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School Management Support for Parental Involvement in Education

Abstract

The role of parents in the education of their children is a factor which has been acknowledged as one of the contributors to learners' success in schools. In addition, the nature of parental involvement and the benefits thereof, have been sufficiently treated in the corpus on school improvement. The purpose of this paper is to probe the support that schools, through their School Management Teams (SMTs), provide to parents to enable them to be closely involved in their children's education. Seen through the lens of Epstein's model, parental involvement is conceptualized and related to school environments in diverse South African contexts. The model of parental involvement reveals six areas of involvement, namely, parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making and collaborating with the community. Accordingly, parental involvement as defined by Epstein and the inherent support that schools should provide to parents, form the thesis of this paper. The paper concludes with a recommendation of implementing proactive strategies of parental involvement in education.

Keywords: parental involvement, education, school children, School Management Team, Epstein's model

Introduction

There has been unanimous consensus amongst experts, not only in education but in psychology as well, that the involvement of parents in the education of their children impacts their learning and development (Munje & Mncube, 2018). Furthermore, recent studies show that there is a need for parents to be more closely involved in their children's education, and to be supported by educational institution to do so (Epstein, 2018). Moreover, studies indicate that "the earlier parents become involved in their children's education, the greater the academic benefits will be" (Cotton & Wikelund, 1989, p. 3). The Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2021) also encourage parents to contribute meaningfully to the success of their children in schools, because it regards parental involvement in education as vital.

The involvement of parents in their children's education has potential benefits, apart from an improvement in the educational attainment of those children. A study by Avvisati et al. (2013, p. 58) reported a "significant reduction of reported truancy and misbehaviour, as well as improved motivation for schoolwork". In the same vein, parental involvement in education has been found to lead to lower students' dropout rates (Jimerson et al., 2000), and better emotional development (McDowall & Schaugency, 2017). In addition to educational attainment, reduction of truancy and misbehaviour, improved motivation for work and lower dropout rates, parental

involvement also involves parents in school decisions through participation in the School Governing Body (SGB).

The main argument made in this paper is that there is a need to focus attention from how and why parents are involved or not involved in the education of their children, to the kind of support that is typically provided to those parents by the school. This contention is corroborated by Trotman (2001, p. 280) who states that “teachers who hold low expectations or believe that parents do not care about their children and do not want to be involved in their education, may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy and directly contribute to the lack of parental involvement and to student [learner] failure”. Similarly, some school practices or policies may have the effect of encouraging or discouraging parental involvement, thereby shifting attention away from parent characteristics to the resources and programmes that schools provide to encourage parental involvement from all parents regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status (Trotman, 2001). Msila (2012, p. 305) claims that “principals and other stakeholders in schools need to understand these complexities when dealing with poor parents in their schools” and support them to be more closely involved in their children’s education.

The aim of this paper is to probe the support that school management provides to parents to encourage them to be more involved in their children’s education. Firstly, parental involvement will be unpacked and clarified through the lens of Epstein’s model (1995). Then, the rationale to provide support for parental involvement in education will be provided. The paper will conclude with a recommendation of implementing proactive strategies to promote parental involvement in education.

Conceptualization of parental involvement

Although some scholars argue that there is no uniform and accepted definition of parental involvement, Okeke (2014, p. 1) reports that “there appears to be some consensus in the literature on the conflation of activities that together represent effective parental involvement in their children’s schooling”. In the same vein, parental involvement can be understood to describe “a situation in which parents are perceived as active partners in the process of educating their children” (Okeke, 2014, p. 1). Makgopa and Mokhele (2013, p. 220) define parental involvement as “a combination of supporting student academic achievement and participating in school-initiated functions”. The two definitions accentuate the importance of the involvement of parents in the education of their children, and ongoing communication with the school. Mncube (2010, p. 234) concurs that parental involvement entails “awareness of, and achievement in, schoolwork, an understanding of the interaction between parenting skills and learner success in schooling, and a commitment to consistent communication with educators about learner progress”. Additionally, there is growing empirical evidence to show that supportive behaviour from parents or guardians correlates with student achievement (Scharton, 2019).

Other definitions regard parental involvement as a partnership between parents and the school to improve the education of learners. The partnership orientation “emphasizes the importance of parents-school cooperation in education and socialization of children, respecting cultural differences among children and families and the importance of different perspectives on creating a positive studying climate” (Matejevic et al., 2014, p. 290). Co-operation between the school and parents is regarded as a cornerstone of the partnership orientation.

Besides the clarity provided in the paragraph above, there are other attempts at defining parental involvement in school. As indicated by Green et al. (2007), traditional definitions of parental involvement entail school-related activities such home-based activities (when parents help children at home) and school-based activities (when parents communicate with the school and help children with school-based activities).

Parental involvement in education can also be conceptualized through Epstein's model of parental involvement. The model is comprised of six major levels. Each level includes activities which clarify how parents are involved in their children's education, and school life in general. In the paragraphs that follow, each of the levels is unpacked to illustrate parental involvement in the education of their children.

- The first level focuses on parenting; parents try everything they can to satisfy their children's basic needs, supervise and discipline them when necessary, and establish home conditions that support children as learners, so that they can perform well at school.
- The second level entails communicating; parents communicate with teachers and schools about school activities and children's progress. This level is crucial as it enables the early identification of learning barriers so that parents can be involved in addressing them.
- Volunteering is the third level, and it refers to parents who assist teachers, learners, administrators, and other parents in classrooms or other areas of the school, while others may participate as supporters of school events.
- The fourth level is about learning at home; parents work with guidance from schools to become involved in children's home learning, such as helping children with homework or curriculum-related activities. Frequent communication with the school is necessary, so that parents may be aware of how and in what areas of schoolwork to assist the child.
- The fifth level deals with decision making and includes parental involvement in school decisions through participation in School Governing Bodies, SGB sub-committees, or school-based parent groups. This role also affords parents the opportunity to participate in school governance and to promote the best interests of the school.
- The sixth level encapsulates collaborating with the community and involves parents working with social structures with an interest in education and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to support the school and collaborate with educators to achieve school goals.

Unpacking parental involvement brings forward two main arguments, namely, that parental involvement in children's education is important and that schools need to support parents in their endeavour to be present in their children's education. To give effect to the thrust of this paper, the section that follows provides recommendations in a form of strategies which might be necessary to encourage parental involvement in schools and to render the required assistance and support to parents.

The rationale to provide support for parental involvement in education

To get parents to be more closely involved in their children's education, it stands to reason that they need support from both school management and other stakeholders who are involved in education. The need to support parental involvement in education is reinforced by Hornby and Lafaele (2011, p. 39), who argue that there are barriers

which inhibit involvement such as “individual parent and family factors, parent-teacher factors, child factors and societal factors”. The authors further state that individual parent and family factors include parents’ beliefs about parental involvement, perceptions of invitation for parental involvement, current life contexts and class, ethnicity, and gender. Msila (2012) concurs with that argument stating that the social and cultural capital of parents from poor socio-economic backgrounds negatively influence their involvement in education.

Hornby and Lafaele (2011) distinguish parent-teacher factors as differing goals and agendas, differing attitudes and differing language used. It can be argued that differences in the abovementioned areas may stifle co-operation between parents and teachers and impede parental involvement in the school. Child factors include age, learning difficulties and disabilities, gifts and talents and behavioural problems. Parents of learners who experience these problems may find it difficult to be involved in their education, and to visit their school regularly to discuss their difficulties with teachers.

Societal factors which have been identified by Hornby and Lafaele (2011) include historical and demographic, political and economic factors. The impact of these factors on parental involvement is evident in some studies on parental involvement which attribute the lack of close involvement to both social and cultural capital (Msila, 2009).

Proactive strategies of parental involvement in education

Considering concerns about the level of parental involvement in education and the support that school management is expected to give to parents, proactive strategies of parental involvement in education in the South African context are recommended. These strategies are based on the original work of Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005). A scrutiny of the six strategies for parental involvement in education, resonates with the situation in schools and an application of these strategies may contribute to support parents in becoming more involved in their children’s education.

Create an inviting and welcoming school climate

For parents to be interested in the school, the school environment should be intentionally inviting. The school environment should be visually appealing to parents from diverse backgrounds when they enter the school. South Africa has a rich tapestry of diverse backgrounds from which the learners come; therefore, no parent should feel alienated by the school. The school environment should not be seen as a closed organization that parents may be afraid to visit. Parents should feel that the school is theirs and they belong there. School management should create a positive school climate. The principal as leader of the SMT should create trust through open communication and the building of sound teacher-parent relationships. The administrative staff should be professionally developed to possess critical office-staff skills with a consumer orientation and treat parents, learners, and visitors with respect.

Empower teachers for parental involvement

Routine school practices that focus on discussion and development of positive, trusting parent-school relationships should be developed. Teachers should seek parents’ ideas, perspectives, opinions and questions about school and family roles in learning. There should be time for parents’ meetings to discuss parental involvement and reflect on practices which have been successful in the school in the past. It is necessary to

keep an active school file of teacher and parent ideas on what is helpful and effective. In addition, a school-specific resource bank should be developed to support teacher skills and capacities for improved parent-teacher relations. In-service programmes should also be developed to support teacher efficacy for involving parents and school capacities for effective partnership with families. To crown it all, teachers should be offered opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and learn from them. Strategies that are adopted to improve parental involvement should be revised frequently. Lastly, involvement plans responsive to teacher, family, and community needs should be developed.

Learn about parents' goals, perspectives on child's learning, family circumstances and culture

Suggestions should be offered for support of child's learning consistent with parents' circumstances. The parents' family circumstances inevitably determine the kind of support that the parents can get from the teachers and how the parent can assist and support the child with their learning. It is vital for teachers to focus on developing two-way family-school communication. Parents' perspectives on the child's learning and suggestions should be sought and followed through. Existing involvement approaches should be adapted as needed to enhance the fit between invitations and family circumstances. Lastly, new strategies should be developed to enhance opportunities for communication between the family and the school.

Join with existing parent-teacher-family structures to enhance involvement

Where after-school programmes exist, these should be used to increase family-school communication. Use the SGB to invite all families' participation in parent activities organized by the school. It is necessary to work with parent leaders to ensure open access and to make parents feel accepted and embraced by the school. In schools where learners are already adolescents, it may be helpful to establish parent advisory committees providing advice on children's progress and suggesting improvement plan if progress is not satisfactory. Some schools establish a school-based family centre to support family-school interactions and communications.

Offer full range of involvement opportunities and new opportunities unique to school and community

Invitations could be sent to specific events and volunteer opportunities at school. For parents with inflexible work schedules, it is wise to think of times that suits their schedules when activities are organized. Involvement opportunities should be clearly advertised by using methods targeted to interests and needs of school families, and which will attract parents to be involved in the school.

Invite teachers, parents, principal, and staff to learner-centred events at school

There is a need to increase opportunities for informal parent-teacher-staff communications and interactions. These events should be used to seek parents' comments and suggestions for involvement. During parent involvement activities at the school, there should be informal parent-teacher-staff communications and interactions. At this stage, the school should avail themselves of the opportunity to seek parent comments and suggestions for improvement. The school can also make use of this

opportunity to distribute information on upcoming events, school policies and how parents can generally support children's learning.

Conclusion

The subject of parental involvement in children's education has received considerable attention in scholarly literature for decades now. The phenomenon has been approached from several angles, to contribute to the existing body of knowledge. The thesis of this paper is that there is still existing need to support parents, in the best way possible to deal with the problem of inadequate parental involvement, which still manifests itself in South African schools today. The ideal situation is envisaged as one where the family and schoolwork together as genuine partners to promote parental involvement. Apart from unpacking parental involvement and justifying why there is a need to provide support to parents, proactive strategies to improve parental involvement were suggested.

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