parents and teachers agreed that they had seen improvements in learners' performance as a result of parental involvement through consultation. This appeared to give credence to observation by Bruce (2003) who noted that parental involvement was one of the accurate predictors of a child's achievement in school. As such parental involvement has to be encouraged in schools.

3.3 Perceptions of parental involvement in teaching and learning

In all the schools visited there was no evidence of parental involvement in teaching and learning. Such involvement has to entail parents inviting parents into the classroom to observe teachers teaching, and participating during the lesson. Parents and teachers noted that they did not have such arrangements at their schools. When asked whether they would prefer such an arrangement in their schools, there were mixed reactions from both the teachers and parents. As for teachers, 83% noted that they did not support the idea of parents observing lessons in class and 17% of them noted that they could be involved to a limited extent. Similarly, parents noted that they were willing to be involved in other areas, but limited knowledge of principles of teaching and learning limited their involvement in observing teachers delivering lessons. Twenty (67%) of the parents felt that they should not be involved in the direct supervision of teachers as it was an area that demanded expert knowledge and 33% of the parents indicated that they would want to be involved in selected areas such as language development. As such involving parents in areas that they are not knowledgeable could be a waste of



time and resources. In that regard, as noted by Green (2005), the role of the school would be to provide training for the parents on how to help their children and on what to observe during lessons. The views and perceptions held by teachers and parents were that involving parents to the extent of them observing would cause interference with the work of the teachers. They argued that this had the effect of disrupting teaching and learning.

3.4 Factors that hinder parental involvement in the teaching and learning of children

The major constraints that hinder productive involvement of parents noted were parents' lack knowledge of subjects; work commitment on the part of parents, the nature of involvement and family background. Some parents also noted that work commitments made it difficult for them to fully participate in school activities. They said that in most of the cases they would be too tired to monitor children's work, especially homework. Some teachers noted that some parents rarely attended school functions and did not pay the agreed levies. Such problems affected the day to day running of the schools. On the other hand, challenges that were related to the background of the family were noted by teachers and parents. Different types of families were noted, and they tended to respond to school demands differently. For example, a single parent family may get challenges when it comes to managing time. As such, the parent may be overwhelmed to the extent that he/she may not get time to supervise children's work or attend school functions. Another type of family that can face challenges as noted by both parents and teachers is the child-headed family. There are instances the child in school is also the head of the family. Some children are orphans and are under the care of old grandparents. It was noted that in some cases the grandparents are so old that they could hardly work. It was also noted by most of the teachers that other factor that influenced parental involvement in the teaching and learning of their children were family income, parents, parents' educational level, type of family and background among other factors. Some parents also noted that poor communication between the school and the home was another factor that negatively impacted on the level of participation of parents in school activities. They further noted that lack of clear policy and training on the extent to which parents can be directly involved in the teaching and learning of their children at school was a hindrance to parents' involvement in school activities.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The study came up with the following conclusions:

- That there were notable benefits in involving parents in children's learning. The notable benefits were improved relations between the school and home, motivation of learners and shared responsibilities.
- Schools were involving parents on deciding and paying levies, homework, school functions such speech and prize giving days, consultation days, fund raising and school development projects. However, parents were not directly involved in attending lessons and observing teachers in classrooms.
- Parents and teachers valued the involvement of parents in teaching and learning, but parents lacked the capacity to observe lesson in the classroom.
- Some of the factors that hinder involvement of parents in the teaching and learning of children related to the perceptions of teachers and parents, background, educational qualifications of the parents, and the type of family.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study came up with the following recommendations:

- There should be teacher development in the area of involving parents in the teaching and learning of their children.
- Involvement of parents in teaching and learning of children has many benefits there should be capacity building programmes that equip parents with the requisite skills.
- The Ministry of Education should provide policy guidelines on how such a programme can be implemented in schools.



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